

Thought you might like to hear a brief yet still very illuminating story about teaching ethics to college students studying business. This is a true story from several decades ago at a Christian university in America, the story involving a traditional, secular college textbook designed specifically for an intro to business class. Yes, it's a story embedded in a proverbial "BUS-101" class. But this BUS-101 class is not like the typical starter course—you know, where college administrators assign a young person who's still working on getting a graduate degree and the course is often a very basic, elementary encounter.

You see, what was different here was that I was the founding dean of the business school and expected to forge a school that vigorously integrate faith in Christ in everything said and done. That meant students should expect to become competent in their field of endeavor, all the while with a ready witness for Christ in deed and word. So, I assigned myself to teach BUS-101 and am still teaching BUS-101 now.

But that meant that students needed to be trained in how to think well and act like a follower of Jesus even while they learned what a fallen world typically believes and how to respond to that perspective. That's why the traditional secular textbook was chosen for a BUS-101 class, allowing the class to canvass secular approaches and also contrast what believers with a truly Biblical perspective say. And there's no better place for doing this than in the topic of ethics. And here's what unfolded. The authors of this popular textbook were a husband-and-wife team, and they defined ethics in the ethics chapter of the book as "what society believes is right or wrong." That's right, *what a society believes is right or wrong!*

Now, you and I know that is misguided right off the bat! Hey, was the German nation in the 1930s ethical in its deliberate extermination of Jews and brutal pursuit of subjugation of other nations simply because German society embraced it? Of course not! All it takes is simple observation to ascertain that societies and nations—every one of them—are each off-base in one key way or another when it comes to ethics.

Now these students in my class were assigned the ethics chapter and quizzed over the chapter material before we covered the topic in class, so they had already been exposed to this definition by the authors. And, of course, as mostly 18-year-olds respecting authority, many had been simply lulled into accepting the definition as legitimate—after all, the definition was in a college textbook...it must be right!

So, on the day the students had prepared for class by reading the chapter and taking the quiz, I opened up the topic by quoting the definition by the textbook authors. Then I told the story that follows about the authors of the textbook, a husband-and-wife team...and now I re-tell that story here and now...

"So, these two well-known husband-and-wife authors were hired to teach a group of people in a faraway island country about business. These distantly-placed folks were very interested in learning how business works straight from the people in America who write textbooks about it. So, for a full two weeks, the husband-and-wife team taught from their textbook. And their teaching was all well-received.

"When they had finished, the elders of the tribe they were teaching invited them to the closing celebration of dinner. When the two arrived, the festivities had already started. When the couple saw the extensive preparation, they were intrigued. When they spotted the huge boiling pot at the center of the large gathering, they politely asked what was for dinner. The chief of the tribe said *you are*. No, no, the couple said, there must be an error in translation, what we were asking is *what is on the menu for eating tonight?*

"And the chief of the tribe they had taught said, *there's no mistake in translation here, you are on the menu! You see, we are cannibals and we honor all our visitors from outside the tribe by eating them. And we know this is entirely ethical because you taught us that what a society believes is right!*

My students laughed, of course, but the point was made: what any particular society believes is *not* a good definition of ethics. Indeed, the leaders and people of every society or nation do craft their own ethics or behaviors *to their own satisfaction*—yes, including Israel, as we see throughout the Old Testament. But, of course, God will judge any and all such pretensions of goodness throughout all history.

But crucial to this story is that this lame but very common working definition was the core definition of ethics for business students in a country like America in the current era. What I mean by “working definition” is that so many tend to lapse into thinking whatever their society or nation believes or practices is the state of progress in ethics. Yeah, that happens in every self-justifying society or nation...always will!

That’s so very bad! But unsurprising. Hey, in a country like America where believers’ message of the Gospel of the crucified Christ is routinely laid aside in favor of hot political issues, a bottoming-out is inevitable. Truth is, many Christians escalate their political priorities above God’s message of submission to Christ—that’s happened throughout history in every nation with a substantial number of Christians!

So, back to the BUS-101 story. After the cannibal episode, I then provide to students the contrast of two ideas: deontological ethics vs. teleological ethics. In plain English, that means *duty vs. consequence*. If you want to have a bit of fun, do what I do: ask a room full of Christian students whether their ethical framework is anchored in duty or anchored in consequences. When you follow up with questions and discussion, you will be amazed at what you will hear.

Yes, duty vs. consequence. You may be reminded of the famous story of Corrie Ten Boom and her family hiding Jews during the Nazi regime’s power in Europe. Of course, they had a duty to political authority but also a duty to God—and those duties in apparent conflict. And they actively worked to deceive their earthly authorities about their activities. This conflict is what is rightly called an *ethical dilemma*.

A Biblical example is Rahab, a prostitute who was pretty much an outsider in her culture. Rahab hid the Israelites spies and helped them escape, deceived the authorities, and abandoned her own people in the process. Just where did her duty lie? James 2:26 identifies it as works grounded in faith. The truth is, like Rahab experienced, ethical dilemmas arise when there’s a conflict between two moral ideals or absolutes. And such a dilemma can and does ultimately impact each and every person sometime in life.

Of course, the New Covenant in Christ transformed any other understanding of ethics—Christ Himself demonstrated an entirely different definition of behavior: that He as a blameless one laid down His life for the sake of the world. That would surely be duty, right? But wasn’t He also focused on the consequences *for others*, His being mindful of an entire world inescapably mired in sin with no way out until His way was made manifest? Yes, Christ was perfectly mindful of both duty and consequence, but not just for Him, but for the benefit of the whole world! For far-lesser folks like you and me, ethics should be Spirit-led, even in the midst of confusion. Then when an action is taken in response to the quandary, God’s grace is sufficient to cover whatever choice made, trusting it was made in sincere good faith!

But, wait, there’s an epilogue to the tale of the business textbook authors and their definition of ethics. After I had utilized the textbook with the abysmal definition of ethics, my phone rang, and when I answered it was the sales representative for the book publisher, a very famous company. The sales rep thanked me for utilizing the textbook for several years and that a new edition was coming out soon. Then he asked how I liked the textbook. I simply said this: *I really like the textbook, especially where it’s wrong!* Clearly startled, he asked what I meant. So, I told him about how I used the fictional story about the textbook authors and the cannibalistic tribe. He laughed out loud and said he was going to ask the author to call me. ...Then, weeks later, my phone rang again, and it was the co-author of the textbook.

She said that she received a cryptic message from the sales representative to call me for feedback. So, I told her the whole fictional tale of her teaching ethics with the result being a very personal experience of cannibalism. There was a long silence on the phone. Then she said that the book was too far along in the publication process to change it. I said, thank you, but I wasn’t asking for a change...in fact, for my use it was very valuable as it was written because it helped me teach my students that this was the type of thinking of much of the world they would join. And, sure enough, the next edition of the text continued defining ethics as whatever a society defined as right or wrong. Surprise, surprise! And that contrast with real ethical dilemmas is what I have taught from then until now. *Now that’s anchoring! And crazy good!*

