

Response to SCE 2020 Committee Report on the Future of Christian Ethics

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Thank you for asking me to respond to this report. I am excited to have an opportunity to reflect on the future of the SCE and Christian Ethics broadly and share my perspective among those I respect. I am a junior scholar in the field, so my remarks reflect my enthusiasm for making a living doing something I love, my limited experience, my hopes for a long career, as well as my institutional location. This December, I completed my first semester as a full-time faculty member. Although I have worked with graduate students in the past when I was adjuncting, I work with undergraduates at Baylor, a Baptist university, and this setting has influenced the way I understand my role as a Christian ethicist and educator and my perceptions of the future for our work. Yet the role of undergraduate teaching was largely absent from the report.

I maintain convinced of the importance of Christian ethical discourse alongside other forms of religious and secular ethical inquiry. Our difficult task in the present and future is to prepare our members, colleagues, and students to critically address complex contemporary societal issues from a Christian perspective with integrity, conviction tempered by humility, and acknowledgement of divergent views within Christianity and among other faiths. Yet in the preface to the report, Charles Mathewes writes:

[S]ome of us suspect that there is some evidence to suggest that... over the past few decades, the field of Christian Ethics has become too firmly a “field”—professionally distinct, and disciplinarily reflexive, in a way too much like other academic fields.... Given that “Christian Ethics” has, at least on many received understandings, a vocational responsibility to the Christian churches, such an “academic captivity” may mean that something has been lost, alongside the many gains.¹

In my brief remarks today, I would like to respond to this provocative statement and suggest some issues that the membership survey about practices and pedagogy might consider. I believe that our work is necessary to act as a critical conscience for Christian institutions and communities, and to the broader society as well. There are methods of inquiry, theoretical arguments, and scholarly conversations we consider that make us professionally distinct and disciplinarily reflexive, and this is a

¹ “2020 SCE Committee Report (Draft),” pp 5-6.

good thing, but as we move into the future, we must continue to be intentional about engaging with established thinkers and emerging thinkers (that is, our students and those outside the academy) in other fields.

This impression I have is confirmed in everyday conversations and in the classroom. Let me briefly describe what happens when I tell people what I do for a living. I'm sure many of you have had similar responses to the ones I've had these past few months when I tell strangers that I teach Christian Ethics. Generally, the reactions I've gotten fall into two categories: confusion and affirmation. Of course, there are those who have no idea that one can become an ethicist. As the discussion progresses, there is generally some interest. The more relevant responses to my point here about our engagement with broader society come from those who affirm our relevance. When I say I teach Christian Ethics, the most common response is something like, "Ooooh, we really need that!" The response conveys a few different sentiments, which usually depends on who my conversation partner means with the term "we.":

- Concerns about moral laxity in Christian leadership
- Concerns about moral decline, decay, or relativism among Christians in light of the surrounding culture
- Concerns about whether the church has anything relevant to say on social issues
- Concerns about the seemingly uninformed and uncritical positions that Christians adopt (e.g. responses I have heard after the comments by the *Duck Dynasty* patriarch.)

My undergraduate students have helped me see a much broader scope for these last two points. I've become aware that my class is a valuable space for helping them think more intentionally about the connection between their Christian faith, their vocation in the world, and their action in society. (I don't mean to overstate my significance here, but to say that I was surprised by the enthusiasm and thirst with which the students I have encountered undertake the ethical task. About half of my students are religion majors or minors – I expect them to be interested in the practical, real world implications of their faith. But the other half of my students intend to practice law, medicine, various types of business, and other professions outside the religious sphere. They are grateful to have space in their lives and in full curricula to think about how they will approach the increasingly complex issues of their professional and personal lives in a way that is integrated with their faith. My point here is that we should see the undergraduate classroom as a space of critical engagement with other disciplines.

Looking at topics that will be presented and taken up at these meetings, it is clear that the scholarship of the members of the SCE crosses disciplinary boundaries. Our research addresses contemporary issues and provides frameworks and approaches for the ethical task. I am certain we as individuals do this in classes and institutional settings. But I am concerned that as a society, we do not have enough discussions about how to be ethicists and educators who make a difference to those outside our discipline. There is a pressing need to demonstrate and teach critical thinking about the topics that threaten our social fabric and the cohesion that could exist despite divergence and distinct identities within Christian institutions. The most pressing issues are some of those that we address here at the annual meetings:

- Sexuality
- War, terrorism, and police and state violence
- Environmental degradation and consumerist values
- Healthcare, autonomy, privacy, and the role of government and other institutions in securing patients' rights
- Poverty and economic disparity

Although we address these issues, as a society of Christian ethicists, we should also be addressing how to participate and equip our communities and institutions to deal with these controversial topics. The membership survey on pedagogy and practices could be a useful tool for exploring this. Today's intellectual climate may lack the "vibrant presence of Protestant liberal arts colleges in the 1960s and 70s" (referred to in the survey committee's report), but ethics courses will continue to be a part of many undergraduate programs out of necessity, and perhaps there is a cooperative role for Christian ethicists in some of those. We should be strategic about our pedagogy and the types of courses we create and lead.

Finally, if we are to be relevant to a broader society, we need to be intentional about cultivating and nurturing the diversity present within our society. Discussions about how to build and defend diversity of thought, experience, background, and research interests within our society are crucial. The survey may help us understand how we perceive current efforts and what tensions remain unresolved. It is my hope that the great work the committee began may continue.

