

Recently, I typed just two words in a search engine: “Boeing” and “ethics.” Well, the first two entries returned were from Boeing’s own website policy pages, anchored with such words as “principles” and “ethics” and “compliance.” The next dozen or so search engine results linked to analyses of Boeing’s managerial handling of the two recent flight disasters involving the Boeing 737 MAX 8 airplanes. Those two tragedies—where hundreds of lives were lost—happened in Indonesia and Ethiopia.

Many of these search responses were substantially critical of Boeing. But a couple of questions first come to mind: by what standards did Boeing act and by what standards did Boeing fail, if indeed Boeing did fail?

From what we know at this point in time of recording this podcast episode, Boeing looks to have actually fostered a real problem. Apparently, Boeing had written new software and actually did not train or even tell airline pilots about the software changes that directly impacted how the airplane would be programmed to function in particular situations!

So the airline pilots involved were not really clued in as to why the airplane was functioning as it apparently was—can you imagine that? That seemingly violates a key principle of ethics applicable to many situations—that of “informed consent.” That is, were the pilots fully enough informed to take on the responsibilities of the captain of the airplane...the very airline captain who is singularly responsible for the lives of hundreds on each flight?

This general situation is emblematic of the rapidly evolving world of machine/human balance, more and more commonly called AI or artificial intelligence. Hey, have you driven a recent-year model of car with touchy automatic braking and keep-steering-between-the-lanes systems? The cars’ designers have preempted certain human actions in certain situations. Is that good? Is that always prudent? And, these types of situations raising these types of questions are going to be the ever-increasing norm in the future, with artificial intelligence designs on the rise in so many nooks and crannies in our technological lives.

So, should one wonder why Boeing took the approach that it did? Was Boeing uncaring as a company? Or perhaps too bureaucratic? Or did the decision-making the-buck-stops-here Boeing executive—or executives, plural—feel undue pressure to keep selling new airplanes with flawed software to keep up with sales and profit expectations of Boeing’s board of directors and investors? Or were Boeing’s airline-company customers putting contractual pressure by requiring Boeing’s timely deliveries of new airplanes, tempting Boeing to cut corners? Or, when all is said and done, was Boeing simply crassly immoral here?

There are many pressures in business! But safety of those you are serving is paramount in any situation, ethically speaking. Some have placed blame on one of the government agencies overseeing Boeing, the Federal Aviation Administration—the FAA. But should Boeing rightly consider any laxity of government oversight as a green light to proceed in the fashion that it apparently did? If the Feds say it’s OK, it’s OK?!

So, is this a problem with capitalism? Well, one can objectively answer that question. The real problem is sin, no matter where it happens. Companies are just like the rest of life. Blaming capitalism for the 737 MAX 8 problems is like blaming all car drivers for the one driver who caused the car pileup on the freeway.

Let’s back up for a minute and take a look at the bigger picture. Just what is an “ethical lapse” in a modern society like the United States? Well, the very idea of an “ethical lapse” triggers a couple of huge problems,

right off the bat. First, in a society that is rapidly becoming very culturally diverse, the very idea of a shared set of ethics for possible lapsing has likely now become impossibly elusive.

And, second, we live in a period of extreme public self-righteousness. That's where every person seemingly feels self-justified in their actions, even while often hyper-critical of others' beliefs and actions. Non-Christians, for example, can feel compelled to reject any Biblical prescription whatsoever—while Christians can easily condemn the unbiblical excuses by others for their decisions even while those Christians know that they themselves fall short of Biblical standards. That universally-applicable truth is right there in Romans 3:23, of course—"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

There have always been a lot of different ways that ethics can be interpreted or recommended, even in the seemingly clearest circumstances. But these two key broad cultural realities in America today—conflicting diversity of belief sets and extreme public self-righteousness—have really disrupted any possible public gelling of what ethics in our culture should look like. And, of course, we must remember that the Boeing crashes occurred elsewhere and impacted lives internationally, well beyond the U.S.

But all of this is merely an opportunity for the serious Christian: that's because the Christian's privilege and responsibility is to reflect Christ in all things...including ethics! While Christian ethics are not always easily discerned, there's a really good place to start, and that's with perhaps the most famous teaching of Jesus—often called the "Golden Rule."

That's found in Matthew chapter 7, the first part of verse 12, which says, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them."

Simply put, the Golden Rule is one of the most common-sense yet often-neglected teachings ever.

And that's one way how the Christian honors God in both the micro-situations of life and the macro-strategy of life. If others do not apply the Golden Rule, then serious Christians naturally have the opportunity to differentiate themselves from those who do not. So, the Golden Rule is one key, practical way of being a witness to others of following Jesus. This not only witnesses to any particular micro-situation, it becomes a pattern within the Christian's macro-strategy for Gospel witness and honoring God.

And that has a not-so-hidden advantage. The Christian who is working diligently to apply the Golden Rule each and every day strongly tends to spiritually crowd out the tendency to exhibit extreme public self-righteousness. Genuine, robust application of Jesus' teachings definitely does *not* tend to lead to public self-righteousness—rather, it leads to both public and private humility...and effective witness!

At the time of recording this podcast episode, it doesn't yet seem very clear to the public just what processes and procedures that Boeing used when proceeding with its new software installation in its airline customers' airplanes. Regardless, it might have been very helpful to more clearly practice the principle of "informed consent" by telling and training pilots about how they would need to respond differently to the actions taken by the new Boeing software.

Informed consent.

Isn't informed consent simply a powerful application of a timeless teaching, the Golden Rule? Even in the modern, cutting-edge workplace, Jesus' teachings are simply timeless. Yes, timeless. Yes, timeless witness.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Does the principle of “informed consent” work well enough for some of the gray areas of human/machine interaction in actual implementation during this cutting-edge technology era?

Or do technological advances in general (e.g., experimental drugs) substantially need to be ethically less gray (and thus extremely clear) before implementing?

Or is that gray vs. “black and white” conclusion an ethical decision in and of itself?

2. Can or should the Golden Rule be applied to ethical issues in a complex modern corporation with employees of all different religious or ethical frameworks?

If so, how? If not, should a serious Christian not work at that corporation?

3. How *does* or *should* your workplace enterprise move beyond simplistic paper protocols into creating and instilling an enterprise culture with most everyone truly living out good ethics?