

5 Christian moral principles

5.1 Introduction

REVISED

It could be said that a religion is characterised as much by its **morals** as by its beliefs. There are many approaches to morals within Christianity and this section explores three. Much of your work for the Religion and Ethics paper will support this, especially the topics of natural law and situation ethics.

Key word

Morals A set of principles linked to doing right actions

For some Christians, the diversity in approach is to be celebrated, perhaps because the intention to do good could be seen as at least as important as the action itself. However, for others, authoritative factors help us to identify what is right and what is wrong and it is important that these are followed.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the authority of the words of Jesus, spoken to the apostles and passed down through the Church, holds high authority. For many Protestants, the Bible is the highest authority, with different traditions giving different weight to reason and to Church teachings. For some Christians, what is right and what is wrong is based on one single authority – love.

We can divide these approaches into three:

- 1 Theonomous Christian ethics.** These place God at the centre: God's commandments are what is required for living morally. Humans are so sinful because of the Fall that they cannot make right decisions for themselves and so they must use the direct words of God, found in the Bible.
- 2 Heteronomous Christian ethics.** There is a variety of sources of authority for morals. The Bible remains important, but, perhaps because it was written so long ago, morality requires additional support to be understood. This support can come from the Church or from reason, or both.
- 3 Autonomous Christian ethics.** The authority is placed onto the individual. The idea behind it is that Christian ethics are ethical decisions that happen to be made by Christians; here we look at those ethics that use love as the guiding force that helps Christians make moral decisions.

The specification says

Topic	Content	Key knowledge
Christian moral principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The diversity of Christian moral reasoning and practices and sources of ethics, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Bible as the only authority for Christian ethical practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As the Bible reveals God's will then only biblical ethical commands must be followed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bible, Church and reason as the sources of Christian ethical practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christian ethics must be a combination of biblical teaching, Church teaching and human reason
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> love (<i>agape</i>) as the only Christian ethical principle which governs Christian practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jesus' only command was to love and that human reason must decide how best to apply this
	Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to diversity of Christian moral principles, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> whether or not Christian ethics are distinctive whether or not Christian ethics are personal or communal whether or not the principle of love is sufficient to live a good life whether or not the Bible is a comprehensive moral guide. 	

Now test yourself

TESTED

- Which approach to ethics might suggest that the Fall has made humans unable to make moral decisions for themselves?

5.2 The Bible as the only source of ethics

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A theonomous approach to Christian ethics sees the Bible as containing all a person needs to live a good life. Behind this is the idea that the Bible is a set of truth statements that reveal God's message to the world: it is **propositional revelation**. If the Bible is, indeed, a set of statements that God has made then it is logical that these statements should be followed directly.

Key word

Propositional revelation The idea that God reveals himself in truth statements. To say that the Bible is an example of this is to say that the Bible is a series of truth statements

The Bible itself makes claims that it is to be taken at this level:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

2 Timothy 3:16

You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though humans, spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:20–21

Some Christians see the Bible not as dictated by God but inspired and still accurate. This approach is borne out by the nature of the Bible: it is full of several different types of text, including stories of people, which need to be understood as holding a message for life today.

For this approach to work, it is important that Christians embrace the whole text of the Bible, rather than choosing some 'favourite' passages. It is also important to recognise that the Bible is interpreted the minute it is read and that this cannot be helped: literalists do allow this approach to interpretation.

Typical mistake

Some candidates suggest that literalist interpretations of the Bible only read the words at face value. However, a literalist in twenty-first century Tanzania will read the words and immediately interpret them very differently to someone in thirteenth-century Italy. It is important not to over-simplify complex issues.

Analysing theonomous ethics

Some suggest the Bible contains contradictions, such as a change in approach to revenge and violence between Old and New Testaments. However, theonomous Christian ethics might argue that the Bible looks at situations from different angles in different places and that much of the Old Testament was replaced by the New Testament. This still leaves the approach open to criticism, however, because it seems that interpretation is required, which could point to the need for the use of reason or Church guidance.

Another criticism is that the Bible contains many different styles of writing and some of these styles are written in a specific context by a person (e.g. the letters of Paul to different Churches). This would suggest that the Bible cannot have been written by one author (God). However, this point could be criticised itself because it seems to limit God to being like a human, able only to write in one way.

A strength of using the Bible as the only source of morality is that it provides clear guidelines that cannot be questioned. However, some would observe that some modern situations are not covered by the Bible and any attempt to apply Biblical content to these situations would be using our reason, which is not true theonomous ethics.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 2 What is a propositional statement?
- 3 Is the idea that the Bible has different styles of writing an argument for or against taking the Bible as the only form of authority in ethics?

5.3 Bible, Church and reason

REVISED

The Bible has not always existed in its current form. During the second century, Christian leaders gathered together to choose which of the many books around at the time had sufficient authority to make up the New Testament. The key criterion was that of apostolicity: the idea that it must have a direct link to an apostle. The books were arranged in the order we now see them, discarding other Gospels and other letters. For some, this was simply the Church identifying which books were God-breathed, but for others it is a clear example of the Church using its authority to select the authentic tradition of Scripture: more than just the Bible is needed to determine what is right and wrong.

Church authority

There are different approaches to Church authority in Christian denominations, as shown in the following table:

Approach by some Protestants	Approach by Roman Catholics
Over 2000 years, the Church has interpreted the Bible and this interpretation should guide people in their moral lives.	The authority of the Church was given by Jesus to Peter and the apostles and itself already existed when the New Testament was put together.
Churches are often governed by councils or synods that guide people in how to live.	Tradition comes from the spoken tradition given to the apostles and handed down over time. It therefore has the same criterion of apostolicity.
The Church is the bridge between the first century and today and its journey is as important as the journey of the first Christians.	Authentic interpretation of the Bible is one of the jobs of the Church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.
Preaching is a valid method of interpretation for Christians.	'To the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles.' (<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> , 2032)
Prayer and worship are ways in which Christians use Scripture and therefore learn from it.	With this authority comes the assertion that there are moral absolutes: some things are simply wrong or right.
The Bible was written after Christianity had existed for some time and so what was written down was written for the specific context of the authors of the different books.	Humans are weak and sinful and therefore cannot rely on themselves to make moral decisions properly – the Bible and Church are required.

These approaches lead to a number of issues:

- Is it reasonable to suggest that humans cannot effectively live their lives without an authority? Would God have created humans that way?
- The relationship between people and the authority of the Church has created problems in Christianity's past and partly led to the Reformation.
- It is unclear how the Church is able to transmit God's authority on a day-to-day basis – does God reveal himself specifically to Church leaders? Corruption within Churches also suggests that Church leaders are as human as others.
- How do we determine when to take the Bible at face value and when to interpret it through the Church?
- Which situations make a new interpretation of the Bible authentic? Who decides?
- If the journey of Christian tradition is valid, can there be absolute right actions and wrong actions? Does this matter?

Revision activity

Which approach do you find more convincing? Or do you reject both? Make sure you can justify your answer

Now test yourself

- 4 For a book to be included in the New Testament, to whom must the book link directly to?

TESTED

5.4 Bible, Church and reason (continued)

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Using reason

For Roman Catholics, reason can be used to identify what God has revealed. The most important area in ethics is in understanding Natural Law. God has a core understanding for the universe (the Eternal Law) and has revealed some laws through the Bible (the Divine Law). The next tier of law is Natural Law, which are the five primary precepts on which humans try to do good and avoid evil. Finally, secondary rules are made that are human laws that fulfil the primary precepts. These human laws are verified by the Church, but can be worked out through reason.

Catholics also give authority to the **conscience** to help make moral decisions. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) said that the conscience was reason being used to work out what is right to do (and therefore identifying the secondary rules of Natural Law). In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman said that conscience has more authority even than the Pope (i.e. the Church) because having a conscience predates the Church's existence.

Many Protestants would agree with some of these principles: reason is, at the very least, required to help distinguish between correct and incorrect interpretations of the Bible. Reason is required to understand the Bible in an ever-changing world, but it is also important to understand reason as trying to establish what would be in the Bible if it were being written in today's context. To be sure, the world today is significantly different from that of the New Testament. These Protestants believe that the Bible can speak into current situations if appropriately analysed. It is important to understand what the context of the Bible writers was and many Protestant communities emphasise the importance of studying the Bible through Bible study groups, as well as engaging in private reflection and listening to preaching. Ultimately, for Protestants, reason still points back to the Bible, which holds ultimate authority.

Analysing heteronomous ethics

Heteronomous approaches to ethics might suggest that the Bible is a form of **non-propositional revelation**. Any heteronomous approach begs three fundamental questions:

- 1 What sources are the correct sources of authority? Which Church or which Church leader?
- 2 Where there is disagreement (especially when the reasoning of two individuals differs), who or what has the ultimate authority? Catholics would say the Church; Protestants would say the Bible – both of which have their own problems.
- 3 Has the ability of God to reveal himself and to be recognised by faith been undermined?

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 5 Who said that the conscience is reason working out the right thing to do?

Making links

Natural Law is covered in detail in the Religion and Ethics book, Chapter 1.

Key word

Conscience The inner sense of right and wrong in a person, sometimes described as an internal voice

Key quote

Conscience is a judgement of reason whereby the human person recognises the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1778

Revision activity

Make a mind map or other visual note of the information in this section on using reason.

Key word

Non-propositional revelation The idea that God does not reveal himself through truth statements, so the revelation might need interpretation

5.5 Love as the only ethical principle

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In *Mark* 12:30–31, Jesus summarises all the law as being about love. This is clearly a theme throughout the Gospels and so a starting point for many Christian approaches to ethics. The Greek word for love in this context is **agape**, which is used of the unconditional love that God has for humans and which humans need to try to have for God and the world.

The Bible further clarifies the idea of *agape* as being:

- sacrificial love for others, in the same way that Jesus sacrificed his life
- making yourself a servant
- directed towards everyone, including enemies and outcasts
- eternal.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) saw love as a central precept, underpinned by justice and growing out of the wisdom of the past. The laws of the Bible are wisdom from which we learn, but central to our ethical decision making needs to be an ultimate fairness for all, which is characterised by love. Tillich rejected non-autonomous approaches to ethics.

Adapting Tillich's thinking, Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991) used this principle of love to determine his theory of situation ethics. In situation ethics, love is the central principle that prevents the Christian from falling into over-reliance on laws or a life without rules. It tells Christians to follow the rules unless it is more loving to do otherwise – to transform a situation into one of love. Fletcher argued that his theory was person-centred, just like Jesus was.

The argument goes that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was not a replacement for the Ten Commandments, or the whole Jewish Law but a set of illustrations of how to put love into practice. J.A.T. Robinson (1919–1983) described love as having a 'built-in moral compass' which can direct people to the most important need when required – we should trust love.

Analysing autonomous ethics: is love sufficient to live a good life?

Yes	No
Love gives us all we need to have the confidence to follow our instincts.	It is over-simplistic to suggest that Jesus' teachings were only about love.
Love is the only force that can fully recognise the ever-changing moral situations we find ourselves in.	In the same situation, different people might interpret love in different ways.
Love is a fundamental and extreme human emotion and so God could well have expected that to drive us.	Love requires at least reason alongside it to understand how to live life. It is too complicated to be the solution on its own.
Love can empower the Christian to be able to put people first in challenging times, especially when mainstream society needs to be challenged.	Love can become an excuse for people simply doing whatever they want.
Jesus kept returning to the theme of love and so situation ethics seems to reflect his approach. Jesus' authority cannot be denied for Christians.	Agape love is not achievable for most humans. It is unlikely that God would expect the unachievable from his people.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 6 What Greek word means 'unconditional love, like that God has for us'?
- 7 Which scholar came up with the theory of situation ethics?

Key word

Agape The unconditional love God has for humans that humans need to try to reflect

Making links

Situation ethics is covered in full detail in the Religion and Ethics book, Chapter 2.

Exam tip

One word can make all the difference – sufficient means 'enough on its own' and so this is not the same as asking if love is important in living a good life.

5.6 Christian ethics: distinctive, personal, communal

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Are Christian ethics distinctive?

Christianity is underpinned by belief in the **incarnation** and resurrection, which means that it is coming from a distinctive starting point from other religions: God reached down to humans, rather than humans needing to reach up towards God. The emphasis on Jesus Christ also leads to the idea for some Christians that personal faith and grace are the primary ways to get to heaven. If this is true, then Christian morals might come less from a central teaching authority than in other communities.

Christians who take a theonomous approach to ethics will have plenty in common with **deontological** forms of ethics, although the emphasis on the Bible will be different. There will also be overlap with Judaism and Islam. Heteronomous approaches, in allowing reason to play a role, have more in common with many of the ethical theories you have studied, although some forms of utilitarianism might overlap more with autonomous approaches, as would situation ethics. Eastern religions have a range of approaches to ethics, which tend to use a combination of sources of authority to help an individual make decisions.

For those Christians who take the Bible literally, their ethical approach might be very different. Using love as a guiding principle also seems distinctive, but it could be argued that love is the same idea as the way that many people approach ethics.

Christianity calls people to be counter-cultural (to challenge society when it loses its way) and to be prophets in the world, such as in the command to love enemies; perhaps on this level Christians can be identified the most as distinctive.

Personal or communal?

The Christian community is both a living community of Christians now and a communal group that stretches back over about 2000 years. The Bible is the story of those early communities, Jewish and Christian; perhaps Christian ethics is about a community expressing moral actions, more than an individual doing them. The idea of Christians building the Kingdom of God is one of building a community, but equally, a community is made up of individuals. In the thinking of Natural Law, ethics is personal but has the ultimate intention of the overall good of society, which reinforces this point from a Catholic perspective.

Key words

Incarnation God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ

Deontological Duty-based approaches to ethics

Making links

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (see Chapter 6) explored the idea of ethics being communal in some detail.

Now test yourself

- 8 What relationship do Christians try to have with the world?
- 9 Does the use of reason suggest Christian ethics is personal or communal?

TESTED

Personal	Communal
The Bible and Church teachings give individuals a way to live life according to their own needs.	The Bible needs to be read as the expression of how a community lives its life.
Jesus spoke to individual circumstances – for example, the woman with the flow of blood.	Jesus spoke to groups more than to individuals, such as in the Sermon on the Mount.
Some Christians apply reason on an individual level to circumstances.	For some Christians, the Bible should be shared and studied in group situations.
The community focus is about worship and prayer, rather than ethics.	Communities work by rules being used and the rules found in the Bible are for the community.
Situation ethics places the emphasis on the individual's ethical decision-making.	Any interpretation of the Bible is done so in a community context – interpretations have changed over time with different communities.

5.7 Summary and exam tips

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Exam checklist

- Explain the views of Christians who think the Bible is the only authority for ethics.
- Explain the role of reason in the ethics of some Christians.
- Explain the authority of the Church and Church tradition for some Christians.
- Explain *agape* as a possible approach to ethics.
- Evaluate whether Christian ethics are distinctive or special in some way.
- Evaluate whether Christian ethics are about individuals or communities working for moral lives.
- Assess how useful the principle of love is in living a good life.
- Compare the Bible, Church and reason as approaches to ethics.

Sample work

Much is made of essay introductions, but these do not have to be tricky. It's important to use that first paragraph to drive your essay forward.

First attempt	Improvement
In this essay, I am going to discuss whether Christian ethics should come from the Bible or from love alone. This has been an issue that has perplexed scholars for many years.	The Bible is seen by many Christians as the Word of God but one of the key messages of Jesus is that of love and this comes through many of his teachings. It could be argued that love is Jesus' replacement for the Biblical law, or alternatively, that love is simply a convenient summary of what the spirit of the law is about.

Going further: Christian virtue ethics

The pre-Christian Aristotle said that an approach to ethics that was based on making sure you were constantly developing your character (through virtues) was more important than being focused on rules and laws. A virtuous person is reflective and sees life as a constant journey towards the goal of fulfilling one's purpose. Virtue ethics has seen a resurgence in modern times through the work of scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre: we should form habits by imitating role models and thus become people who are able to make good judgements.

Some might argue that this is how Jesus intended his teachings to be taken. Jesus could be said to have wanted to form people into 'good Christians' who were then able to tackle whatever life threw at them.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas saw virtues as being interconnected with rules. He did not see rules as being able to be formed in advance for all situations and he felt that being virtuous can help our decision-making.

Christians sometimes list seven specific virtues, which are very similar to key virtues listed by other religions (which might also be an argument against Christian ethics being distinctive):

- Prudence (wisdom)
- Justice (fairness)
- Temperance (self-control)
- Courage (inner strength)
- Faith (in God's revelation)
- Hope (not giving up)
- Love (*agape*)

Starting Christian ethics with an understanding of virtue theory could lead to some interesting answers to the questions raised by this topic:

- It could explain why some Christians believe it is possible by faith alone to get to heaven because true faith requires these virtues (and morality then follows naturally).
- It could explain why Christians who use the Bible alone can have all the tools needed in their lives for ethical living.
- It could solve the question of whether ethics are both personal and communal because an individual might practise the virtues and develop them alongside the community.
- It could unpack the idea of what *agape* means and involves.

Revision activity

If you want to explore this further, make sure that you research Christian approaches to virtue ethics, rather than the theory in general. It's good practice when revising to challenge your brain with wider reading from time to time.