

The Struggle for Ethical Integrity

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He was my supervisor, the state director. I was in my early years as a local campus minister. We were seat mates on a flight trying vainly to negotiate its way through heavy turbulence on the way to the Southern Baptist Convention. Suddenly, the plane hit an "airpocket" and dropped several hundred feet within a matter of seconds.

Because I was relatively new at this mode of travel, I was scared speechless. (My prayer life, however, improved radically.) A short time later, after I had recovered sufficiently to speak, I turned to my "boss" with this confession: "Remember my last monthly report in which I stated that we were **comfortably filled** at Vespers each week? Well, uh . . . what I **really** meant was . . . that we had room enough for everyone to lie down."

My guess is that all of us have come up against situations which sent us scampering to the nearest justification for our actions. Each of us has struggled with the ethical dimensions of life and work.

The purpose of this article is to offer a kind of visceral rationale for this struggle (because I am more visceral than cerebral). It is not intended to be the "last word" on the subject. Just a word . . . mine. Neither is it intended to be primarily a theological/epistemological study of the campus minister and ethics. That is much too broad an assignment for the length of this paper. Someone should write an article concerning the relationship of "ethics" to the Baptist Student Union/Baptist Campus Ministry as organization, the college/university, constituent and non-constituent students, church staff, family, and "governance" problems. The following is not that article. Simply put, it is an attempt to deal with the integrity problem we all face in varying degrees of intensity.

My suspicion is that when a breakdown in personal/professional ethics (which are not easily separated) occurs, we all may somehow be involved, at least in the first step—i.e., the misrepresentation of facts/truth through the "little lies" of convenience and accommodation. After all, they seem harmless enough at the beginning. Someone asks you to speak and you

know the honorarium won't cover your expenses (you **really** can't afford it), so you plead a prior commitment you don't have. Another asks a favor of you and you don't want to say "no" because you have a neurotic need to be liked and you are afraid a negative answer will diminish your personal stock. But you don't want to go and you find a convenient alibi. You then perceive that you have let him down easily and that you have maintained your "status." Later you discover that, in fact, the situation has become more complicated.

Why do we ever begin that process? Why does it all happen? Aside from the perceived pressures (sometimes very real) to "succeed" by **all** Madison Avenue standards, I humbly suggest three clues to the integrity problem.

1. The primary problem has to do with our world view. Amid all the fragmentation, estrangement and alienation, it is no wonder that contemporary society would conclude that this is not a **moral** world. Popular television preachers and media evangelists bombard us with the message that since the world is in rapid moral descent, the world cannot be moral.

How we regard the world (God's creation?) is crucial to formulating an ethical/value system. Read some of the classic Old Testament stories where **cleverness** was regarded as a greater virtue than honesty. And when your sense of guilt begins to weight you, read about those great giants of faith—Abraham or Moses or lesser known but equally important members in Jesus' family tree, e.g., Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38). "General Hospital" and other afternoon soaps have nothing on the Bible!

The cycle is endless for generations. The old proverb is true: "Unhappy is the man who tells a lie because he can never believe that anyone else tells him the truth."

So the first question we need to ask is, "Whose world is it, anyway?" That is a profoundly religious question. If we conclude that we are the owners of the vineyard rather than its stewards, we have a problem which opens us to ethical compromise.

2. A second reason we may have a flirtatious relationship with ethical "reductionism" is the failure to accept ourselves as we really are—warts and all. Much that we see as deception hangs precisely on this point. Apparently some of us cannot believe that we are enough as we are, so we feel the need

to present ourselves as more than we are . . . and in the process truth is distorted. This is the reason "just average" ex-football players become great stars by the time they get around to telling their kids about their gridiron exploits. I still enjoy those marvelous state of the art games played at local Pastor's Confernces concerning "our services yesterday." Further, I want you to believe that I am a shrewd and thrifty consumer, so I brag about the "great deal" I arranged on the new car purchase. Few of us are immune at some level and the trip is short to a lifestyle built on distortion of reality.

Years ago, Vance Packard (**Hidden Persuaders**) was one of the first to call attention to this type of deception in advertising. A soft drink is said to have "nutrient energy." That means it is loaded with **calories**. And the beat goes on.

According to James Dobson (**Hide or Seek**), our collective sense of inadequacy has reached epidemic proportions. I agree that it is indeed serious. This situation makes it easier to use a form of deception in order to keep others from discovering what we "know" to be true about ourselves—which is another religious issue, because it exposes where our genuine commitment really lies.

Revel Howe once said that if we really believed that God loves and accepts us as we are, we would have the freedom to live as the people we really are on the inside. We would be liberated from worrying about what others may think about us. May I suggest another side to the same coin: If we truly believe God loves us and, therefore, our "righteousness" is not really ours but a gift of grace, we are freed from the sometimes passionate need to manage others' lives.

The energetic missionary apostle asked our question for us: "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" (Romans 8:31ff).

3. A third reason we may face the ethical dilemmas of honesty and integrity involves the apparent strong need to possess the whole truth. I really do not know why this is such a problem for so many of us apart from its relationship to the prior point; i.e., it may be tied to a perceived lack of a healthy self-image. Perhaps we campus workers have internalized the extant ministerial neuroses that we perceive ourselves as authority figures and we have problems when we are challenged by anyone. If this is true it is only a short distance to other

relational problems with nearly everyone with whom we work (and live?) including students, pastors, supervisors, *et. al.*

At the risk of oversimplifying, the obvious answer to this embryonic pathology is **maturity**. One of my seminary mentors, a highly regarded (now retired) New Testament scholar, said recently that one of the great benefits of reaching age seventy was that he no longer feels the need to carry the burden of omniscience and infallibility. We need to hear that word. Perhaps all Christian ministers should work toward that goal. Perhaps a good dose of that medicine would make us immune to the plethora of claims around us from the political, scientific, and religious worlds that "there is only **one** truth, and I have it!" Perhaps we should acknowledge that no one of us has the total truth about **any** subject.

In 1870 a certain bishop heard an educator say that in fifty years men would "fly like birds." He responded: "Flight is strictly reserved for the angels and I beg you not to repeat your statement lest you be guilty of blasphemy." The bishop's name? Milton Wright . . . whose sons' names were Wilbur and Orville!

The U.S. Commissioner of Patents during Abe Lincoln's administration resigned his position because he felt that "there was nothing new under the sun." Everything worthwhile had already been invented, and he wanted to move into a more profitable career.

History is replete with such stories to teach us that truth belongs to no one person and that one of the ways we collide with reality is when we allow our expectations of truth to become too specific. There is more than one level to truth and it comes in more than one form.

I would suggest that the best way to deal with this problem is to model for our constituency a fresh sense of openness. It is in the affirmation that under God each of us holds only a "particle of light" and that our task is to join others in the sharing of their particles that we can begin to catch a glimpse of the truth. At least a significant portion of our responsibility is the development of ethical sensitivity toward the sanctity of "the other side." It is a spirit that needs to be nurtured by all of us.

Christian ethics functions to define the "highest good" and to declare the principles of action we may take to achieve

it. It also rejects a privatized gospel in competition with the **community** of faith. While personal encounter with God is crucial to personal regeneration, it is never isolationist. Conversely, it is incarnational in its approach and relational in its methodology.

In summary, we deliberately cultivate the ethical standards of personal and professional integrity through our relationships. We can learn to accept ourselves as we are and thereby realize that we have no need to project distorted self-images to others (which helps us to accept others better). We can work at keeping our belief system open by being willing to have our perceptions of truth examined, while insisting on the same freedom for others, knowing that ultimately it is the truth that will make us free.