WHAT MORALITY DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

Thinksheet 6

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The Bible teaches a formally authoritative, materially nonauthoritarian morality. What's this! Didn't I promise this course would be as simple as I could make it? It is. If I say something compactly, formulaically, as in this Thinksheet's first sentence, I go on to unpack it, make it simple. This Thinksheet is the unpacking of its first sentence.

1 The course's title is not "What Morals Does the Bible teach?" "Morals" (from Lat., "custom") are behavioral specifics, the **materials** of morality. Abortion, for example: does the Bible approve or proscribe abortion? Neither. Does the Bible say anything that might help my thinking about abortion? Wow, yes! Morals are actions, morality is virtue (goodness, character), & ethics is the study of the principles of principled (moral) & unprincipled (immoral) living. You could look it up, but I wouldn't advise it: the dictionary necessarily blurs distinctions we need for systematic thinking. The distinctions are not arbitrary but necessary, though the naming of the distinctions may vary.

2 Our thesis statement says the Bible teaches a **materially nonauthoritarian** morality. "Material," as we've said, has to do with the specifics of action, the "matter" of behavior. "Authoritarian," as you know, means absolutely controlling. Politically it's often called totalitarian, because the control is theoretically total (actually, it doesn't work: communism taught the inevitable collapse of capitalism, but communism as a totalitarianism inevitably collapses because it cannot crush the human cry for freedom). Over a vast range of personal, interpersonal, & public behavioral decision-making, the Bible leaves us free, indeed sets us free, to use our minds (otherwise, how could we worship God "with all our mind [Deut.6.5, M.12.30,33, L.10.27]?"). Of course there are some specifics freedom itself requires (eg, no murder), but they are few.

3 The Bible teaches a **formally** authoritative morality. Marbles of various colors may be put in a box (ie, a form), then dumped out & replaced with varicolored shells. No matter what changes you make in the content(s) (which in §1 we called "the materials"), the form does not change. The Bible is authoritative in its unchanging forms, or principles, of morality....Two problems: (1) In ethics, it's not always easy to distinguish between form & content. Eg, is "love" content, or is there also a "law of love"? (2) The failure to make continuous effort so to distinguish results in four pathologies: (a) *moralism* (seeing everything in moral terms, & insisting that others conform to one's specifics, morals), (b) *legalism* (conformity to a strict code of specifics, & efforts to force this code on others, (c) *skepicism* (moral indifference, from concluding that we can't distinguish form & content; and even if we could, neither would be authoritative), & (d) *conventionalism* (going along morally to get along; superficial, shallow, unthinking, nominal adherence to the canons of expected behavior, whether the adherence is punctilious or lackadaisical).

4 The Bible's morality is formally **authoritative**--for Jews, the OT (Hebrew Bible); for Christians, both Testaments, the first latently & the second patently. Here's part of the Bible's longest sentence (in the original; Heb.1.1ff NRSV): "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a [or, "his"] Son,...through whom he created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains [or, "bears"] all things by his powerful word." Underline the words bespeaking authority: "God spoke...has spoken...reflection.... exact imprint....word." Following Kant, who in this was redacting Hume, the modern mind believes that experience is the only thing that can speak authoritatively to human beings: revelation, as beautifully & powerfully put in our Hebrews passage, is prescientific, irrational or at least nonrational, unavailable to "critical philosophy" because claimed on the basis of special ("prophets....Son") rather than general human experience. But the Bible centers authority in "Jesus as Lord," with contributive secondary authorities in Scripture, tradition, church, & continuing experience of the Presence in the Holy Spirit.