

Talking about Ethics

Negotiating the Maze

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Foreword

Justin Denholm is a valued member of our Anglican Diocese of Melbourne Social Responsibility Commission. In that context I have come to appreciate his refined thinking and good will.

His intent is always to help us think through the ethical consequences of our shared faith in Jesus, our Saviour.

In *Talking about Ethics*, Justin's scholarship and fine intent are made available to people of faith both as individuals and as small groups. Justin wants to help people connect their relationship with Jesus to the conversations and debates of our time. He does so with clarity and insight.

A nuanced, thoughtful faith is much more attractive than either the extreme of fundamentalism or the kind of liberalism that merely 'marries the spirit of the age'.

Justin, in helping us think ethically, thus assists our missional purpose. He provides a contrast for those who have rejected Christianity on the basis of shallow stereotypes. He encourages thoughtful conversation.

Amidst all the noise of public debates, there is nevertheless a yearning for quality conversations. Hence the rise of book groups, the spread of Writers' Weeks, Festivals of Ideas, and similar initiatives. We also know that honest, open conversation is often the only way to resolve conflicts.

Our ministry of reconciliation, honouring God's act of reconciliation with humankind (Col 1:15–21), urges us to keep conversations going with those with whom we disagree, including over ethical issues.

We need to foster a 'Culture of Dialogue' especially given that new technologies such as the internet can make it possible to only hear voices that reinforce our own views.

As Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks has said, 'There is a danger that a generation is emerging unable to give a respectful hearing to the other side. When that happens, warns the Bible, violence is waiting in the wings.' As has been said, the irony is that having created instant global communication, we can end up talking less and less with those with whom we disagree.

Rabbi Sacks notes the rabbinic phrase: 'Conversation is a form of prayer. Openness to the Divine Other helps us to be open to the human other. It's good to talk – perhaps even holy too' (*The Times*, 25 June 2011, London).

Justin's work encourages just such a quality of conversation – a culture of dialogue.

Towards the end of his book, Justin also offers some gentle advice about how to conduct such conversations in Godly manner.

Accordingly, he concludes with the wise counsel to ‘keep praying and relying on God’ as we talk about ethics. As he says, ultimately ethics is not an intellectual exercise but a spiritual one. Hence we pray to be guided by the Holy Spirit who, as Jesus promised, ‘will guide you into all the truth’ (Jn 16:12).

It is an honour and joy to commend Justin’s book, with gratitude to him and Acorn Press for this timely initiative.

Bishop Philip Huggins

Bishop of the North West Region

Anglican Diocese of Melbourne

Chair, Social Responsibility Commission

Prologue

As I sip my coffee, the stranger sitting next to me snorts at the daily headline. ‘Another boatload of asylum seekers!’ he exclaims. ‘Ridiculous! Why don’t we just send them back to where they came from?’ There’s a short pause, while I desperately cast my mind about for an answer. What to say? Something clever? Something challenging? Something spiritual? Just . . . something? I mumble something inaudible and he nods, taking his paper as he gets up to leave. My coffee tastes bitter as I walk into work, still searching for the perfect answer.

Later that morning, one of the other doctors stops me in the hallway to ask for some advice. An angry patient has been threatening staff, and some think he should be made to leave the hospital. We talk for a few minutes about how to balance caring for sick people and responsibilities to look after the people who work for us, and I wish her luck as she heads off for more difficult conversations.

Over dinner that night, my wife and I continue a conversation that started when we found out we were having a second child. Would we have the tests for Down syndrome? What if they were positive – would it change anything? Knowing that we wouldn’t consider abortion, how could we have a conversation with our obstetrician with which we would be comfortable?

Finally, a phone call before bed. A friend is keen to leave his job, and his work colleagues are urging him to secure a new position before he quits. He feels uncomfortable about doing this, and isn’t sure what Christian integrity looks like in this situation. How should he live out his faith at work? He wants to know how others would handle this, and decides that he will also bring it up for discussion with the small group Bible study he attends.

As I hang up the phone and go off to sleep, I think about the ethical conversations of the day. Some have come my way as an ethicist and as a doctor, but we all have opportunities to talk about ethical issues, whether or not we recognise them. These opportunities are not just about abstract ideas but real and important elements of life. These conversations matter. Have I handled today’s conversations as well as I could? How will I make sure that next time is better? I fall asleep still thinking . . .

1. Who Cares about Ethics?

Questions about how we should live are deeply important for Christians. Rather than simply being a philosophy or state of mind, the Christian faith brings with it a collection of ideas and directions about how we ought to live. Thinking about this collection, bundled together, is what we call Christian ethics. It touches every part of life, from work to home, from the supermarket to the hospital, from the school to the nursing home. While it can be challenging in many circumstances for us to know exactly what we should do, most Christians understand that their faith may have something to say about these aspects of how we live our lives.

Although how we think about our actions is important, one part of ethics that sometimes falls through the cracks is how we explain our perspectives and engage with those around us, particularly those with whom we disagree. Too often, 'ethical discussion' is simply two people stating their opinions with no real understanding or interaction. For many of us, the fear of confrontation or awkwardness can lead to avoiding difficult topics altogether.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part provides a general overview of approaches to ethics. In order to be able to have good discussions about ethics, we need to start by understanding our own and other people's ethical ideas. You don't need to be an ethicist to talk about important ethical questions but it is often useful to have some broad concepts and outlines in mind to help shape discussions and decide where to go. The second part turns to ways of using ethics as a tool in Christian life. This includes some very practical ideas about using these ethical skills in ways that enrich and challenge in a variety of settings, from church on Sunday to coffee with friends or chats around the tearoom at work.

It can be tough to know how to think and talk about ethical questions well. I am convinced, though, that these conversations are important; too important to avoid. We need to learn not just what to do but how to talk and faithfully explore ethical questions with the people around us. *Talking about Ethics* springs from a passion to see Christians engaging in ethical conversations in a thoughtful and winsome way. Ethical conversations are more than simply interesting diversions or a way to arrive at the right answer. Instead, they should be understood also as effective tools for Christians to use in various ways. They are tools for discipleship, training and evangelism, and can add extra dimensions to how we study the Bible and meet together. My own aim is to continually try to do better in the conversations that I have, and I hope that this book will provide some tools that help you do the same.

This book is intended to be used in any of a number of ways. You might want to read it on your own and think about how these ideas and approaches could be used in your own life. If you are reading in this way, a number of boxed questions

have been scattered through the text. These are there as good opportunities to stop reading and reflect about how this all matters to you. Some might also be triggers to talk with others; to put down the book and start a conversation with your work or classmate, friends or family. After all, *Talking about Ethics* is hopefully an encouragement to do just that and I hope that it will stimulate many good discussions.

Perhaps the best way to study Christian ethics, though, is in conversation with other Christians. Frequently other people will bring up ideas or objections that you have not thought about before, and intentional discussions around ethical issues are of great value. At the end of this book, therefore, there are some suggestions intended to help guide groups in reading the book together. Reading through it with a small group will provide regular opportunities to encourage and challenge each other, and is a great way to think about these issues. My own experience is that small groups and Bible studies who take the time to think about ethical questions in this way find that it continues to enrich their regular Bible studies long after the ‘ethical’ sessions are finished.

Why Christians should care about ethics

I’d like to suggest that there are two particularly important reasons that Christians should be interested in ethics. There are many others, of course, but these two may be helpful to keep in mind as we think about ethics together in this book.

First of all, *ethics is about making sure our beliefs line up with how we live*. The Bible has a name for people whose lives don’t match up with what they say they believe – they are called hypocrites. If we really mean what we say, we should be keen to act like it, and the study of Christian ethics is all about working out how our faith translates into action. Talking about ethics is a great way to connect our theology with our practice, or our beliefs with our lives. In the church, ethics is a good tool for mentoring others because it encourages them to be clear about their beliefs and then apply it in their lives. It also gives some good approaches to help Bible studies or other teachings stay practical and personal in their application.

Secondly, as well as being useful within the church, *ethics is a good way to approach evangelism*. Many non-Christians have questions about ethical issues, and being able to explain clearly what Christians believe and why provides a great platform for talking about the gospel. I often say that ‘ethics is the new apologetics’ because it seems to me that it is ethical questioning rather than historical or scientific concerns that defines much of this generation’s search for God. As we explore ethics together we should remember that morality is by no means an exclusively Christian activity. Although people who are not Christians might come to some different answers, the same issues are facing everyone living

in this world. The world is full of people who come at the question of how we should live from very different backgrounds, and we need to be ready to present a faithful Christian understanding of what life should look like.

So, there are some good reasons for Christians to learn how they can think and act ethically. By reminding us of why ethics is important, they provide us with motivation to think and talk about ethics as faithfully as we can. This means not only should we want to discover the right answers to our ethical problems, but that we need to know how to ask the right questions.

The next chapter of this book will look at the different ways in which people commonly ask ethical questions, before moving on to consider the approach that Christians should take.

Do you agree that ethics is important for Christians? Why/why not?

When you talk with friends, how often do ethical problems come up? Are you comfortable talking about them?

Are you confident you know what your co-workers or family would think about common ethical issues?