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The Core Virtue of Christian Librarianship¹

Gregory A. Smith

Abstract

Christian librarians should derive their professional ethics from methodical exegesis of the Bible. The New Testament's most salient ethical statements center on love--for God, neighbor, and fellow believers. Each of these has significant implications for library practice. Identifying love as the core virtue of librarianship represents a radical departure from secular approaches to library ethics. While the biblical and secular models converge on some significant points, they are fundamentally opposite. Where the two reach similar conclusions, the biblical model proves to be more philosophically consistent. The Scriptures speak with enduring relevance to the issues facing librarians.

The core values of librarians have come under intense scrutiny in recent years. According to several accounts, the debate over the essential principles of librarianship reached a feverish pitch at the 2000 Convention of the American Library Association (ALA) in Chicago. There, following passionate discussion of a proposed Core Values Statement, the ALA Council voted to extend the process of formulating a set of values for the profession (Flagg, 2000; Gerhardt, 2000; "Values dominate," 2000).

Only weeks earlier, the ALA had published Michael Gorman's Our enduring values: Librarianship in the 21st century. Gorman presented a synopsis of this book at the 2000 conference of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL); a summary of his presentation appeared in The Christian Librarian in 2001. His proposals have elicited written responses from several Christian librarians (Baker, 2001; Delivuk, 2001b, 2001c; Doerksen, 2001) and appear to have heightened interest in the formulation of a distinctively Christian approach to library values. For example, the 2001 ACL conference schedule included at least five workshops or panel discussions on topics related to librarians' values, a significant increase over recent years.

In many ways Gorman's proposed values--stewardship, service, intellectual freedom, rationalism,

literacy and learning, equity of access, privacy, and democracy--are more consistent with biblical theism than with the humanistic worldview to which he holds. However, this study does not seek to validate Gorman's values (or any other set of values, for that matter) from a biblical or theological perspective. Rather, it aims to identify the core of the New Testament's ethical teaching, and to investigate the implications of such teaching for library practice.

This is admittedly a large task. Given the space available, this study is confined to an analysis of three ethical maxims pronounced by Jesus: the first commandment (to love God with all of one's being), the second commandment (to love one's neighbor as oneself), and the new commandment (to love fellow Christians in imitation of Jesus' love). These are arguably the most salient ethical statements in all of Scripture, and each has significant implications for librarians.

Review of Related Literature

Over the past thirty years, Christian scholars have addressed a number of ethical issues related to the use of libraries and information (Smith, 2000b, p. 47). Few, however, have grounded their arguments in methodical exegesis of the Bible. As a consequence, the literature of Christian librarianship contains many discussions of ethical issues--and even some proposed philosophies of Christian librarianship--that take as a starting-point the authors' experience in library work rather than the parameters of biblical doctrine. While this approach may guarantee relevance to contemporary issues, it tends to undermine distinctively Christian thinking.

Doerksen (2001) aptly summarized the consequences of adopting an anthropocentric approach to library values: "There is no basis [in humanistic philosophy] for saying that any value is the right value to hold, nor can one authoritatively propose a set of 'best' values, because there is no external criterion by which to judge right or wrong, best or worst" (p. 11). By contrast, he portrayed God's self-revelation as "an objective standard" by which values should be judged: "As Christians, our personal perceptions may at times be faulty, but the standard of comparison . . . continues to exist as a corrective. Humanistic philosophies have no such beacon" (p. 12). Secular thinking (e.g., Symons & Stoffle, 1998) can do little

to identify legitimate values or resolve the conflicts that inevitably arise between them. Following Delivuk's proposal (2001c), this article distinguishes between values, which are relative, and virtues, which are objective.

A handful of Christian authors have acknowledged the importance of librarians' worldview to their work. Waller (1977) discussed six essential criteria for a working philosophy of librarianship and evaluated the suitability of six prevalent philosophies. Terhune (1982) proposed a philosophy of Christian college library service firmly grounded in a theistic view of truth. In a sequence of articles Delivuk (1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001a) applied specific aspects of Christian theology to library practice. Smith (2000a) identified biblical foundations for research and librarianship and (2000b) discussed the integration of Christian theism into the functions of academic librarianship. Baker (2001) outlined the elements of an evangelical philosophy of librarianship, avoiding, however, an appeal to biblical authority.

The three ethical maxims chosen for analysis in this study are widely recognized as some of the most significant in the New Testament. According to Morris (1992), "The importance of the love command cannot be overestimated. In Jesus' day the Jews discerned 613 commandments in the Law, and there were vigorous discussions about the relative importance of some of these. . . . Jesus swept aside all such deliberations with his revolutionary insistence on the centrality of love. . . . It means that love is central to the whole way of life of the follower of Jesus . . ." (pp. 494-495). White (2001) concurred: "Jesus pressed the demand for righteousness still further than the law, . . . to the sufficient and overriding commandment of love to God and neighbor (Matt. 22:35-40). In this summary of all duty . . . as *love* lies Jesus' most characteristic contribution to ethical thought, as his example of love's meaning and his death in love for humanity comprise his most powerful contribution to ethical achievement" (p. 401).

Given the importance of these ethical statements, it is not surprising to find that they have been the focus of much research. Furnish (1972), Perkins (1982), and Fuller (1975/1978, 1989) have authored noteworthy studies on the subject. These and other studies were consulted with the goal of discovering the proper interpretation of each commandment.

The First and Second Commandments

The first and second commandments are known collectively as the double love commandment because they appear together in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). The sequence of pericopes that consistently surrounds these accounts establishes the fact that they are parallel (Aland, 1983, pp. 245-250). Nevertheless, they differ on several points, warranting study by several scholars (Furnish, 1972, pp. 24-45; Fuller, 1975/1978; Perkins, 1982, pp. 21-25).

The first commandment is known as such because Jesus taught the Jewish leaders that it was the greatest in the Old Testament law:

Then one of the scribes came, and . . . asked Him, “Which is the first commandment of all?” Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment . . .” (Mark 12:28-30; cf. Matt. 22:35-38).²

Jesus was quoting and expanding on Deuteronomy 6:4-5. He proceeded to quote from Leviticus 19:18: “And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31; cf. Matt. 22:39).

These ethical maxims were not new. They had been part of Jewish consciousness since the time of Moses. They were repeated elsewhere in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:12-13; 11:13ff; 13:1-4; 30:6; Josh. 22:5). Yet, they had never been accorded such prominence, nor had their interdependence ever been stated so clearly. This is not to say that Jesus’ declaration was totally unprecedented. Both Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews had emphasized the two commands and had even referred to them together in summaries of moral duty (Perkins, 1982, pp. 12-19). But Jesus boldly stated that they summarized the whole Old Testament: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:40). His listeners’ response--silence--gives some indication of the impact of his words (Mark 12:34; cf. Matt. 22:46; Luke 20:40).

The first commandment appears nowhere else in the New Testament. By contrast, the second

commandment occurs in five other texts--two in the gospels (Matt. 5:43ff; 19:16-22) and three in the epistles (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-15; James 2:8-9). The occurrences in the Epistles are significant because they show that the early church appropriated the second commandment as a concise statement of believers' social responsibilities. In each case the commandment occurs in proximity to specific ethical admonitions. Romans 13:8-10 emphasizes that in loving one's neighbor one fulfills the social requirements of the law:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Galatians 5:13-15 calls for a balance between spiritual freedom and responsibility: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" James 2:8-9 stresses the incompatibility of neighbor-love and partiality: "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

In summary, while the New Testament abolishes the ceremonial aspect of Old Testament law (2 Cor. 3; Gal. 1-4; Heb. 8-10), it perpetuates its moral emphasis. Fuller (1989) concluded that "for the New Testament writers the central part of [the Old Testament law] is the second table [i.e., the last six commandments of the Decalogue] plus the love commandment" (p. 255). The second commandment remains an enduring statement of believers' responsibility to those around them. Nevertheless, it is best understood not as a discrete unit, but as interdependent with the first commandment (Bockmuehl, 1987, pp. 15-16). This is the sense of 1 John 4:20-21: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he

is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.”

The New Commandment

The double love commandment aptly summarizes the moral demands of the Old Testament law. Though Christ’s death has fulfilled the ceremonial aspect of the law, His followers remain accountable to love God and neighbor. However, the New Testament imposes an additional moral requirement on those who are in Christ: to imitate Jesus’ love in their relationships with each other. Christ referred to this moral principle as the new commandment: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). He reiterated it in John 15:12-13, 17: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. . . . These things I command you, that you love one another.”

The new commandment is both peculiar to and prominent in John’s writings. Not only did he record it twice in his gospel, he devoted significant attention to it in his first two epistles. According to John, it is natural for those who love God to love His children as well (1 John 5:1-3). Under John’s influence, the love commandment became so ingrained in the life of the Christian community that he eventually came to refer to it as “an old commandment” (2 John 5-6; cf. 1 John 2:7-8).

On the surface the new commandment seems to be little more than a repetition of the second commandment. According to Crum (1960), commentators have offered a number of different explanations of its newness. The most reasonable interpretation identifies Christ as “the model, ground, and means of the disciples’ love for one another” (Collins, 1992). In this view, “believers are enjoined to love one another because of their common relationship with Christ, imitating the example of his love for his disciples, and doing so by the power that his love itself supplies” (Smith, 2000c, p. 31). According to Barrett (1978),

The mutual love of Christian disciples is different from any other; it is modelled upon,

and in some measure reveals, the mutual love of the Father and the Son. The Father's love for the Son, unlike his love for sinful humanity, is not unrelated to the worth of its object, since it is a part of the divine excellence of both Father and Son that each should love the other. Similarly, it is of the essence of the Christian life that all who are Christians should love one another, and in so far as they fail to do so they fail to reproduce the divine life which should inspire them and should be shown to the world through them. (p. 452)

The new commandment calls Christians to serve one another in love following Jesus' example. It emphasizes the special bond that joins all who have experienced the redemptive grace of God in Christ. And it anticipates the fact that the world expects those who follow Christ to exhibit unselfish, sacrificial love towards one another. Jesus' injunction to brotherly love summarizes much of the ethical teaching of the New Testament. It is only fitting that the new spiritual age ushered in by the coming of Christ should make itself known by something new--a love that gives sacrificially in testimony to the supreme gift of eternal life. Believers can share in this love (albeit imperfectly) as they surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Implications

How do these ethical maxims relate to librarians' virtues? Is it really possible to construct a moral agenda for Christian librarianship from three biblical commands related to love? Previous studies suggest that this is indeed the case. Riga (1962) concluded that loving service (as expressed in John 13 and a number of other New Testament texts) is one of two principles essential to the integration of Christian faith and librarianship (pp. 544, 583-584). Terhune (1982) appealed to the second and new commandments as a rationale for providing loving service in Christian college libraries (p. 9). Nicole (1982) cited John 13 when referring to the librarian as a model for service (p. 107). Delivuk (1999) mentioned Galatians 5:13 when referring to Christian service as "a community effort" (p. 7). And Smith noted that the first commandment provides a framework for librarians to interpret intellectual life and

higher education from a Christian perspective (2000a, p. 52; 2000b, p. 50).

The first commandment carries with it at least five implications for Christian librarians. First, *we should acknowledge God, not professional standards, as our supreme authority*. God should be the supreme object of our affections. Several librarians have expressed this concept well. Dempster (1985) observed: “In my professional activities, I am told, I must have no politics, no morals, no religion. But such professional detachment is, for me at least, impossible, since total allegiance to God involves bringing under his authority every aspect of life, not least work, or, to put it in another way, being my Christian self in every situation” (p. 6). Knight (1985) commented in a response to a Library Journal column, “I do not live a dichotomous life. I am not a librarian who just happens to be a Christian. Rather, I am a Christian who happens to be a librarian, and I work and live according to my beliefs and the standards the Lord has set for those who follow Him” (p. 9).

Second, *we should promote the love of God as mankind’s highest occupation*. As followers of Christ we recognize that there is no greater cause than loving God with utmost devotion. In our professional activities we should seek to lead others to recognize the supreme virtue of loving God. Librarians who work for Christian institutions can pursue this objective with little inhibition (Smith, 2000b, p. 50; Smith, in press). However, secular workplaces require subtler approaches. A number of Christian librarians who work in such contexts have discussed this topic (Simons, 1986; Davis, Jr., 1992; Davis, Jr., & Tucker, 1993; Warren, 1997).

Third, *we should offer information resources to provide for total personal development*. Jesus’ insistence that we love God with every element of our beings indicates that God intends for us to grow in each facet of our personality. Living as Christ’s disciples involves every aspect of our lives. This has definite implications for librarians: We are called to provide access to information so as to lead our patrons to well-being in every area of life--physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. This position has significant support in the literature of Christian librarianship (e.g., Terhune, 1982; Phillips, 1982; Delivuk, 1998; Tucker, 2000; Smith, in press).

Fourth, *we should integrate scholarship and discipleship* and lead others to do the same. We

should model the kind of wholeness that God intends for His children. We should recognize Christ's authority in every area of our lives. In addition, we should approach the acquisition and application of knowledge as a sacred enterprise. Several Christian librarians (e.g., Terhune, 1982; Sauer, 1989; Johnson, 1990; Smith, 2000a, 2000b) have developed this theme.

Fifth, *we should affirm human freedom to choose to love God*. Inherent within the first commandment is the fact that God has created us in His image with the capacity to make moral choices. He desires our loving worship--indeed He has commanded it--but He is not coercive. Though we should express our faith in the context of daily work, we should affirm each individual's personal accountability to God in matters of belief and practice. This delicate balance calls for us to seek wisdom and direction continually.

The second commandment demands that we treat everyone with whom we come in contact with loving respect and concern, as we ourselves would wish to be treated (cf. Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). According to Romans 13:10, the essence of loving one's neighbor is seeking his or her welfare. We are to treat others as persons created in the image of God, recognizing that any abuse of power is ultimately an assault on His character (James 3:9). References to the second commandment in the New Testament epistles make clear that we are to express love for our neighbors in a number of concrete ways.

First, *we should abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage* (Rom. 13:9; cf. Matt. 5:27-30). At work and elsewhere, we should avoid any conduct that undermines God's plan for sex. While we may find it difficult to observe God's standards of sexual purity, we should remember that they are designed for our good. When we violate the Bible's moral boundaries, we are bound to bring harm to ourselves and to others.

Second, *we should refrain from violence in all its forms* (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:15). Libraries are not known as places where murder is likely to occur. However, we may be tempted to assassinate others' character through abusive speech. According to Jesus, venting our anger in this way is essentially the same as murder. Therefore, we must take care to resolve conflicts peacefully and promptly (Matt. 5:21-26).

Third, *we should practice honesty* (Rom. 13:9). We are to express honesty in both speech (refraining from lying) and action (refraining from stealing). Library work offers numerous opportunities for failure in both areas. While some behaviors are obviously dishonest, others are subtler. Given the deceitful nature of sin, we do well to invite the Holy Spirit to search our lives and convict us of areas where we are failing to live truthfully.

Fourth, *we should balance freedom and responsibility* (Gal. 5:13). As librarians we find it difficult to achieve this balance. Many of our professional colleagues are obsessed with an absolutist concept of freedom. Our professional literature seems to provide a steady diet of libertarian indoctrination. The Bible, however, presents a different picture. Johnson (1990) concluded that

The Christian concept differs from the current liberal concept by its grounding in God's will rather than in human autonomy. The liberal concept insists on the right to freely express all ideas and the right to free access to all ideas, whether or not they are related to the pursuit of truth. Censorship is any restriction of these rights. In contrast, the Christian concept is primarily concerned with the pursuit of truth, and is therefore not as inclusive as the liberal concept in its understanding of intellectual freedom when viewed as a moral right. (p. 67)

We should take seriously our role as Christian librarians, recognizing that God will hold us accountable as stewards.

Fifth, *we should serve patrons, colleagues, subordinates, and superiors with a motive of love* (Gal. 5:13). Providing cheerful, conscientious library service can be difficult. Customers are sometimes unreasonable, uncooperative, or unkind. If we are motivated to serve them primarily by our professional ethics, our institutional loyalty, or our own sense of goodwill, we are doomed to failure. We must serve from a heart that overflows with Christ's love (Terhune, 1982, p. 9; Delivuk, 1999).

Sixth, *we should refrain from discrimination when serving patrons and dealing with personnel* (James 2:9). This is a point to which most librarians are sensitive, largely on the principle of equal opportunity. However, Christian librarians should oppose discrimination with even greater resolve,

recognizing that partiality is an attack on the just nature of God.

The second commandment requires us to love our neighbors--believers and unbelievers alike--in a way that recognizes our common creation in the image of God. The new commandment, by contrast, calls us to express a special kind of love toward all who have experienced God's redemptive grace (cf. Gal. 6:10). It follows, then, that Christian librarians have a greater responsibility to the believers whose lives they touch in the course of their work. On the surface this may seem to contradict the prohibition against partiality inherent within the second commandment. However, it is only natural for believers to feel a certain camaraderie with other believers; conversely, it would be unreasonable to expect such a bond to exist between Christians and non-Christians. In addition, God has ordained both commandments, and, when properly understood, they cannot stand in opposition to each other.

The new commandment carries with it at least three implications. First, *we should emulate Christ's love in our dealings with other Christians at work* (John 13:34). Christ gave His own life in order to bring us into fellowship with God. Likewise, we should demonstrate a deep concern for the welfare of fellow believers, whether patrons, colleagues, subordinates, or superiors. We should love our brothers and sisters sacrificially, consciously seeking to assist in their spiritual growth.

Second, *we should seek unity among genuine Christians* (John 13:34-35). Jesus stated that the world would judge the reality of our relationship with Him by the love that we express toward other disciples. This principle does not require us to endorse everyone or everything that calls itself "Christian." Rather, it calls us to affirm as brothers and sisters all whose lives have been changed through faith in the person and work of Christ. This principle does not preclude us from disagreeing with other Christians on non-essential doctrinal points; nevertheless, it does require us to avoid prideful divisions within the body of Christ. By extension, *we should give a positive witness to unbelievers* (John 13:35). Following our Master's example in our relationships with other Christians will provide a suitable backdrop for sharing the gospel. We should always be conscious of the way that our lifestyle impacts the viability of our verbal witness for Christ.

Conclusion

This study assumes that Christians should rely on the authority of the Bible when investigating all moral issues. By implication, Christian librarians should define the ethical principles of their profession on the basis of biblical teaching. The supreme virtue of the Scriptures (and, therefore, of Christian librarianship) is love--for God, neighbor, and fellow believers. When applied to the library context, the principle of love affirms some of the concerns expressed in current professional literature, including personal integrity, high standards of service, and impartiality. However, the principle of love contradicts prevailing library culture by emphasizing the priority of one's relationship with God and by affirming that freedom should be balanced by responsibility.

Identifying love as the core virtue of librarianship represents a radical departure from secular approaches to library ethics. While the biblical and secular models converge on some significant points, they are fundamentally opposite. The former is theocentric and objective, while the latter is humanistic and relative. Where the two reach similar conclusions, the biblical model proves to be more philosophically consistent. The humanistic approach to library ethics succeeds in asking some important questions and in suggesting some possible answers. However, it fails to speak with authority because its conclusions are based on human opinion. By contrast, the Scriptures speak with enduring relevance to the issues facing librarians.

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¹ This article is a revision of The core values of Christian librarianship, a panel discussion presentation made at the annual conference of the Association of Christian Librarians, Bourbonnais, IL, June 14, 2001.

² Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.