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The Great Moral Debate
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The biggest ethical debates in American society have been issues where there is not an obvious right or wrong, where one side is not definitely good and the other side obviously wicked. The most difficult moral struggles our society has faced over recent decades are ones where Christian churches have been prominent on both sides. This was certainly true for the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the Women's Rights movement of the 1970s. For both of these, churches were on the forefront of both sides of the debate. Why was this? How can Christians who all follow the teachings of Jesus Christ disagree so passionately over the practice of those teachings?

At the risk of oversimplifying these difficult ethical issues, I want to suggest that they are actually part of a larger moral debate that has been going on since the start of Christianity and probably will continue until its end (and perhaps beyond). I refer to the debate between moral principles and moral answers.

What do I mean by "moral principles and moral answers"? In the gospels, Jesus presents most of his ethical teachings as principles. Usually they are given in the form of short, wise sayings, such as "Love your neighbor" or "Judge not, and you will not be judged." Other times they are given as parables, such as when the young man to whom Jesus said "Love your neighbor," responded by saying, "Who is my neighbor"? Jesus then told him the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A moral answer comes by applying a moral principle to a particular circumstance. For example, an acquaintance angers me. Should I hit him? The application of the moral principle "Love your neighbor" gives the moral answer that I should not. In this particular situation, the answer is "do not hit!" (which is what I tell my six-year-old several times a week).

So what is the Great Moral Debate? Over the years, generations, and centuries, Christians have taught both moral principles and moral answers. Moral answers serve well for guiding behavior when the answer is already known. (I know I'm not supposed to hit others.) But guiding behavior by moral answers requires

learning lots of circumstances and the appropriate moral answer. What happens when one encounters a circumstance for which there is not a learned answer?

Moral principles, by contrast, are more flexible, and one principle might cover a number of situations (including unexpected new ones). Loving my neighbor, for example, would also indicate that I should help people in trouble, as well as refrain from hitting them.

The problem with moral principles is that they come without clear instructions. There is no clear-cut delineation of circumstances in which to apply them, for instance. When the young man asked Jesus who his neighbor was, he was expecting a clear definition. Instead, Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus thus increased the possible definitions of "neighbor" rather than limiting them.

So how does the distinction between moral principles and moral answers address our opening question of why serious Christians take opposing sides on ethical issues? The difference comes from whether the Christians respond to an issue with a learned answer or with the application of a principle.

To the question of whether women should take a speaking role in worship services, for example, the apostle Paul gave the moral answer that women should keep silent in church. Today, many Christian denominations have looked at the issue again and applied the moral principle of equality -- of everyone being equal in the eyes of God. In those denominations, women have become ministers, priests and in some, even bishops. Both sides gave a Christian response to the issues, but one side gave a moral answer while the other applied a moral principle.

In America's newest moral dilemma, about the role of gays in our country's social and legal life, different Christian denominations are again on different sides. One Christian church, the Episcopalian, is even the protagonist in the debate. But watch for the Great Moral Debate behind the scenes, the one between moral principles and moral answers.