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**The Bankruptcy of Christian Fundamentalism’s Rule-Based Morality:**

**Case Study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics***

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All forms of religious fundamentalism, including Christian fundamentalism, are based almost exclusively on oversimplified rule-based moral system that represents a quick shortcut towards the resolution of serious moral dilemmas. Robust Christian moral reasoning is very often absent from the current theological debates and fundamentalist *literalistic* dogmatic persuasions that generate moral judgments foreign to Scripture and Christian tradition.

This paper will first attempt to define and explain the examples of Christian fundamentalist moral orientation/systems with its inadequate and restricted rule-based morality. Next, this research will use the common morality theory (with its emphasis on how to deal with violations of moral rule) as a possible way out of the conundrum of moral reflection and application. Finally, the presentation will make a case study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* as an example of the historically responsible, contextualized, and relevant moral system that generates responsible theology and just action.[[1]](#endnote-1) Finally, at the centennial of 1919 Conference some beneficial implications for Adventist current theological debates, organizational challenges, and moral practices will be presented.

**Theological Fundamentalism and Rule-Based Morality**

Theological fundamentalism stems from so-called *intellectual fundamentalism* of 1920-es. Analyzing this phenomenon, John Dewey, famous American pragmatist, psychologist, and philosopher of education defines the 1930-es “fundamentalist in religion” as the one “whose beliefs in intellectual content have hardly been touched by scientific development” ignoring altogether Copernicus, Newton, Darwin or Einstein.[[2]](#endnote-2) Theological fundamentalism, with its literalism, ascended from the ambiguous context of tensed relations between religion and science, especially between creationism and evolution. My goal here is not to analyze what Dewey meant by “being touched by scientific development.” Religious and theological anti-modernist fundamentalism simply ignored the *contextual* and *polemical* nature of theology, namely, discussion of pertinent issues within the context of emerging science, philosophy, and culture in general. Intellectual theological fundamentalism takes into consideration solely the revelation of God as direct means of communication between God and human beings. Any indirect form of God’s communication is rejected as a product of modernistic philosophy or scientific “paradigm shift” not welcomed in the Church.

The natural outcome of this intellectual and theological fundamentalism is what I will label here *ethical fundamentalism*. Moral fundamentalism or ethical fundamentalism does not take into account *contextuality* and the *philosophical reflection* on the nature of morality, its sources, structure, and function (based on tradition of contribution of secular and Christian ethical thinking and reflection). Consequently, rule-based morality based on mostly simplified divine command theory has become the great paradigm of understanding God’s will and human moral duty. There is no need here to elaborate more on the contribution of legalism to fundamentalism.

As a reaction to liberal modernism, which claimed that “morality is the essence of religion and is indeed virtually equated with it,”[[3]](#endnote-3) religious fundamentalism rejected intellectual reflection on morality and involvement of human reason in making moral judgments. The reason has become the empty vessel filled with God’s revelation interpreted literally and directly. Ethics has been transformed into dogmatic theology. It is captivating that *The Fundamentals* do not address Christian moral reflection at all.[[4]](#endnote-4) Lack of reasonable moral reflection has been staggering.

Rule-based morality, therefore, has become the natural result of this so-called *biblical morality,* which ended up in so many contradictions and ambiguities based on the fact that the moral reflective reason, emptied of *principles*, cannot transcend or bridge millennia of cultural gap between the biblical world and the contemporary post-Enlightenment world. The sacrifice of Isaac or the Hebrew midwives lying (just to name a few) have become biblical moral phenomena impossible to comprehend and integrate into this strict fundamentalist rule-based system of morality or duty oriented deontological system of morality (source of this conundrum is Kant, of course).[[5]](#endnote-5) Lying to Nazis about the Jews in the basement became impossible and unacceptable. The moral system almost justified immorality. The result is confusion, disappointment, and moral chaos. Rule-based morality (or conditionally divine command theory hijacked by biblical morality)[[6]](#endnote-6) has developed into a rigid moral structure without contextual reflection or contemporary struggle with moral application. Contextuality and polemics are exorcised.

**Common Morality and Contextuality (Deciding What to Do)**

One of the theories of morality that might help us here to understand how morality should and has to transcend fundamentalist rule-based ethical system is a *common morality theory* developed by Jewish secular philosopher, ethicist, and bioethicist Bernard Gert.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ignoring both weaknesses of deontological and utilitarian theories of morality, and yet built on strengths of both, Gert claims that the only safe way of reflecting on nature of morality is to develop *anti-theoretical* common-sense morality (ten simple rules that match everyday experience with morals).

Quite intriguing, within the discussion on the tenth rule “do your duty,” Gert is explaining the list of possible questions we should ask when reflection on *justifying the violation of moral rule*.[[8]](#endnote-8) One of the questions especially catches reader’s attention. *Is the rule being violated toward a person to prevent her from violating the moral rule when her violation would be (a) unjustified or (b) weakly justified*?[[9]](#endnote-9)

Gert is simply teaching us that we live in the real, contextual, not imaginary world. In the ambiguity of moral life and moral decisions quite often, we have to decide: is the violation of moral rule justifiable, and if it is, is this justification strong, weak, or non-existent? Whether this violation is done by the government or an individual the rational process of “estimation” or “determination” is needed to determine the nature of the justification.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Needless to say, the biblical morality based on the proper understanding of divine moral agency and revelation, especially when it demonstrates moral ambiguity (Sacrifice of Isaac or lying of Hebrew midwives), does support some of the principles of this common morality and the determination of *strong justifications for rules violation*. After all, in cosmic moral sense (C.S. Lewis), has not God violated the principle not to punish the innocent person by the divine redemption through substitutionary atonement and sufferings of the Innocent One? In moral terms, if divinity is subject to common morality, this would represent extremely strong justification defined as salvation of humanity. In the contemporary abortion debate, for example, rape or incest would be a strong justification for a violation of the common morality rule: thou shalt not kill or do no harm. Ordination of women as a moral mandate also would involve strong justification for Church policy/principle “violation” [though many believe it is under policy] because principles of justice and equality are safeguarded.

Common morality, therefore, helps us to understand the complexities of moral reflection and the possibility of the advantageous context-based moral system.

How does Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Ethics*, confirm the bankruptcy of the rule-based moral system and possibility that only through context-based moral reflection and action we can satisfy the moral demands of the divine agency and do justice?

**Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* and Context-Based Morality (Case Study)**

First pages of *Ethics,* according to Bonhoeffer’s disciple and biographer Eberhard Bethge, have been written 1939-40,[[11]](#endnote-11) in the turbulent times of the peak of Nazi rule in Germany. The fact that Bonhoeffer wrote this volume in the time of the absolute collapse of moral principles makes this work *contextual* in itself.

The context-based morality of Bonhoeffer is based on only one principle, principle of the love of God.

Bonhoeffer explains:

Not fettered by principles, but bound for love for God, he/(she) [wise human being] has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision. They no longer oppress him [her]. He/she belongs simply and solely to God and to the will of God.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Bonhoeffer himself was oppressed by the conflicting thoughts on possible concrete action against the Nazi regime. He was searching for “principles” that will guide his Christian ethical reflection and decision. Ultimately, he has not found them in the prevailing moral theories or even proper and current interpretation of Scriptures, but in the ultimate *existential* revelation of and calling of the love of God. Bonhoeffer continues:

The wise man [woman] is aware of the limited receptiveness of reality for principles, for he [she] knows that reality is not built upon principles but that it rests upon the living and creating God. He [she] knows too, therefore, that reality cannot be helped by even the purest of principles or by even the best of wills, but only by the living God. Principles are only tools in God’s hand, soon to be thrown away as unserviceable….[[13]](#endnote-13)

It sounds like a strong Kierkagaardian encouragement for Abraham’s soul in the morning of sacrificing Isaac![[14]](#endnote-14) Resolution of Derrida's “absolute dissymmetry?”[[15]](#endnote-15) For Bonhoeffer, like Kierkegaard, the action of sacrificing Isaac would be morally wrong but *religiously right*, or in Gert’s terms *strongly justified rule violation*. Bonhoeffer wants to reignite the living faith in the living God, absolute obedience to the will of God that transcends common morality or ethical principles or even religion. The disciple is not bound by the universal rigid rule-based moral system but by the contextual existential expression of the ultimate love for God through just action.

Bonhoeffer’s action against Nazism, in spite of clear biblical moral mandate of obedience to the government supported by a biblical form of fundamentalist morality, was instigated by the moral reality, reflection, and decision of a *real* human being.

*A real* human being is a *contextual* human being. Christ, explains Bonhoeffer, “has not become an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but God became man.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The incarnation has become the prototype of contextual *incarnational* moral expression of justice.

Speaking in Gert’s terms, Bonhoeffer lived a perturbed moral reflection and action based on strong justifications for violation of a general moral principle or rule. This context-based morality based on the deep personal knowledge of Christ and the immediate will of God *transcends* the distinction of good and evil in a traditional moral sense.[[17]](#endnote-17) Context-based moral reflection calls for prophetic insight and just action impossible without commitment for the love for God and humanity.

Fundamentalist rule-based morality, therefore, can never grasp the ambiguity of the moral reflection and the agony of conflict of moral principles, the intensity of estimating justification for a moral rule violation and call for contextual and courageous Christian moral action. That is why it is close to ethical obsoleteness and bankruptcy.

Bonhoeffer, in his historical context, was aware of this collapse of ethical systems, and for this reason he believed the Church has even “political responsibility”[[18]](#endnote-18) to act not upon conscience only (which is part of human moral principles system) but upon the absolute commitment to the love for God and the common good of human beings. Political responsibility is also based on obedience to the “immediate” will of God leading to just action.

**Adventist Fundamentalism Today, Church Organization and Context-Based Morality**

Adventism traditionally struggled to transcend the rule-based system of morality and understand what context-based morality means. Theological compatibilism between historically developed ‘Galatian heresy’ and Reformed doctrine of justification by faith impacted Adventist moral system of behavior and action. I should unpack this more but I will transition to only one aspect of current Adventist moral reflection.

Of all the current debates in the Adventist understanding of revelation, policy and morality (action of justice) question of church governance and policy is becoming the most pertinent one.

Regarding current institutional policies and shared governance attempts, I believe it is not enough to replace one dysfunctional ‘fundamentalist’ governing system with another that still reflects an *unethical policy-based mentality* enforcing the opposite or alternative *liberal* and foreign agenda on the Church beliefs and structure, carrying out tit-for-tat. This agenda would be deeply unspiritual, unchristian and sometimes anarchistic. Policies and principles of shared governance are the tools of the Church’s efficiency, not vice versa. Policies, if properly applied in moral *polemical* setting, should reflect and support the basic moral/’political’ *values* of the body of Christ – respect, dialogue, democracy, civility, love! The struggle is for generating *values,* not new policies. If basic Christian values are not upheld and defended at any cost, interlocution is pointless and futile.

Finally, striving towards serious moral reflection and living out the *context-based morality* is a Christian imperative. Whatever the Church’s future of shared governance and policies brings, principles of rigid fundamentalist and/or liberal theological, organizational, and moral agendas must be transcended by the flexibility of the *contextual freedom/liberty* to love God and generate the common good. As long as policies serve these *universal* *values* they are functional God’s tools. Like Christ Himself, the Church has to become *real*. Her ‘political responsibility’ towards the internal structure and its members remains the same as it is towards the external social setting. Being contextually *real* means being able to recognize and comprehend the ambiguity of the moral reality and principle, the uncertainty of determination of strong justifications for, if necessary, violation of moral principle and/or existing policy, and prophetic courage to speak and act in accordance to the love of God and immediate will of God for just action and the common good of *real* human beings within the faith community. We need *humane* Christianity!

1. The assumption here is that there is a clear distinction between *Christian* ‘neo-orthodox’ modernist-contextualized (Bonhoeffer et al.) and *liberal* *modernist* ethical systems in their attempt to challenge fundamentalist theological/moral agenda. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, 1934), p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. R. A. Torrey and A.C. Dixon, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony To the Truth*, Baker Books, 2003. None of 12 volumes of essays do not mention or discuss biblical *moral* theology or Christian moral philosophical reflection. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Excellent presentation <https://www3.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/2009-10/10100/LECTURES/26-kant.pdf> on page 6 explains this conundrum. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. If God’s Will is revealed literally in the Bible and God’s Will is the only criterion of the moral nature of an action (as divine command claims) then the biblical mandates and commands become God’s will in literalistic sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bernard Gert, *Common Morality: Deciding What To Do* (Oxford University Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 55-74. Some of the questions are the following: which is the rule violated; what are the desires of the person toward whom the rule is being violated; what goods or benefits are being promoted by the violation; are there alternative actions that would be morally preferable; is the violation done intentionally or knowingly etc.) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Touchstone, 1995), p. 15-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Preface), Religion Online Library <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/prelude/>. See also Arron Holander, *Impossible Ethics* <https://www.swarthmore.edu/writing/impossible-ethics-a-response-to-sacrifice-isaac> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 344-346. An individual Christian cannot be responsible for government’s actions but because of his faith and charity he/she is responsible for his/her calling within the sphere of his/her personal life, fulfilling its call in the *polis* (paraphrase of Bonhoeffer’s thought). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)