

What Are/Is Christian Ethics?

Jay E. Adams, S.T.M., PhD.

Dr. Adams is Director of Advanced Studies at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. He is also the Dean of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation and the author of numerous books on counseling.

The ambivalent use of the verb form evident in the title of this article tells you something. But before talking about that - let me ask you - which should it be: "is" or "are?" Is the word ethics singular or plural?

If you don't know, or aren't sure, you're not alone! I have discovered that more than a few Christians do not know whether the noun "ethics" is singular or plural, a fact that probably is indicative of another more important one - they know virtually nothing about ethics, either.

To begin with, then, we must study the word and its referents. The noun comes from the Greek *ethikos* which means "arising from use or custom." The more basic term, from which *ethikos* is derived is *ethos*, which signifies "use, custom, manner, habit." The latter term is used, for instance, in the New Testament in Hebrews 10:25 where the bad "habit" or "custom" of absenting oneself from the assembly of other believers is mentioned. Clearly, then, the word ethics originated in the customs and habits of groups to which their members were expected to adhere.

Ethics today refers to the standards of

conduct adopted by a group or individual; as a discipline, it is the study of moral values belonging to such groups or persons. Obviously, the words "medical ethics" describe those standards under which physicians, nurses and other medical personnel conduct themselves when carrying on medical practice.

The problem with this concept of ethics, deeply embodied in both the word and its history, is that human beings set standards according to the values that they accept. There is no objective, universal standard of moral value applicable to all medical persons for all time and in every culture. Moreover, each discipline takes upon itself the task of determining its own ethical code. These codes are, therefore, subject to change according to the whims of society and the biases of the majority of the persons subscribing to them. Strictly speaking, Christians should not operate under such relativistic codes.

In medicine, for quite some time, the Hippocratic oath formed the basis for medical ethics. That vow, repeated by graduating physicians as late as the 1950's, reads as follows:

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

I swear by Apollo, the physician, and Aesculapius and Health and All-Heal and all the gods and goddesses that; according to my ability and judgment, I will keep this oath and stipulation:

To reckon him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents, to share my substance with him and relieve his necessities if required, to regard his offspring as on the same footing with my own brothers, and to teach them this art if they should wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation, and that by precept, lecture and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the art to my sons and to those of my teachers, and to disciples bound by a stipulation and oath, according to the law of medicine, but to none others.

I will follow that method of treatment which, according to my ability and judgments I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is

deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such such counsel; furthermore, I will not give to a woman an instrument to produce abortion.

With purity and holiness I will pass my life and practice my art. I will not cut a person who is suffering with a stone, but will leave this to be done by practitioners of this work. Into whatsoever houses I enter I will go into them for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption, and further from the seduction of females or males, bond or free.

Whatever, in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I may see or hear in the lives of men which ought not to be spoken abroad I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

While I continue to keep this oath unviolated may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the

art, respected by all men at all times but should I trespass and violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot.

Obviously, that oath has little bearing upon what medical people believe and do today. But, what I want to ask is this: was the oath ever an acceptable standard for Christians? I am not thinking about the plain paganism of the oath so much as the fact that even in its best clauses ("I will not give to a woman an instrument to produce abortion.") it is humanistic and not Christian. Nothing there is based upon the Word of the living God. It was a purely human production, having no greater authority than the views of those who assent to it, and could be altered or given up as quickly as physicians' views change. Indeed, that is just what has happened; and as a result, today, there is virtually no standard code of ethics; each man does and believes that which is right in his own eyes.

But is that all bad? My contention is that it is not. While one must grieve over the licensing of sin that has led to the disavowal of many former values, he must rejoice over the fact that Christians can no longer take it for granted that their compatriots will seek the welfare of their patients (indeed, they never should have since only God can tell us what the welfare of another might be). No longer can Christian medical personnel simply follow the crowd and the direction of professors in medical college; they are forced to question them as never before. Such

naïveté has at last become all too apparent.

What this all boils down to is the fact that at last Christians are required to think clearly about the true foundation for the values they will take with them into their medical practice. Will modern codes - the pronouncement of elite physicians today (who are no less pagan than Hippocrates, just less obviously so) - be the standard to which they adhere? And - just what code will you make your personal code: an AMA code? A state medical association code? The code of some hospital? Or will Christian physicians, together with the help of knowledgeable and sympathetic theologians, draw up their own code of belief and practice based solely upon the principles of Scripture - the only permanent, objective standard they can trust?

The Hippocratic oath, in spite of its open avowal of paganism, its nepotism, its self-seeking brotherhood of physicians, etc., had this going for it: it unmistakably recognized the necessary relationship between medicine and God. And it called upon physicians to vow before God to treat men, whom Christians know are made in His likeness, according to the lights of their religion.

It even demanded purity and holiness of life, recognizing that the man giving the treatment had to have a sincere religious

commitment. Modern codes do not. Of course, the gods to whom the Greeks prayed do not exist, their religion was false and the standard for treatment of men would be set according to the values and principles of paganism. But, at least, these pagans saw the need for a physician to take an oath before the God in which he believed. Should Christians do any less?

The inseparable connection between medicine and faith is obvious in James 5 where oil (medicine)¹ was ministered with prayer. Moreover, the concern in James 3:9, Genesis 9:6 for the life and welfare of other human beings that should characterize the treatment of Christian physicians must stem from the significant fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God. That does not mean that people have great dignity and worth, as some of those enamored with self-esteem teaching claim, but rather that God does. It is because they reflect Him that the Christian physician considers any attack upon or mishandling of human beings as an insult to God Himself. Here are at least two reasons (out of many) why it is important for Christian physicians to draw up a Christian Confession of Faith and Practice for Medicine. Call it a Christian Code of Ethics, if you will; but if you do, be sure that it differs from every other code by the fact that its basis is the unchanging and unchangeable Word of God. Every point in such a code must grow out of and be consistent with Scripture.

My plea, then, is for a code of ethics for

Christian physicians, nurses, and other medical personnel based on a permanent, objective God-given standard for faith and life. Time has long past for Christian physicians to draw up such a code. If this article can give impetus to a movement in that direction, its goals will be achieved.

Oh, yes, you probably did want to hear about the word "ethics" - is it plural or singular? My dictionary tells me that it is a plural noun when it means a system of moral principles, but singular when used to denote the field or discipline which studies such matters.

For details on this, see my Competent to Counsel where I point out that the verb "anoint" is not the ceremonial word (*chrío*) but the ordinary one used by physicians that means to "smear, rub" (*aleipho*).