

Making Moral Decisions

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The|Church of Ireland

How should I live? What principles should I live by? How can I make sense of a dilemma that I face? Many thinkers and philosophers down the ages have offered a variety of answers to such questions, and Christians have always believed that their faith gives them a distinctive answer. To put it simply, Christians seek to live according to the will of God.

Discerning the will of God can sometimes be straightforward. Murder, torture, theft and lying are unethical and, for Christians, such behaviours are clearly contrary to the will of God. By contrast, caring for those in need, feeding the hungry, and helping the downtrodden or suffering are understood to be both profoundly moral and in keeping with God's will.

Other moral decisions, however, often prove more difficult to address. This may be because new ethical dilemmas have arisen that are not covered by our traditional moral teaching, or because there are sincerely held differences concerning how that traditional moral teaching might best be interpreted now. The range of our moral experience is broad and complex; so reaching a moral decision can be both difficult and costly. The Church attempts to root its discernment of God's will in an acknowledgement of these challenges, and it seeks to support those who are struggling with the moral difficulties they face.

How should we use the Bible?

The Bible contains much ethical material, for example the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the general example and teaching of Jesus, and passages in the letters of Paul. It is important that we read and reflect on this material. In doing so, we may well become conscious not only of the way the Bible can speak helpfully to us, but also of the great distance between the biblical world and our own. For many Christians, the cultural context of the biblical writers seems to have resulted in rulings we would rightly call into question today, in the light of Jesus' central command to love unconditionally. Attitudes in the Mosaic law to enemies, slaves and women, together with punishments such as stoning for sexual transgressions, are cases in point.

So we need to consider how we read the Bible. Two principles are crucial: first, the Church emphasises the importance of the systematic reading of scripture in worship: for every day of the week and every week of the year, the Church follows a set of readings from both the New and the Old Testament, and Christians

focus most especially on the words and example of Christ. We cannot focus simply on a few passages that appeal to us; we are required to read and reflect on the Bible as a whole. Thus, the Church is a moral agent that is shaped by its reading of Scripture.

The second principle is related to this way of reading. The Bible contains many Christian ideals, but it is not simply a book of rules. It is a collection of testimonies from across the ages about a living relationship between our loving heavenly Father and his children, a heavenly Father who always wants to protect us from the harm we may bring upon ourselves. So while the Bible offers much moral guidance, especially in the life and teaching of Christ, to treat it simply as an ethical rule-book would be to minimise and even mar its value.

Where else can we discern God's will?

Our faith in God as creator means that God is revealed in and through the world around us - not just through the environment, but through research and study, through both our potential and our limitations as determined by nature, through human interaction and exploration. The various branches of study and human endeavour continue to reveal much about creation and about its creator.

Through our prayers and our worship, our study and our meditation, we may come to discover more and more of God's will for creation. Our experience as a community of believers, the Church, is central to this process of discernment. This community – across time and space – offers us a sense of perspective, a yardstick by which we can measure our own experience and response to God. It is reassuring to realise that we are not the first people to wrestle with moral issues as part of our Christian lives. We may find that our conscientious efforts to discern God's will in difficult situations leave us confused and unable to find an answer with which we are comfortable. Or, that on reaching an answer we find ourselves in disagreement with those we love and trust. But it is vital for us to realise that there is nothing wrong in being unable to produce a definitive answer to every moral question, and to remember that, whatever our conclusions, we may need to revisit them in the light of later developments.

So how does an Anglican make moral decisions today?

God's will is to be discerned in at least three ways: through the Bible as revealing God's dealings with his people, especially

through the life, death and resurrection of his Son (Scripture); through the community of believers, the Church, today and down the ages (Tradition); and through the world around us, God's creation (Reason).

If these all point to the will of God, we would expect them to agree. If they don't agree, we may need to think and pray more deeply and reconsider our interpretation. Have we understood the Bible correctly? Was that insight really from God or merely an expression of our own culture and upbringing? In making moral decisions we need to take all these things into account, humbly, prayerfully and with respect for those who come to different conclusions, as was the case equally in New Testament times.

Where does conscience fit in?

Conscience has been defined as 'the inner aspect of the life of the individual where a sense of what is right and wrong is developed'. That sense has to be developed and educated, which for a Christian is part of what is meant by growing in faith. Because of this, it is a mistake to equate conscience with the voice of God, as has sometimes been done. Yet as we mature in faith we grow in our understanding of right and wrong. Conscience is not to be confused with our emotional response to difficult situations and choices, nor is it our gut reaction to a moral issue. It is our prayerful understanding of God's will.

Can the Church help?

From time to time a church body or a church leader will attempt to assist church members to think through a particularly difficult issue. Often it is one where Christian values are clear but hard to apply in a very complex situation. A statement may be issued which offers advice; but nothing can take away the individual's personal responsibility for their decision. The Church can guide or assist; it is up to the individual to decide.



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Church of Ireland House,
Dublin 6