

DP2.01 Biblical Pragmatics

Christians are idealists who believe in absolutes, in right and wrong. We believe that God has created the world with moral values to which we, as humans, are called to be responsible. In every situation we desire to know what is the right course of action and then to act upon it.

The relativism which characterizes so much of our society today is therefore extremely objectionable to us as Christians. The widely held belief that there is no such thing as right and wrong, or indeed any absolute values, is fundamentally a denial of God. The idea that all viewpoints or actions have the same moral worth flows directly out of unbelief.

Pragmatism and Utilitarianism

In modern ethics this philosophy of unbelief gives rise to Pragmatism (or, as the English call it, Utilitarianism) – the belief that the moral quality of an action should be judged by its results. Decisions and actions which lead to worthwhile results are to be approved of and followed, while decisions and actions which have deleterious effects are to be avoided. The actions themselves are not important, since their value and acceptability is determined entirely by the outcome they achieve.

Pragmatism does not really solve the unbeliever's dilemma about morality. As a philosophical and ethical system, it is a failure. It fails because you still have the problem of determining what constitutes a worthwhile result. It is all very well to judge things by their consequences, but how do you judge the consequences themselves? How, for example can we show that happiness itself is “good” in any objective sense? And even if we could, how can we measure the different levels (or kinds) of happiness that will result from a proposed course of action? Prohibition in America resulted in widespread corruption, but it also significantly diminished the amount of liver damage within the community. Who can say which was the more important result? Or who could predict beforehand, which result was going to follow?

Christian Ambivalence to Pragmatism

Christians have tended to be ambivalent, or even hostile, toward the idea of pragmatism. In some circles the word 'pragmatism', like the word 'compromise', is a pejorative term. To say to a Christian that they are making their decisions on the basis of pragmatism can be to accuse them of living by unbelief.

God's ideals always work. God knows what is best for people and His laws and values will ultimately create the best results for humanity. However, what is ‘best’ for us is not described or defined in terms of the greatest happiness. Our God is good, generous and concerned for our welfare, and happiness frequently flows from following His ways, but it is not our primary aim.

God's ways may be ideals, but not unworkable, impractical or unrealistic. On the contrary, they are thoroughly workable, useful and profitable. Thus Paul writing to Timothy says, "Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." (I Timothy 4:8).

While God's ideals always work, we cannot conclude that everything that works is the same as God's ideals. The equation is not reversible. Some things that may seem to have great and beneficial effects

and results, may still be opposed to the character and mind of God. Thus, you can get your workers to work harder as a result of encouraging envy and rivalry. However, envy and rivalry are never the ideals that God wishes to promote in people. It is also questionable whether working harder is an ideal that God wishes us to pursue.

Christian Decision-Making – Ideal and/or Pragmatic

However, as God's ideals always work, what 'works' is not an irrelevant consideration in Christian decision making. Some decisions are questions of right or wrong. Other decisions are a question of wisdom. The choices we make are often between two or three things that are right. Which one of these right courses of action we choose is to be decided by human wisdom. This wisdom is frequently utilitarian in format, i.e. we choose the course of action which will produce the best results. A lot of the book of Proverbs teaches us wisdom on the basis of utility. Pragmatic decisions, within the realm of what is right, are decisions based on wisdom.

Idealists tend to make bad politicians. Those in political power have to make decisions in a less than ideal world. Christians understand the universal sinfulness of mankind, but our idealism tends to preclude us from making decisions that are based upon man's sinfulness. We wish to pass laws that reflect how man should live, rather than building upon how man is by nature. Most Christian idealists oppose competitiveness as a social institution and yet, as Christians we know that it is only competition that motivates people to work. To be pragmatic, and create a socio-economic system based upon man's greed, seems to be approving sinfulness rather than fighting it. Yet to fight sinfulness, and build a socioeconomic system upon man's generosity, denies the truth of the word of God and fails to see the gospel as the only cure for man's sinfulness. In this fallen world there is no real solution for the Christian politician.

Christian Ministry – Ideal and/or Pragmatic

But what of gospel ministry? How pragmatic should we be in decisions about the ministry of the gospel? Within the context of what is right, we must pursue that which will work. The gospel determines what is right and what is wrong. The goal of the gospel is to present people before Christ, pure and spotless. To succeed in building a magnificent temple and not to build up the people of God into a holy temple is wrong. To raise a million dollars and compromise the truth of the gospel on route is wrong. The goal of our utility is determined by the truth of the gospel. We are not aiming to produce the happiness of mankind but the glory of Christ and the salvation of others. The methods we use, must themselves be glorifying to Christ.

However, within the realm of what is right and glorifying to Christ and presenting His people to Him pure and spotless, we must choose those courses of action on the basis of what works. Thus, for example, in I Corinthians 8-10, Paul makes decisions on the basis of what works. He does everything for the glory of God, seeking the good of many (i.e. that they be saved), but he chooses that which works. So we see his enormous flexibility— becoming a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, free to those who are free, under the law to those who are under the law, in fact, all things to all men— all chosen in the light of the consequences and effects. Paul was a Christian utilitarian: his ministry was decided upon pragmatic considerations.

This opens up for us the whole wisdom of God taught in the scriptures. For example, in Proverbs 24:27

we are taught to, "Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house." This is a matter of practical common sense. Food and income take precedence over housing and comfort. It is the kind of practical common sense you can see in committing resources into ministry first and buildings second.

Thus the wisdom of God, which is so practical, becomes our ideal. In Christian ministry today, too many people ignore what is right. They do not think through the implications of the gospel. The church is not a social club for the preservation of old buildings and antiquarian customs. Large numbers, large budgets, and a gigantic choir are not the symbols of Christian success. Toning down the harsh parts of the gospel – judgment, the exclusive claims of Christ etc. can never be justified on the grounds of church growth. However, too many people ignore the necessity of pragmatics. Too often the churches will stick with what has always been done or what conforms to the rules and regulations of the denomination without being concerned for the salvation of mankind as history passes them by. It is often our inflexibility of approach to the ministry of the gospel which stands in the way of actual ministry of the gospel.

Discussion Starters

1. In what ways do we see people ignoring what is right in their attempts to minister?
2. In what ways do you see people slow to take up what works in the ministry of the gospel?