THE MINISTER
AS MORAL THEOLOGIAN

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS
OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

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To my students
over the last twenty-five years,
from whom I have learned much
of what I know about ministry

Contents

Acknowledgments

Books, even those with individual authors, are always collaborative efforts. As a writer you are in conversation with other writers, both those you know personally and those you meet only in print. For a book like this one, which draws extensively on years spent talking with students at all levels of ministry experience and on formal and informal consultations with ministers across a wide variety of traditions and settings, the sense of a collective labor is particularly strong. Whatever insight it has to offer is the fruit of a community of students, thinkers, and practitioners experimenting with the possibilities and wrestling with the perils of leading the church as a moral community. The book's dedication to the students I have taught over twenty-five years is in happy recognition of some of that debt.

A few members of the community of scholars and practitioners deserve special mention here because their long association with the author made them liable to be called upon for ideas and feedback, in response to which they were uniformly gracious and helpful. In this category belong my teaching colleagues Daniel Mejia and Joe Bush, and my onetime seminary classmate Anna Verlee Copeland, now a pastor in Maine. I also thank Tom Berlin, pastor and chairman of the board of Wesley Seminary where I

teach, whose feedback and encouragement were invaluable, and Mandy Sayers, an alum of our school who is both a fine minister and a meticulous editor.

Finally, I must mention a few scholars whose work in this area has been particularly provocative and helpful to me as a thinker and teacher: Rebekah Miles, who first gave me the idea that pastors could call upon congregants to do their moral homework; Richard Gula, whose work on the professional character of ministry offered me new ways of thinking about power; and Margaret Farley, whose reflections on the sustenance or failure of human commitments continues to illuminate both my work and my life. For the wisdom and insight they have brought to our shared field, I am grateful.

Introduction

WHY THIS BOOK?

Thirty years ago, when I was in seminary, literature on the ethics of pastoral ministry was remarkably sparse. What material did exist had more to do with manners and professional etiquette than with the moral problems that arise in ministry, and offered little in the way of tools for analysis or standards for judgment. Gaylord Noyce, longtime professor of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School, was among the first to address this problem with his 1988 book *Pastoral Ethics*.[1] In this work, he used the then-developing field of professional ethics to provide a framework for reflecting on the responsibilities of clergy.

In the decades since, many other writers have turned their attention to this topic. Recent books in the field are numerous, and many offer sound judgment and good practical advice. Among the general texts I have found useful in my many years of seminary teaching are Rebekah Miles's *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, William Willimon's *Calling and Character*, Joe Trull and James Carter's *Ministerial Ethics*, Richard Gula's *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry*

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1. Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics: Professional Responsibilities of the Clergy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

and his more recent *Just Ministry*, Joseph Bush's *Gentle Shepherding*, and Barbara Blodgett's *Lives Entrusted*.[2] These books provide various sorts of help, whether as broad moral and theological resources for understanding the particular ministry of the ordained or as carefully developed arguments for the nature of moral obligations in ministry. Some offer detailed accounts of what is at stake and what harm is done when professional norms are violated. Others enter into particular debates about the duties of confidentiality and their limits, the possibilities and risks of friendship between pastors and congregants, and the challenges of balancing professional obligations with personal and family life.

In addition, there is an emerging literature focused more narrowly on pastoral sexual misconduct, its patterns, its effects, and appropriate responses to it. Beginning with the seminal work of Marie Fortune,[3] these themes are followed up in works like Stanley Grenz and Roy Bell's *Betrayal of Trust*.[4] Other relevant works could also be cited, including a number of denominational statements. Most of these texts offer analyses of why such misconduct is so serious and so destructive along with practical guidance and strategies for establishing and maintaining necessary boundaries, and all articulate clear standards of conduct.

Given all of this it is reasonable to ask, Why another book on this subject? My answer to this sensible question is twofold. First, I am interested in calling attention to all the dimensions of pastoral ministry that involve ministers deeply in work we normally assign to the province of Christian ethics. This is not simply a matter of a particular clergyperson's intellectual interests or preferences. The ordinary practice of ministry *requires* pastors to serve as moral theologians within their congregations. It is demanded by the

2. For more on these and other recommended books, see the further reading section at the back of the present volume.

3. Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

4. Stanley J. Grenz and Roy D. Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Confronting and Preventing Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).

nature of their regular work as preachers and teachers and givers of counsel as well as by the role they inhabit as visible leaders of communities of faith. In fact, pastors will be teaching ethics, whether consciously or not, by how they handle (or avoid) biblical passages that are morally challenging or troubling; they will be giving moral lessons by what issues they address or ignore and by what they say about those with whom they disagree on those issues. They will be shaping character by what they say or leave unsaid in the counseling session and by how they respond to the behavior, praiseworthy or otherwise, that is displayed in the communities they lead. Furthermore, they will be continually "speaking with their lives," as the Quakers say, for they will be taken as moral exemplars and role models (whether wisely and fairly or not), which is an aspect of the office that cannot be ignored.

Recognizing that the minister bears special responsibility for the moral formation of youth and adults alike invites reflection about the nature of leadership and care in a congregation, a body that must be a moral community if it is to maintain its identity as the church. The work of formation requires not only explicit teaching and preaching but also fostering relationships that balance patience and humility with the willingness to confront issues honestly. All of these aspects of pastoral ministry call out for the need to address the particular character of moral leadership and for practical tools and guidance. Yet these topics receive very little attention in books in ministerial ethics, which tend to focus on ethics for ministers rather than on ministers as ethicists.[5] I hope to remedy this deficiency.

This first set of reasons leads us to a second set. As leaders in processes of moral reflection and judgment, as well as moral argument and decision, pastors are required to develop a certain set of skills and sensitivities. But because ministers will continually be preaching by behavior and teaching by example, they must also become certain kinds of people: not only people who possess

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5. Rebekah Miles's *The Pastor as Moral Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) is an exception, but it concentrates on guidance in the context of individual counseling.

certain knowledge and techniques but also people whose character is shaped in particular ways. This necessity is made even more urgent by the difficulty of the role a pastor is called to fill and by the distinctive moral risks and demands that are built into it.

Just how perilous this calling can be is not always acknowledged in the literature. To read some of what is written about the ethics of ministry, one would suppose that the task is merely to explain and justify the applicable rules. That way, ministers will understand why personal and church funds must not be commingled, pastoral duties must not be shirked, professional confidences must not be casually divulged, and congregants must not be used as a way to meet one's own emotional or sexual needs. While these are all sound and laudable principles, I doubt that they are frequently violated because of a failure to understand the rules. Rather, it is because the capacity to recognize and fulfill those obligations when they come under pressure is lost—lost to confusion, to desperation, to isolation and loneliness and self-doubt, all of which obscure vision and dissipate the energy and hope required to sustain moral integrity amid the challenges of life in ministry.

There are, to be sure, wolves among the shepherds, unscrupulous and predatory persons who seek their offices precisely in order to exploit them. But both observation and research suggest that these are very much the exception and not the rule.[6] Most pastors who lose their way do so because they lose themselves, in a sense, and grasp at anything (approval, admiration, celebrity, inflated authority, money, sex, or the unhealthy dependency of those they lead) to fill the void they experience. None of this lessens the destructiveness of violations, and none of it excuses pastoral misconduct. Whether or not pastors feel powerful, they wield enormous power and are responsible for the devastation that can come with its misdirection and abuse. It is altogether appropriate that those who violate the trust they have been given be held accountable. But it is not enough to elaborate the rules of ministerial conduct, as if they in

6. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, 47.

themselves could prevent transgressions. It is not enough to create legal and administrative processes for responding to offenses after the fact. While necessary, such responses will always be too little and too late. It is vastly more helpful to understand how those who begin with an intention to serve end up doing harm, to identify the factors that contribute to or reduce that risk, and thus to help prevent misconduct before the harm is done.

To do so, we must probe more deeply into the dynamics that lead to moral confusion and collapse. We must identify the structural features of pastoral ministry that create particular challenges for pastors, challenges that are greater not less for those most personally invested in their ministry. We also need to recognize the distortions of pastoral practice that begin in ways far subtler and more insidious than the sex scandals that attract media attention. We must see these commonplace vices for what they are: early signs of moral and spiritual corrosion that weaken the church and its ministry, even when they lead to no more egregious offenses. I aim to explore what puts ministers as human beings at risk, to help them acknowledge and understand the vulnerabilities that all human beings share, and to help them address these vulnerabilities in safe and appropriate ways. Ultimately, recognizing the profound link between moral performance and spiritual practice will help ministers to develop patterns of life and sustain virtues that will protect them and those they serve.

This book examines all the ways pastors are called upon to be moral theologians in residence for the communities they serve. I first discuss how pastors teach and model Christian ethics (chap. 1). I then offer particular guidance for how this can be done more consciously and constructively in preaching (chap. 2), teaching (chap. 3), and offering pastoral care and counsel (chap. 4). I conclude by discussing the challenges as well as the important opportunities created by the de facto role-model aspect of ministry, perhaps the dimension of ordained life that seminary students reflect on and prepare for least (chap. 5). For those who desire to go more deeply into the topics discussed in the final chapter, I

will treat them more fully in a companion volume.[7] There I will focus on the second set of concerns I have identified: the necessity and risks of pastoral power, the spiritual dynamics at work in the minister's role, and strategies for managing those unavoidable risks wisely and faithfully.

7. Sondra Wheeler, *Sustaining Ministry: Foundations and Practices for Serving Faithfully* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

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The Minister as Ethicist

Ethics between the Lines

Despite the title of this chapter, I realize that the great majority of those who answer a call to Christian ministry have not set out to become ethicists. Most will serve in churches (or hospitals or schools or some other setting) devoted to the praise of God, the proclamation of the kingdom, and the meeting of human needs, not in the academy. So it would not make sense to try to equip all pastors for, say, teaching the history and philosophical foundations of Christian moral thought or explaining Thomas Aquinas's insights regarding the elements of freedom and constraint in human acts. (Although, for what it's worth, this is fascinating and important stuff.) I aim to resist the temptation that besets all academics to try to excite everyone else about the aspects of their disciplines that interest them.

Instead, I want to take seriously the tasks and the needs of those who are called to pastoral ministry or chaplaincy, recognizing that the finer points of moral theory and the more technical aspects of ethics may be of little immediate use to them. Yet the minister is probably the only professional practitioner of Christian ethics most

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congregants will ever get to know, a fact that has many implications for the practice of ministry. And if you suppose that such a description does not apply to you, I would like to make the case that all who perform the routine tasks of ministry will be doing moral theology—the exposition of how their theological commitments shape their lives in the world—every day, whether they think of it that way or not.

To begin with the most obvious, those of you who serve in churches (and in other ministry settings as well) act as ethicists in preaching. You convey judgments about what is central and important in forming and living a Christian life by choosing which biblical texts to preach on and by choosing what to emphasize within a given passage. You also teach by default in what texts you ignore or actively avoid, choosing to offer a topical sermon on the week in which a particularly challenging passage comes up in the lectionary. You teach ethics explicitly through what you say about passages that raise moral issues but also tacitly through what you assume or leave unsaid—as, for example, when a minister breezes past the advice in 1 Peter for slaves and women to imitate Christ by accepting the unjust authority placed over them (2:18–3:6) without stopping to deal with analogous modern instances of injustice in police misconduct or domestic abuse. You serve as an ethicist through what you preach about perennial moral problems (violence, oppression, infidelity, greed) as well as in the problems you avoid naming or addressing at all. And whatever moral issues you choose to address from the pulpit, you teach central lessons in Christian ethics by how you talk about those who hold other points of view.

Apart from preaching, ministers in any setting teach in one form or another. This activity, too, always includes aspects of ethics, whether intended or not. Simple matters, like which church groups or subjects are deemed worthy of your teaching time, are full of implications about who and what is most important in the life of the community. Furthermore, not only the content but also the method you use in teaching carries lessons in Christian ethics.

What sources do you draw upon in coming to understand a topic, and which have the most weight? How do you reckon with differences between those sources? How do you use the authority of the classroom, and how do you draw out and make use of the ideas and experiences of others? All these practical decisions offer moral lessons in themselves. In the Christian education of adolescents and adults, as in preaching, much is conveyed just through which topics are addressed and which are set aside either as unimportant or as too difficult to handle. If you *do* take on topics that are painful or disputed, then how you approach these areas will be as important as what you say about them. Especially instructive is how you deal with moral disagreement in the society at large, in the church, and within your particular community. How much real ambiguity do you allow for in making moral judgments about complex matters? How tentative or provisional are the positions offered on such issues? In matters of controversy, to what extent do you open the possibility that your view rather than your opponent's might be incorrect? All such attitudes and presuppositions fall under the broad sweep of ethics, which includes habits of heart and mind as well as norms of behavior.

Woven into and underneath all discussions of ethics in the church is an underlying issue of central significance. What is the relationship between Christian faith and moral life? Is Christian life simply a matter of trusting in "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:22), so that Christian ethics begins and ends with throwing oneself at the foot of the cross? Or conversely, does it all depend on one's behavior, so that (as the letter of James suggests) true religion is "to care for widows and orphans in their distress" (1:27)? Does that mean we need not worry too much about what—or whether—we believe? Or is the relationship between faith and morality more complicated than either of these texts taken alone can indicate? Some answers to these questions, however unformed, are implied by the patterns and practices of a community. How and to what extent are ethical questions taken up in the proclamation and instruction of a given congregation?

How are these matters related to its core theological commitments? The day-to-day life of a Christian organization embodies an ethical viewpoint and a sort of unspoken moral theology. By the nature of the enterprise, all Christian teachers, and thus all ministers, are also teachers of ethics.

While preaching and teaching Sunday school are clearly activities peculiar to religious communities, the giving of care and counsel may seem like one of the services that ministers provide in common with many other professionals. Psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, marriage therapists, and even the emerging specialty of "life coaches"—all are among those who offer support, advice, and therapeutic assistance to individuals, couples, and families in a variety of situations. These professionals are trained in a variety of disciplines and possess a range of skills. They represent diverse methods, approaches, and schools of thought, as indeed clergy may bring different levels of training and experience and different tools, resources, and theoretical frameworks to their work in pastoral care and counseling. What makes ministers and pastoral counselors distinct as a group from other caregivers is that they are grounded in part in some religious tradition and receive part of their authority from that tradition.

This foundation means that pastoral counselors are not neutral in their work but represent a particular, theologically informed view of the world and of the human being. They do not begin their encounters with people seeking help from a position of agnosticism about what is true and important, and they cannot adopt a posture of indifference to these commitments or their implications when counselees step into the pastor's study. Judgments about good and evil, conduct that is worthy of praise or blame, and paths that lead to human flourishing or impoverishment all depend on what is real and true about human beings and the world they inhabit. For this reason, the counseling activities of ministers always have ethical aspects to them. A minister cannot simply accept uncritically whatever life goal or strategy parishioners offer and neutrally set about helping them to achieve the proffered aims by whatever

means come to hand. Rather, the minister must engage with the counselee in the work of discernment, of coming to moral clarity and judgment, and must call the person to faithfulness in this work as an aspect of discipleship.

Let me hasten to acknowledge that the Christian faith is not uniform. There are significant differences in theological interpretation and resultant moral judgments among the various Christian traditions and indeed within them. Nor is it even the case that two people who subscribe to the identical statement of faith will always come to the same ethical judgment in a particular case. The point here is merely that in a community of faith, life choices and decisions are recognized as *moral* decisions; they are aspects of living out one's faith and not merely matters of personal taste or preference. They are, therefore, fit matters for discussion, subject to ethical evaluation and critique, possibly calling for affirmation or even for reproach. This is true whether the congregant (or even the pastor!) wishes to deal with morality directly or not.

Sometimes, of course, congregants come explicitly seeking moral counsel. Other times they may come seeking permission to follow a course of action that has obvious ethical problems. Occasionally they come having already decided upon such a course and want help in carrying it out. ("Please help me tell my wife that I am leaving her for my girlfriend so she doesn't get too upset"—an actual example!) And then there are the times people do not come, but you and those around them desperately wish they would. If you are a pastor—a word that, after all, means "shepherd"—what do you do when a parishioner proposes or undertakes some patently outrageous course of conduct? Or conversely, when someone in your care grieves and agonizes over some moral decision that cannot be made any more faithfully than it already has been? At least some of the time, to be a pastor is to offer more than what we commonly call "moral support": it is, with all humility and some trembling, to offer moral guidance.

The final category of what I have called "ethics between the lines" in ministry is the subtlest and in many ways the most challenging

of all. It comes of the fact that, whether you like it or not, fairly or unfairly, as a minister you are taken as a model—an exemplar of a faithful Christian life. There is a potent opportunity as well as a serious responsibility in this: many have been inspired to greater practical faithfulness by the Quaker saying, "Let your life speak." But of course, in a broader sense your life *is* speaking all the time, especially if you are the visible leader of a community. The question is, what is it saying? And because communication always depends on both members in the exchange, what your behavior is taken to say will never be fully in your control, nor will your actions always be interpreted generously or even reasonably.

If as a pastor you are seen doing something, others may twist this as permission to serve their own agenda, even if the circumstances are not really comparable. ("Even the minister drinks. Get off my back about a couple of shots on the way home from work! I'm fine to drive!") If you have had a bad day and a splitting headache, and you snap at a parishioner who is being domineering in a meeting, it is not just your conduct in that moment that will be subject to criticism. Your leadership and even your calling may be questioned. More broadly still, moral failures that become known are taken not only to reflect badly upon ministers but also to cast doubt on the faith they represent, as we have seen in the public scandals over sex and money that have plagued the church over the past few decades. Finally, and deepest of all, beyond the requirement of modeling faithful discipleship day to day, there are some occasions—at the Communion Table or beside a penitent or at the bedside of the dying—where the minister's role is nothing less than to embody the presence of Christ. It is not obvious how those who serve in ministry can take the weight of this role seriously without self-deception or collapse.

By now I hope I have made clear why ministers cannot avoid doing ethics as part of their ordinary work. As a pastor, you function as an ethicist in a variety of ways, and in some way in almost every activity you undertake, if only as an example whose conduct will be taken as a standard by members of your

congregation. If you serve in another kind of institution, in a school or in a hospital, in the military or as a chaplain for police and firefighters, the particular shape of your ministry may change, but it will still include the elements of proclamation and instruction, giving counsel and modeling discipleship. Whether or not this was part of your plan, having entered into ministry, you are the moral theologian in residence for the community you serve.

The Church as a Moral Community

Every human being of ordinary mental capacity over the age of seven or eight is "doing ethics," at least in the basic sense of making choices that have moral dimensions. Similarly, all Christians can be said to be "doing moral theology" in that they are living out some version of a Christian life, whether they are reflecting on it or not. But ministers are a special instance of this general truth because they have undertaken to lead a congregation or some other Christian community. Such a role draws upon all three dimensions of moral existence: what one understands, what one does, and who one is. It includes the formal leadership of worship and instruction and the administration of the church as an organization. It also includes the informal aspects of personal presence and example, the building of relationships, and the modeling of a shared life. Formal and informal aspects of ministry are intertwined, and both are vital to effectiveness. Leadership involves a delicate dance of speaking and listening, influencing others and being influenced by them, and developing the common ethos that makes an organization healthy and effective. This is true even in secular organizations, the government, or for-profit enterprises, whose leaders must forge a common purpose and a shared commitment to it in order to accomplish their goals. But a church is a distinct case in that a church must be a moral community in the deepest sense in order to retain its identity as a witness to the gospel and a sign of the reign of God.

To be a moral community in this comprehensive sense is first of all to be grounded as a place of theological reflection. It is to be rooted in study, thought, and prayer about the practical implications of Christianity's central claim: that God has acted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth to redeem and reclaim the world as God's own. Most Christian traditions send their prospective pastors for extensive education to equip them to lead such reflection, training them in tools of biblical analysis and the history and structure of Christian thought. But the role of a minister is not properly to study and reflect *for* the community in the sense of doing it on their behalf. Rather, it is to invite all members of the community into the shared work of reflection, a dimension of loving God with one's whole mind that is part of the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:30 and parallels). Christians are those gripped by an extraordinary story: how God in Jesus has followed us even into flesh to break the cycle of sin and death that holds us and the whole creation captive. How does this astonishing act grasp our lives and open us to new possibilities? What does a life set free from fear and futility look like? If the whole of Christian existence can be summed up as loving God and our neighbors, how do we discern together the concrete shape of love in our own time and place? These are not questions only for the ordained but for all who are members of the body of Christ in the world.

From this foundation the other aspects of life as a moral community arise. The people nurtured into Christian faith are also gathered in prayerful attention concerning the particular gifts and calling of this community of faith and of the individuals who compose it. This Spirit-guided work of learning to see the world as God intends it, and to recognize one's place in bringing that world to light, is what the tradition calls moral discernment. Together in worship and prayer, in the study of Scripture and the study of the world they are called to serve, with the help of the Holy Spirit, Christians seek to know their vocation and respond to God's call. But the path of faithfulness is often challenging.

The ongoing communal task of growing into people who have the skills and the character to fulfill their vocation is the long work of moral formation, and it has countless dimensions. We are shaped by all we see and hear—by the stories we treasure and the examples we lift up, by the lives of the saints and the steady disciplines of prayer and worship, where we learn to give up our illusions of control and remember with gratitude that God reigns. And we are formed by the company we keep: the friendships we nurture and the unlikely companions God gives us for the journey, the people God bestows on us who support or challenge, comfort or irritate us, the concrete and particular neighbors we are given to love and to learn from.

The deep, subtle shaping of how we see ourselves and the world, of what we hope for and imagine, what we love and trust and fear—all of this is part of sustained participation in a community of faith. This formation of character bears its most visible fruit in the mission and ministry of the congregation, but it also shows itself in the internal conversation that guides and propels that ministry, the conversation about the shape of a faithful life and the demands of discipleship. Such conversation is essential to the ongoing health and vitality of the congregation, for without it even once-vibrant missional programs tend to become matters of rote, based on "we've always done in that way" and not on the present gifts of the church or the actual needs of the wider community it serves. And apart from the constant renewal of vision and the continuing incorporation of new members with their ideas, gifts, and challenges, churches do not survive the changes that time brings within and outside their walls. Part of seeking a renewed vision and call is grappling with the issues of the day that confront us and trying to find a way forward that is faithful, bearing witness to the good news of God's love and the truth of God's reign over a broken and self-destructive human world.

This means that to be itself, the church must be a place of continuing moral conversation, a community where it is safe to struggle with confusion and disagreement, because what unites us

is stronger than what might divide. The truth is that our unity is not a choice but a fact: it is the result of what God has freely done for all of us in common, and it knits us together whether we like it or not. We are sisters and brothers, kin by divine fiat, and we can no more exclude and ignore those we are sure are wrong (as they likely are equally sure about us!) than we can stop inviting Uncle Al to family weddings just because we find him so disagreeable. But we also cannot avoid unpleasantness by dodging real conversations, keeping things on a polite and superficial level where we do not offend but also do not truly engage one another. We need to talk with one another about what is true and important in how we live our daily lives: what is at stake in the promises we keep or break, in the way we earn our money and how we use it, and what it might mean to be a Christian and a citizen. In these and a hundred other arenas, we are giving testimony about what we actually believe and love, hope for or fear, and we need to probe together how that testimony conforms to what we say in church on Sunday morning. To abandon that aspect of the church's common life is to settle for being something less than the church, a place of comfort without accountability, of service to the members rather than service to God, who calls the church into being as a living light to the world.

To sustain such a conversation is not easy, and it is not for the fainthearted, for it involves not just observation and discussion of issues in the abstract but also encouragement in the challenging discipline of learning to conform the witness of our lives to the witness of the gospel. It means learning to listen as well as to speak, to suspend certainty on matters about which we hold firm and passionate convictions so that we may be open to learning from others. And when that learning leads to the realization that we or someone else has turned aside from the path of faithfulness, then the community becomes the place of reform and reconciliation, where the wanderer is invited to repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. If this sounds uncomfortable, time consuming, and socially awkward, it frequently is. It is also deeply counter to our

culture, which tends to treat all morality as a matter of personal taste and entirely private judgment. But for those who dare take it, this path of shared moral discernment and discipline is rich and life giving, an indispensable means of growing together in holiness, into the very likeness of Christ in the world.

However, if the church's work of becoming a moral community helps us to avoid the risks of uncritical accommodation to whatever values prevail in a given society, it is not without risks of its own. On one side is the perennial temptation to focus on the failings and offenses of other people rather than on our own and to confuse the necessity of truthful speech with the sins of self-righteousness and condemnation. Most of us who have spent years in the church have seen instances of these deformations. On the other side is the danger of continual anxious self-examination and constant fear of offending God. This is the failing that Christian tradition calls "scrupulosity" and warns against for its ability to undermine joy and trust in the gracious mercy of God. This is perhaps less common in generations shaped by the therapeutic maxim "I'm OK—You're OK," but it still rears its head in the church, as most experienced pastors can attest. It is no small feat to form and sustain healthy life in such a community, even guided and nourished by the Holy Spirit.

By now it should be clear why the church, which must be a moral community to be fully itself, calls for a distinctive kind of leadership. It is not enough to administer the organization efficiently, not enough to display exegetical and rhetorical skill in preaching, not enough even to be a caring presence in trouble—though all of this is needed. To be able to foster a conversation at once intimate and broad about the shape of faithfulness requires all of a leader's gifts: knowledge and interpersonal skills, spiritual maturity, and all the cultivated patience and humility required of anyone who seeks to lead a community toward a character not yet fully realized in oneself. While much of the capacity for this work depends on the deeper elements of emotional health and spiritual nourishment,[1] I

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1. I treat these elements in my companion volume, *Sustaining Ministry*.

want to begin in the arena of knowledge, by providing a few basic tools as resources for the minister who undertakes to nurture a Christian community through intentional moral discernment and formation. These tools will be of service to us as we examine the ethical dimensions of the pastor's work as preacher, teacher, and giver of moral counsel. They will also be helpful when we return to speak of the challenges of being a moral example in the church.

What Good Is a Theory?

I have already acknowledged that not all the aspects of Christian ethics that are of interest to the academic specialist are of immediate use to those called to ministry. A vast technical literature analyzes human acts and judgments, explores the nature and limits of moral freedom, and examines the inner dynamics of motivation and self-awareness. Alongside different accounts of human beings, this literature offers widely varying accounts of the relation between Christian faith and moral life and competing views of whether (and if so, how) we can know and do what is good. These broad treatments are joined by reams of material about particular issues and areas of concern—political ethics, economic ethics, medical ethics, and so on—if not quite ad infinitum, then certainly too many for even the specialist to pursue them all.

But this does not mean that none of the resources of ethics as an academic field are helpful to those who are charged with leading churches or other Christian organizations. I would argue that there are few things of greater practical value than a good theory, for a theory is just an abstract and general account of what something is and how it works. What makes it useful is that it can be applied to any number of cases in a way that illuminates and clarifies both what they have in common and what makes them distinct. Accordingly, at its most fundamental level a moral theory is an explanation of the meaning of moral language—that is, what we are saying when we use ordinary terms like "right" or "wrong" and "good" or "evil." Embedded in any such explanation

is an idea about how we come to moral judgments (or perhaps how we ought to come to them!) and how such judgments can be explained and defended when doubts or disagreements arise. Also implicit in any fully developed moral theory is a picture of moral life, of what we are doing when we "do ethics," and of what sort of creatures we must be to do it well.

I want to offer a short survey of how disciplined reflection about moral life has been shaped in Western thought, what such reflection is good for, and how to help others engage in it. For some readers this will be a review of material covered in a long-ago course in college or seminary, while for others it will be new. Whichever group you fall into, this summary is brief and nontechnical enough not to be burdensome while showing how it might provide a framework for leading moral conversation in the church. The aim in this is not to fix the shape of the community's conversation, much less to determine the conclusions that might be reached in it. It is rather to deepen and enrich that conversation and to help it achieve, if not consensus, at least mutual understanding and sympathy. For that purpose, I will introduce the three broad families of moral theory, name some of their strengths and weaknesses, and say a little bit about the theological foundations on which they have drawn in Christian usage.

In the course of this survey, I will highlight the connections between moral theory (how we understand moral language) and moral method (how we come to a decision). I will also discuss the connection between the theoretical perspective we adopt and how we see the world: what appears to us as a moral issue to begin with and what seems most imporant about it. Most centrally for our purposes, I aim to show how familiarity with the various languages of ethics can help us to broaden what we pay attention to and the questions we learn to ask.

The Ethics of Duty

Of the families of ethical theory, the ethics of duty is often the most familiar, the taken-for-granted form in which people

first encounter morality as a category. Put most simply, *the ethics of duty evaluates acts in terms of whether they fulfill or violate one's obligations*. These obligations may be expressed in various ways, as rules or laws or principles, and they may be quite particular ("You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite" [Deut. 23:19]) or altogether general ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31 and parallels]) Obligations may also be grounded in varying kinds of authority: taken as the commands of God, like the Scripture quoted above, or as the laws binding a particular society ("Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion").[2] They may be something one has voluntarily taken on, like the duties one assumes by taking an oath of office, or they may be implicit in the situation one is born into, as having received care and benefits from one's parents creates a duty of gratitude. Or duties may be in a certain sense owed to oneself, as a form of respect for the sort of being one is. For example, accounts of humans as rational creatures ground a whole branch of ethical thought wherein a person is obliged to act in accord with reason.[3] In this way, obligations of equity and consistency and fair reciprocity, along with respect for others and honesty, are understood to be founded in the nature of human beings as rational moral actors. To act contrary to such duties is to act unreasonably, and thus less humanly, betraying one's true nature and forfeiting its freedom.

These are only the broad strokes on a very large and detailed canvas, but they are enough to suggest what is helpful and clarifying in approaches to ethics grounded in obligation. They help us to step back from ourselves, from our desires and feelings, and from self-interest so that we can see the situation with a wider lens and a greater degree of objectivity. We may have an impulsive desire to take what is not rightfully ours, but we recognize the legitimacy

2. US Constitution, Amendment I.
3. This description could be applied to all forms of ethics based on "rational universalizability," such as all of those derived from the work of Immanuel Kant. It could also describe many forms of natural law ethics from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas.

of the rule against stealing. We may in furious anger want to hurt someone, but both moral and legal obligations restrain us. A situation may arise where it would be easier and more convenient to lie to a friend than to deal with the truth. But it is not long before we ask ourselves, "Doesn't this person deserve the truth?" or "How would I feel if this person I trust lied to me?" The language of duty presses us back from what we *want* to do in the moment to what we *ought* to do, from the act that might be satisfying or beneficial to us as individuals to the act that we can justify as right and good and fair in our relationships with others. Clear rules and principles can be of great help in circumstances where we are either confused or tempted, serving as lines we know we should not cross.

However, true though it may be, this description leaves some things out of the account. For one thing, it does not address the fact that the application of principles and rules is not always simple or straightforward. Most of us would argue that there are limits to property rights, for instance, times when dire need might overcome a person's claim on what belongs to him or her. Thus Thomas Aquinas argues that a starving man who takes bread from the surplus of another as a last resort does not break the commandment against stealing.[4] Even more confusing, duties may conflict with one another. What are we to do when a promise to keep someone's secret runs up against the obligation to tell the truth when we are asked a direct question? Or more simply, when the obligation to care for one person is at war with the duty to care for another? There are strategies both formal and informal for thinking through and resolving such conflicts, and I do not want to suggest that just because rules are not absolute or self-interpreting they can offer us no guidance. It is often said that hard cases make bad law; they make bad ethics too. The point here is merely that rules and principles *require* interpretation and application if they are to offer practical help, and much depends on the wisdom and insight with which that work is done.

4. *Summa Theologica* I-II.66.7.

It is also important to note that the ethics of duty (like any system of moral thought) has characteristic weaknesses as well as characteristic strengths. One of those weaknesses is a relative lack of adaptability. Principles, being more general, typically have some degree of flexibility built in, but rules that work well in one context may require modification or complete rethinking if they are to serve the good they were meant to in another. Duty ethics (again, like any moral paradigm) also has characteristic forms of corruption and decline. This is seen when principles or rules that express our obligations are made utterly fixed and unyielding and treated as if they could offer a completeness and certainty that removes the need to pay attention to anything beyond the formal requirement of the law. If the great benefit of the ethics of obligation is clarity and the pressure toward objectivity, its corresponding risk is rigidity and narrowness of vision. It is possible for the reason and purpose of the law to be obscured and its function of guarding the integrity of the community lost, leaving only the letter that kills and not the Spirit that gives life (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6).

Despite these issues, the strong theological foundations for this way of approaching ethics are obvious to anyone with even a casual acquaintance with the Bible. There God is met as the Creator who speaks the universe into being, whose Word is law in the most profound sense of bringing what it declares into existence. With the advent of humankind, God is shown as lawgiver in the more ordinary sense. In the narrative of Genesis 3, God offers the bounty of the garden to the human couple with one prohibition: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After human transgression breaks the first peace of creation, the relationship between God and humanity is repaired through a series of covenants in which mutual obligations are framed by laws and promises binding God and the people. From a Christian standpoint, these covenants reach their final fulfillment with the coming of Jesus Christ, who declares a new covenant sealed in his own blood. But even here it is possible to speak of the "law of Christ," fulfilled by obedience to the double commandment to love

God with a whole heart and to love the neighbor as oneself. The language of law and obligation serves to honor the sovereignty of God and to highlight the seriousness of the requirement that humans respond to God's claim.

The Ethics of Consequences

If the ethics of obligation is the first form of ethical thought most people recognize, the ethics of consequences may be the form they most readily resort to in making daily decisions. This is true both in the arena of personal choices and in matters of public policy, particularly when some conflict arises between competing goals or desires. One common application of this moral theory is encountered in the risk-benefit analysis that guides decisions in human enterprises from medicine to transportation policy to tax law. At its most basic, *consequentialist ethics understands the meaning of right action to be action that brings about the best results for all those affected by it*. Acts that are likely to bring about poor results for those affected by them (whether actually adverse or merely less good than available alternatives) are judged morally wrong. By these calculations, unpredictable accidents (like a fatal car crash on the way to take a neighbor to the doctor), however dire, are not part of the moral judgment upon the act unless one has somehow contributed to them. The results by which acts are to be evaluated are only those that can reasonably be foreseen.

While this broad definition holds true across the family of consequentialist forms of ethics, there is as much scope and variety in this branch of ethical theory as we saw in the ethics of obligation. To begin with, the underlying rationale for the pursuit of the best results can be grounded in different ways. It can be rooted in the love of neighbor when that is understood as beneficence, doing good or offering benefit to others. It can also be founded in the nature of distinctively human acts, acts that are chosen and deliberate rather than done by instinct or reflex. To be human is to act "on purpose," as we say, to set out to bring about a foreseen

result that is more desirable than alternatives. And just as the ethics of duty can be grounded in the human capacity for reason, so can the ethics of consequences: on this view, it is simply irrational to act in a way that does not produce the best possible result, a repudiation of our nature and capacities.

There are also multiple accounts of the nature of the goods and harms that should direct our choices. People who hold to consequentialist ethics argue about how these goods and harms should be identified and defined, whether all goods are instances of a single thing, like pleasure or utility, or whether there are diverse goods. They also dispute whether goods and harms are the same for everyone or depend on individual preferences. Finally, consequentialist theorists disagree as to whether decisions should be based on the consequences of each individual act (e.g., Will the truth or a lie bring about the best result in this particular case?) or on the pattern of action that is most beneficial overall (e.g., Will it be better for everyone if people can have reasonable confidence in the truthfulness of others' statements?).

Some of the strengths of this form of moral reasoning and judgment are evident. Consequentialist ethics is highly flexible and enables one to take account of special circumstances as well as changes in historical context. It accords with at least some of our commonsense moral intuitions about wanting to have things come out for the best. Also, the moral vision this form of ethics holds out is notable for being inclusive and egalitarian. Common to all forms of consequentialism is the insistence that all the effects of our actions count, no matter whom they might fall upon. Moreover, in the balancing of good and bad effects that is part of the calculation of best result, the effects on all parties count equally: effects on self or others, on friends or enemies, on those of any social status. It is no coincidence that utilitarian moral thinkers (the earliest advocates of consequentialist ethics) were among the first to argue for the equal rights of women and for laws to protect laborers. Those who simply do whatever brings about the best result for themselves without regard for others are not

acting as utilitarians; by the light of this theory, they are merely behaving immorally. A disciplined attention to consequences will teach us to look at long-term as well as short-term results and to accept responsibility for all that can reasonably be foreseen to result from our decisions.

As is often the case, the weaknesses of consequentialism as a moral framework have the same roots as its strengths. The flexibility that allows one to take account of circumstances can also make room for rationalization and special pleading when one's own interests figure into the judgment of results. The even-handed objectivity required for a fair weighing of better and worse consequences is hard to come by and hard to sustain. Even more basic, it is not clear how we are to do the moral calculus required in weighing out the mix of good and bad effects of actions when those effects are of different kinds and affect different people. Does a small benefit to fifty people outweigh a significant harm to one? And where is the scale on which we can weigh very different kinds of goods (the overall benefit of funding an art museum against that of improving vaccination rates, for instance)? Finally, judging the morality of actions based on the results for all of those affected requires a high degree of confidence in our ability to foresee and quantify all the results that flow from those actions. However, anyone who has studied history or public policy knows that it is in large part a story of unintended consequences and unforeseen effects.

Still, the basic insight that human beings act for reasons and aim at some result holds true. Moreover, the capacity to order our actions so as to achieve some end is a fundamental aspect of being rational and morally responsible creatures, a part of how we are made in the image of God. And no account of moral life that ignores the actual consequences of our decisions for us and for others can claim to be fully Christian. The witness of Scripture, with its detailed instructions about practical matters from family life to commercial exchanges to the treatment of farm animals, makes it clear that material life and well-being matter. Likewise, the life and flourishing of nonhuman creatures is important if only

because God has made and blessed them and entrusted them to human care. The ethics of the apostle Paul may be centered upon what he calls "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5) and the law of love (Rom. 13:8), but he can still summarize the shape of Christian obligation succinctly: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all persons, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10 RSV, alt.).

The Ethics of Virtue

Whereas both the ethics of duty and the ethics of consequences focus upon guiding or evaluating particular acts and decisions, the ethics of virtue or character takes a broader view. It is interested in what we do as, first of all, an expression of and a contribution to who we are: what kind of persons we are revealing ourselves to be and what kind we are becoming as we act and decide. Rather than evaluating each act as meeting or failing to meet an obligation, virtue ethics asks what is involved in becoming a trustworthy and reliable person, one who has the capacity to recognize and fulfill one's duties. Instead of calculating how each act contributes to a goal in the world outside of us, character ethics focuses on their contributions to the goal within us: the goal of becoming a morally excellent person. Accordingly, *the ethics of character understands the meaning of right action to be the action that would be taken by a person who possessed the required virtues*, who would be able to judge and to enact what goodness looks like in the particular situation. In this way, character ethics has aspects of the other families of ethical theories, incorporating stable moral principles (such as the cardinal virtue of justice) and attention to the concrete circumstances in which judgments must be made.

This way of thinking about moral life as fundamentally a matter of character is reflected in the way we commonly talk about people, whether actual individuals we know or the "characters" of history and fiction. We offer moral descriptions of people not by listing their individual acts but by naming the reliable patterns

they show over time, patterns we regard as expressions of who they are. Of course, the traits we identify are not perfectly uniform and unchanging. A person who is generally patient may lose her temper occasionally, and we all know (to our sorrow) that even good people can fail dramatically or gradually be compromised and corrupted. However, most of us also have the happy experience of seeing persons develop with time and nurture positive traits that they lacked in the past. (Otherwise, hope of moral reform and spiritual transformation in the church would be hard to sustain.) Despite these cautions, in general we experience our own lives and the lives of those whom we know not as a series of disconnected situations and decisions but as narratives. They take the form of stories in which we and others become relatively steady and coherent personalities, including moral personalities, with reliable traits of character. Our ordinary moral conversation bears witness to this experience.

The ethics of virtue is not, however, altogether uninterested in particular moral judgments or acts: one definition of virtue is the capacity to act rightly when it is difficult. But virtue ethics tends to see right action as dependent upon things that are prior to and deeper than any single decision. These are the dispositions, habits, and skills cultivated over a lifetime that enable us to see a situation accurately and judge wisely the right thing to do. They also equip us reliably to act upon the correct judgment when it is reached, something that is frequently hard to do even when the judgment itself is quite clear. These cultivated habits and skills are what we call the virtues.

Here as in the other families of moral theory there is both variation and historical development over time. But the ethics of virtue as it has shaped Christian thought in the West is to a large extent descended from the work of thirteenth-century scholar and mystic Thomas Aquinas. He set out to integrate classical philosophy (particularly Aristotle's) with Scripture and the medieval Catholic tradition, incorporating the moral thought of the ancient Greeks into a theological structure grounded in God's work as Creator,

Redeemer, and Sustainer. The result for Christian ethics was an account that retained the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, understanding them to be the fruit of nature as it is developed in a good community. These were the virtues that equipped human beings to build and inhabit a good society. To these Thomas added the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, familiar from 1 Corinthians 13. These were understood as supernatural, the gifts of divine grace, which fit us for communion with God and the saints. The theological virtues also reach back and transform the natural virtues so that each virtue takes on a new character as grace reorders them toward our ultimate destiny in God. The development and refinement of these capacities for goodness is the lifelong work of every human being. They form the heart of moral life and offer the fulfillment of our potential as beings created in the image of God.

The strengths of virtue approaches to moral understanding should be easy to recognize. Their focus on who we are rather than on what we decide in a given moment corresponds to our sense of ourselves as moral beings. We are characters who develop and grow over time into a measure of stability, who face setbacks and surprises, but whose reality cannot fully be conveyed in a list of decision points. Virtue ethics teaches us to pay attention to who we are becoming, to how we are being formed or deformed by the characters we admire, the models we imitate, and the practices we adopt. It draws our attention to the most enduring product of our moral existence, which is neither the codes we adopt nor the good we accomplish, but rather the selves we become in the process.

The ethics of character also has obvious connections to one of the prevalent languages of the New Testament. There, the call to holiness is expressed not in terms of obligations to fulfill or practical goods to bring about but centrally as being conformed to the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29), "transformed by the renewing of [our] minds" so that we "may discern what is . . . good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). Thus Paul speaks of the transformation to be wrought in us by God's grace not in terms

of law but of virtues, the "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" that are the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).

The easy connection between the ethics of virtue and the moral language of the New Testament points toward a limitation as well as a strength. Virtue ethics understands moral life as a kind of inward progress toward a goal, where the virtues are developed skills and habits that enable us to reach this goal. This understanding works well enough in the Christian context, where the ultimate purpose or goal of human existence is broadly agreed upon: to "glorify God and enjoy God forever," to borrow the words of an old catechism. But it is harder to see how we can achieve any degree of consensus about virtue in a social setting where there is very little agreement about what human life is *for*, whether it even has a purpose, or what makes it meaningful or successful. In such a setting, it is easy enough for one to praise as hard-headedness what another would call hard-heartedness, or for one to condemn as weakness what another would call compassion. More than statements of obligation or calculations of benefit and harm, understandings of human excellence and fulfillment depend upon a community and a vision of the human good. In their absence, virtues and vices will seem no more than subjective terms of approval or disapproval, with no claim to truthfulness or authority.

This brings us to a related criticism, that the language of virtue has a kind of frustrating circularity. If right action is defined as the action that would be taken by a person of virtue, and virtues are the capacities that enable us to judge and to act rightly, where and how do we learn to recognize what right action looks like? The answer of classical thought seems to have been that we have to be formed and taught in a good community, one inhabited by persons of virtue. But this just continues the circle, for where are these virtuous persons to come from? Without delving into the various and ingenious answers offered in antiquity, I will merely note that Christians at least have an answer to the problem of what can serve as the model and source of moral goodness. Jesus

himself is the model of virtue, and the Holy Spirit is the one by whom we are formed into his likeness.

Ethical Theory and Moral Leadership

Often when I begin teaching a seminary course in ethics, I start by saying what we will *not* accomplish in our fourteen weeks together. Among other things, I say that I will not be able to show students a method for getting the right answer to every ethical question every time, and that I do not expect that we as a group will reach unanimous conclusions about every issue. For some students this is a disappointment, because they are hoping for an end to confusion. For others it is a relief, since they are afraid of being told what to think about complicated and controversial topics. But the fact that ethics as a discipline may not yield certainty on every question or universal agreement on every issue does not mean that it has nothing to offer those who are looking for actual guidance or help in finding the truth. As I hope the preceding survey has shown, what ethics is really good at is probing what we mean to say by calling something right or wrong, good or evil. This in turn helps us to understand some of the disagreements that arise among people who use the same words but mean rather different things by them. Familiarity with moral theory will not lead to the resolution of all conflicts, but it may lead to greater understanding and sympathy for those with whom we disagree. This is vital for the church to be a community of moral conversation and moral discernment.

It may also help us to understand conflicts we feel within ourselves when powerful moral intuitions pull us in different ways. For instance, when the devastation and brutality of war are brought home to us, we think, "Surely this could not be loving our neighbors!" At the same time, we are at a loss for how better to halt the spread of vicious regimes or the madness of genocide, which destroy others who are also our neighbors. This experience of being torn between principles we believe in and consequences we cannot bear is nearly universal. The fact is, none of the three broad approaches

to ethics is altogether complete and freestanding, and no normal human being operates with utter disregard for any of them.

The links between different ways of thinking about ethics are built in at the theoretical levels as well as in human experience. We have already seen the close connection between virtues and the capacity for right moral decision and action, understood in light of principles like justice and impartiality. Right doing may be the fruit of right being according to virtue theory, but right action is itself part of what forms character. Thus some notion of what it is right or wrong to do informs the pursuit of virtue. Similarly, no one who is concerned about fulfilling a duty can be indifferent to the effects of actions upon others; for one thing, some of those duties (like gratitude or reciprocity) are framed in terms of offering benefit to someone. Conversely, generally recognized duties like truthfulness and avoiding harm to the innocent continue to make themselves felt even when a careful calculation of overall consequences leads someone to decide that the morally best course requires lying or harming some in order to help others. People in these circumstances continue to experience the tug of the obligation they have overridden for the sake of the best result, even when they remain convinced they have done the right thing.

But beyond analyzing conflicts and understanding disagreements, the most important benefit of familiarity with moral theory for the minister entrusted with moral leadership in a community is that it teaches us to pay attention to all aspects of a moral situation. Each of the three families of ethics highlights a particular dimension of moral life, and each offers particular insights. Each approach leads the inquirer to ask a different set of questions and to become aware of a different set of challenges. Taken together and thoughtfully applied, they can help the pastor to see more keenly all the elements of a complex ethical issue and to lead others into a richer and more complete understanding in turn. Some acquaintance with ethics helps us to ask more and better questions, questions that invite congregants to see a complicated reality in 360 degrees and to enter more deeply into the hard work of moral discernment.