Chapter 1

The Teaching/Learning Context for Christian Ethics

Introduction:

It was way late into my career as an academic Christian ethicist that I came across Aristotle's "Rhetoric." Finally, some of the main themes, ethos, pathos, and logos, became integrated for my thinking. Previously, those had come to my attention only sporadically, individually, and never really demonstrated to be related. And, related is too general a term for how I think they must be considered. That is, these terms are interrelated, interfaced, integrated.

Indeed, that allusion to "triads" in the Introduction found resonance with these terms. These are each part and parcel of one another. They are, like so many concepts that find their way out of not just Greek philosophy, but world philosophy. That is, the primary dynamic Aristotle intended to demonstrate and teach was that of persuasion. The Romans, on the part of those who shaped what the empire became, missed persuasion as a mode to win friends and influence people.

Why had these concepts escaped my attention for so long, I wondered? At the least, my rearing did not include much reference to the Greco-Roman cultures at all. No speech or preaching courses ever considered Aristotle's Rhetoric.

The paradox is that those courses, the theological education I received, were built around the style that can be traced back to the Romans' directness, even confrontation, assertiveness, dare I say aggressiveness. Or, at least, how they have through the centuries been interpreted. In other words, the Roman approach to philosophy, theology, economics, political system, was to dominate through force, if necessary. Objectivism, rationalism, pragmatism were honored and became embedded in the social infrastructure of Western culture.

For the Romans, and a generalization I admit, any persuasiveness was heavy handed. Any quid pro quo always put more quid in the Romans' side of the arrangement than the others!

With the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and his apparent devotion to the faith tradition, one has to wonder how much the empire's essential ways of functioning really changed. Christianity changed, though, with its organizational patterns mirroring that of the Empire. Episkopos (pastors, congregational leaders), became more distinctively labeled "bishops" and looked like Roman senators in form and function. The pope figure paralleled the emperor. Power, influence, became hierarchical and as the pattern developed reflected some of the same brutishness as how the Romans had expanded their empire.

There should be no surprise, then, that Aristotle's sense of communication be done from the perspective of persuasion began to be covered up, ignored, and basically forgotten.

Riding the Bicycle of Theological Education, Again

My return to classroom work took me into a summer term. I had a level of anxiety about it. It had been four years since I'd been involved in leading a course of any kind. The job I'd gone to centered around research, editing, writing, an occasional presentation, but each of those were for audiences unlike the academic context I re-entered.

With the position with the denominational agency preceding this summer term, I realized all the way back to my post high school days, I'd been involved in academia, as student or teacher,

every fall, spring, and summer semester. That denominational job had no sense of an academic calendar about it. I had to recalibrate my days, my months, my time off.

But, in most ways, that summer term went well. After the first week, I was able to say to my wife, "It's like riding a bicycle. Once you've done it, you can do it again." That is, I could hold the attention of a roomful of students for four hours a day—we did have regular breaks—proceed with the objectives of the course, staying with the calendar of days and topics included with the syllabus.

My early assumptions began to build toward this new round of being an educator as being quite familiar in lots of ways. It wasn't a matter of an old dog learning new tricks, for I was still a relatively young dog then(!). At that time, little did I know that no semester was ever just like those preceding it. And, some weeks, no day was like those that preceded it.

Leading a class on some facet of Christian ethics means considering one is working with a kind of organism that may well be evolving, even devolving, in front of you. For, only in retrospect, do I recognize that the one, two, three of those students in that first course I led represented the portents of the how the ensuing years would be shaping up as far as the denomination, and the students who came to my school, to me.

Into the Breach of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

There are layers to any educational context. And, there are many ways to dissect and delineate those layers. I think Aristotle's advice about communicating persuasively is still an extraordinary way to assess one's pedagogies, abilities—if you please. Particularly so, when a subject area, a discipline, a course, carries some level of dissonance for some of the students, which Christian ethics does.

Just to be sure you catch a bit more of my musings, here are the basic understandings of these three terms: ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos describes the basic character of an individual. That character is shaped by sentiments, convictions, guiding beliefs of a person, a group, an institution. "Ethics" is a derivation of ethos, interestingly enough. For Aristotle, the speaker, for example, has better chance for communicating one's message if the audience can determine the speaker has an authenticity, character of integrity, about him/her.

With pathos, the speaker evokes—and exudes—pity, which may not be a sadness, but rather an identification with, a rapport, empathy, compassion. The contemporary "I feel you, man" communicates the idea of pathos. As well, research and application of "emotional intelligence" and its many facets, finds resonance here.

Logos is most closely related to "word." But, also, logic, a pattern of reasoning. Aristotle considered that an ordered presentation gave advantage to its reception. As well, Aristotle gave a platform for the Greeks to understand Creation to have an orderliness about it.

At the heart, the core, the intersection, of these concepts, values, virtues even, is the idea that the speaker must first understand her/his own sense of each and all these ideas to be an effective persuader, dare I say teacher. The expectation is, as well, that the ethos-pathos-logos shaped person attempts to understand those qualities in one's audience, a classful of students. With those two understandings in mind, one theoretically, at least, can have a fruitful exchange.

Getting Re-Acquainted With the Reshaping of the Theological/Ecclesiological World

This re-acquaintance had sometimes some sharp edges. Other times, it was only in retrospect when I saw my assumptions needed to be re-addressed. There was consistently the need to adapt to the student group coming into my classes each semester.

In some ways, my denominational job had actually been inside a kind of echo chamber. The position was networked across the country, but a like-mindedness generally could be anticipated. My agency's executive did an extraordinary job shielding his staff from the negative onslaught's which that agency did draw.

With the classroom job, being up, close and personal brought in quickly that students came out of their own echo chambers, bubbles as some called the contexts. In many ways each and all of us were provincial in our perspectives, our world views, which affected just about everything else. The students were more so than I expected.

Assumptions Need Contextualization, Delineation, and Redirection

So, in that first round of assumptions that began to take pressure was that more of the students than not would be on the same page with me regarding the subject matter, a definition of the discipline, course, even application of Christian ethics. I was disappointed that many of the students had given little thought to ethical behavior. Their resource for guidelines was to speak in terms of "absolutes." They failed to recognize that just talking about absolutes really gave little help toward making decisions, behaving in ways that portrayed values that could be labeled as Christian.

 The realization came on me that I should develop a definition of Christian ethics of my own and be able to describe to the students how I came to it. The point was that they develop their own definition. With that approach, I had the hope, over the years, that students would begin to do some critical thinking of their own. For instance, that they would recognize they likely were ensconced in one of the major ethical theory realms to the exclusion of others.

Interestingly, and perhaps coincidentally, the chair of the Christian ethics department at that time suggested that each of us in the department should develop a definition of Christian ethics. He intended to demonstrate to his classes the variety, but also consistency, among the department. My definition became: Using biblical-theological bases in association with the natural and social sciences and insights from philosophy, the fine arts, and humanities Christian ethics is the study and application of the Christian faith in the individual and corporate dimensions of daily life.

Notice that this definition puts forward the notions that Christian ethics is both an area of study but also a dynamic of application. Christian ethics requires the interface and integration of all forms of knowledge for both study and application.

The development of another triad came into play. That is, the three major ethical theories, in my mind—which can be used to encapsulate each of their subsets—are deontological (duty, obligatory, law and order, command, imperatives); teleological (consequential, utilitarian) and relational (relationships, of course). This triad gave me opportunity to demonstrate there were expressions of each and all of these in Christian scripture and that each intersects with the others in those decisions we enter into, with one theoretical base sometimes dominant but not exclusionary of the others.

Another one of those assumptions was that there could be a quick camaraderie built in a classroom full of graduate students with what appeared to be a common goal—being prepared to be the best ministers they could be. These were young adults, college graduates, some already in staff positions in congregations. So, another assumption was that the students would have a proportional level of maturity to being young adults on the way to fulfilling a calling to the Church.

If it had not been for the discovery of James Fowler's "Stages of Faith" and Howard Gardner's "Frames of Mind: A Theory of Multiple Intelligences," I would have floundered for sure. These educators provided frameworks, reference points for students to realize where they were in faith development, in application of calling, for example.

Usually, the graduate students were well mannered, but back to those levels of maturity, there could be problems that arose. With only one or two exceptions the students were compatible, relational, there to get four hours knocked off the too long Master of Divinity degree. They were intelligent and communicative. The exceptions were some of the portents of years to come, however, .

 For instance, there was always a number of them who came with their ideas about theology, and especially ethics, already set. They entered the course ready to explicate, even when not called upon, their particular "stance" on this or that social issue. I know now I should have identified them as close offspring to the Roman empire figures who expected their mandates to be honored by all others. Those students were highly deontological, legalistic, stuck in their echo chamber, complicated by tunnel vision.

Too often, back there and into the contemporary era, those types have been identified as right-wingers, ultraconservative, Fundamentalists. And, those to the left of them do such identification pejoratively. The irony is that this "I'm right and you're not" attitude without explanation usually resides as well in those who could be labeled as ultra-left, liberal.

Those terms liberal and fundamentalist were bandied about too freely. Unfortunately, the labeling has deteriorated into incivility, partisanship, breakdowns in social structures, like civic organizations, churches, and neighborhoods. From the beginning I attempted to guide the students away from such labeling, for it commodifies and objectifies persons.

At the least, commodification and objectification in action resist trying to understand, interpret, and apply the image of God concept. It is necessarily mysterious, of course. With the reductionistic, lack of critical thinking, style endemic in our culture, this was yet another theological idea dismissed, ignored.

The easy commodification and objectification were a bit of surprise for me. Some of the students failed to realize that these formative traits had tremendous ramifications for matters of sexuality and ethnicity. Unfortunately, the commodifications and objectifications found a home in how the students, by and large, considered what their main job as Christian ministers was. To the question, what is the main job of the Church, usually would come the response "Evangelism."

For that faith tradition, that meant getting people saved, obtaining salvation, a quite biblical term. Through centuries of reductionism, again traceable back to when the Roman Empire absorbed the Church, the "plan of salvation" had come to be a transactional thing. Follow four or five

steps and one is in. The goal of salvation, being saved, is to get through heaven's gates for eternity.

As for the meaning and method for one's life, one's family, one's church, one's society, there was little room for discussion. Salvation was individual and personal, nothing of social impact.

As well, many of the students had been reared in communities, congregations, that had been established and existed through the region known in the United States as the Old Confederacy. They had little realization consciously of what had been embedded in their psyches. A regionalized "churchianity" had taken over basic guidelines, principles, teachings of Christ. Ironical.

Those handful of students with those perceptions, assumptions, were reflections of the perceptions and assumptions beginning to become more visible in the denomination. For instance, the pastor of a local congregation was to be the authority figure. The Bible was the inerrant word of God. Parenthetically, those two characteristics put together meant that the pastor's hermeneutical method, interpretations of Scripture, were to be considered, tacitly, as inerrant, as well.

Further, any movement in congregational life was, according to some of the students—and a few of the faculty with whom I worked-- always to be considered as going from one's current location to a "significant" church. As well, the image of the pastor being a charismatic figure intertwined with these facets already mentioned. The model of one who exhibited extroverted behavior, even narcissistic behavior, was one emulated by those seeking a pastorate.

Too late, I think, I realized that the narcissistic behavior and toxic masculinity traits found appreciation among a wide swath of faculty, students, congregants and congregations. Though some in the context mouthed the idea of "servanthood," there was no substance behind their talking about it, exemplifying what the idea meant through a Kingdom of God filter.

Restrospect That Became Prospect

Some of those early days' class meetings were the result of preparation I'd done all the way up to the few minutes I needed to move from my office to the classroom. Sometimes during class, I made scrawled notes on my outline/notes for the next time I led this course. Too, after a class meeting, I had already begun reflecting on what I knew was still coming in the course and if any adjustments needed to be made in light of where just past, and that day's, class discussions, interchanges had gone.

Initially, as I began to make more serious changes to the course outline/syllabus/content, I had to deal with some feelings of whether I was going against the trend that had been in place at that seminary for more than half a century. My attempts at getting acquainted with students, all of their assumptions, their sense of ethos, pathos, and logos, whether they realized such or not, and I felt to a large extent needed reforming—gave me the sense, a calling, if you please, of building the course to be more relevant to those dynamics.

Trying to read the students, the institution, and myself pressed me toward less lecture, more improvisation sometimes when a student's question, not intended to distract at all, became more important than getting through all my "lecture notes." Some of those detours during a class meeting ended up getting attention in future courses. Though I had a graduate degree in

education, and the only one on the theology faculty at the school with that credentialing, I found myself even critiquing what had come to be the accepted framing of theological education. That meant attempting to find a set of pedagogies, not a single one, but an appropriate blend of those known to professional educators.

Pedagogies deal with content, the medium (media) of communication, the pedagogue(s) and their personalities. With the teaching of ethics—and I explored with the students whether ethics could be taught—the conclusion reached was yes, as the teacher not only talks about the subject but incarnates the discipline, the course. That lesson was taught by how I measured, quantified, student success. Testing was different in ways most of them had experienced. Field work, probably mirroring my earlier career in natural science, was a part of their research and writing exercises.

The Bible, the student's choice of version, became a required text. Not a few of the students who entered my classes were essentially biblically illiterate. They were full of proof-texting, running a stream of individual phrases or single verses to substantiate a point. One of my basic lines came to be, "You should get to a point where no matter where a congregant comes from in the Bible, or with whatever kind of question, that you can move from that throughout Scripture to help them with a more wholistic view of scriptural themes. You must have facility with the whole Bible." And, frankly, I made sure students knew I held Scripture in high esteem, in fact higher than many of them. They might think they were more orthodox, but I was more so, but not bragging about it.

Fairly early on, but continuing through the years, in the introductory part of the basic course I asked the students as to why they were in the course—not just because it was required! So, why study Christian ethics. The list answering that question grew. And, formed a bridge from where the students were to more of what they could be.

The numbers of students that faculty were expected to lead were such that it was difficult to know them individually. And, some of them liked the potential anonymity. My point to them, though, was they were in a profession that kept them out of anonymity. In order to get acquainted with them, but also so they could become acquainted with each other, I developed a Student Information Form. On it were fill-in spaces so they could provide me their birth-place, where they called home, family members, their sense of calling, what and where they would like to be in five years, ten years, their hobbies, where they did undergraduate or other graduate work, hobbies.

Now I would include the item of the students providing me with some sense of where they are in reference to political parties. The reason? So much of what passes now for theological discourse (sermons, studies) find more resonance with political party platforms than with what can be described as a "whole Gospel, for the whole person, for the whole world."

This Student Information piece led to more specific attention to what I called Informing and forming influences in our lives. That development and configuration is covered in more detail in an earlier book of mine, "The Integrity Wheel."

Conclusion: Being relevant, both to the discipline and the practice of Christian ethics, required me to be aware of the students and leading a course that demonstrated relevance to them personally and to the congregations they would be leading. The attempt was to help the students

in the necessary translation work of theological jargon, academese, that had/has little bearing on people's character and actions. As I came to know them better, I could understand myself better, and vice versa.

For Further Discussion:

1. How would you respond to this idea: The study of Christian ethics is more than that of a descriptive study, it can become a normative endeavor, in fact recognizing that ethics becomes an interdisciplinary study and application.

2. If someone asks you, "What is Christian ethics?" How would you respond? Perhaps at the end of the book, you might ask yourself the same question.

3. Do you have an example of a decision made, or being made, that includes elements of deontological, teleological, and relational ethical theories?

4. Have you seen/experienced someone who talks about "absolutes" but decisions made, relationships, have strong "situational" content? Can these be parts of a larger whole?

5. Where would you start if you were asked to compile a list of virtues from the Bible? Much more, with that list, how do you absorb and extend those virtues?