



Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

Decision making is the most difficult area in which Christians are expected to reflect their commitment to God's Word. This is the area that causes the most angst and, yet, is the most visible reflection of our belief and faith. Therefore, we should not simply rely upon some formal "code of ethics," then assume everyone has the skills necessary to make quality decisions. That's especially true when our foundation is Scripture. We must, then, be trained on how to make sound scripturally-based decisions. Anecdotally, I would offer that we would not expect an untrained technician, who had merely read the manual, to go out and build an atomic bomb. Improving our ability to understand and make scripturally-based decisions is no less critical.

The complexity of ethical decision making, however, is compounded by the fact that there are no algorithms that can be taught as hard fast "rules" that, if followed, would be the correct decision with a pre-described outcome. I have read several books written by Christians that do an excellent job showing how, for example, you can use the Ten Commandments as the model. I totally embrace having foundational principles upon which to make decisions. These foundations assist and guide us, even *govern* us in making decisions. The point here is that when it comes down to having to make the decision, it will be made in an imperfect environment.

In the absence of a perfect world, we must then strive to improve the quality of our ethical decisions, recognizing we will never be perfect. We can improve our performance by first understanding the characteristics of ethical dilemmas. Also, there must be a process imposed on our decision making that will improve consistency. Finally, it is mandatory that we apply principles that are consistent with Scripture. There is an idealized world in which we strive to be perfect as God's Word has called us to be perfect (Matt. 5:48). In a fallen world we must therefore know that there will be a gap between the idealized and the realized. Our goal is to minimize the gap.

With that preamble, let's consider some of the characteristics of ethical problems that Christians face today:

Most ethical decisions have extended and uncertain consequences.

Our decisions have an impact upon others, and those consequences should be considered, and that extension constitutes the essence of the ethical dilemma. Some think ethical issues are free of risk or doubt, with a known outcome for each alternative. A deterministic model—that is, one without probabilities, may seem to simplify the process of analysis, but it does not accurately describe the dilemma. In reality, it is rarely clear and

definitive what consequences will follow from the alternatives considered regarding most ethical choices.

Most ethical decisions have multiple alternatives.

Some think ethical issues are primarily dichotomous—a yes and no choice. A dichotomous framework may present the ethical issues in sharp contrast, but it does not accurately reflect the dilemma. I have been told by many Christian role models and teachers that yes, there is only one interpretation of the Scripture verse, but there may be differing "applications" of that respective verse.

Most ethical decisions have mixed outcomes.

Ethical issues are rarely antithetical with directly-opposed returns and some corresponding cost. In reality we can do everything right, but still not achieve the desired outcome. Just because we made the decision—for all the right reasons—the outcome will not always be as desired.

Most ethical decisions have personal implications.

No informed person would think ethical issues are totally impersonal, divorced from our faith, our lives, and careers.

In summary, when faced with ethical dilemmas we must consider the consequences, the alternatives, and the personal implications. In the end, however, we make the decision based on God's Word. We need, however, to consider the variables so that we make the *best* decision.

Next month I will address ethical decision making in a more specific manner, but I thought it would be appropriate to first introduce some of the variables we face when dealing with ethical dilemmas.

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