

Moral Development

BY DENNIS PETERSON

C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic work *Mere Christianity* that morality is concerned with three things: social interactions, internal personal harmony, and “the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for.” He concluded, “Without good men you cannot have a good society.”

The individual and societal necessity expressed by Lewis is clear: morality. The challenge is to achieve that goal. In particular, how does a Christian school produce moral students?

This question is even more important as we witness the moral degeneracy in society at large and among young people in particular. The teen pregnancy rate is soaring. The largest percentage of violent crime is now attributed to young people. Academic cheating prevails even in our national military academies. Public education, although receiving millions of dollars annually for its ever-increasing programs, seems only to exacerbate these problems.

Christian schools are by no means immune to immorality, although they may be a few steps behind society in general. Our students may appear to be moral while they are within our classroom walls, but some of them, perhaps more than we would like to think, conform to the world when they get beyond those walls. What becomes of their “school standards” once they graduate?

Primary responsibility for the moral instruction of young people rests unquestionably on the home. But the imperative extends to institutions outside the home as well, most notably to the school because it operates *in loco parentis*.

Basically, all approaches to moral development—whether labeled “character development,” “good citizenship,” or “social adjustment”—can be summarized by the psychological bases from which moral behavior is defined. Three definitions cover the most common views:

1. Morality is moral **behavior**.
2. Morality is moral **reasoning**.
3. Morality is **godliness**.

Morality As Behavior

This definition is based in large part on the views of B.F. Skinner (behaviorism), J.B. Watson (social engineering), and E.L. Thorndike (instrumental conditioning). According

to this definition, a child is born neither good nor bad (as John Locke theorized, the child's mind at birth is a blank tablet); he becomes what he will because of his environment. His personality, interests, temperament, motivations, and current behavior are a direct result of his past experiences.

Further, "society" determines right and wrong (and these standards may change with societal whims). The emphasis of moral instruction is on "publicly observable responses" that are guided by the imitation of good role models. This is morality in conformity to current societal mores.

In addition to its reliance on a fluid values system, this definition has another major flaw. In the words of Bonnidell Clouse (*Moral Development: Perspectives in Psychology and Christian Belief*), "Moral behavior is only a part of what it means to be moral, a surface manifestation of an inward state, which in some people is a reflection of a true sensitivity to moral concerns and in others nothing more than the opportune response at the moment." It also leads one to blame the environment for immoral behavior, rather than accepting personal responsibility.

In spite of the negative reactions sparked among Christian educators by the proponents of this view, we do find applications for it. For example, do we not agree that the early, formative years are critical in stamping proper behavior patterns? Do we not encourage our students to follow exemplary role models? Do we not reward conformity and punish nonconformity in our schools? And do we not try to provide the "right environment" for learning (i.e., no drugs, guns, rock music, long hair, short skirts, etc.)? Although one may accept these patterns of morality, the philosophical basis of societal morality cannot determine right and wrong. Only God's Word can do so.

Morality As Reasoning

The second definition emphasizes "judgmental and thinking processes." Rather than focusing on behavior, it focuses on the process by which moral decisions are made, and it makes wide use of the discussion of moral dilemmas as the means of reaching those decisions.

According to this view, moral development parallels intellectual development. It posits that "moral development occurs in a series of stages that are invariant, hierarchical, and universal" and that "each stage is the product of learning that occurred during the previous stage and becomes a preparation for the stage that follows."

It holds that morality develops as a result of conflict; therefore, the best technique for ensuring morality is discussion and reasoning through moral dilemmas. True morality, according to this view, comes from within rather than being imposed from without, and the environment may either "impede or facilitate" that development.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments against this view is that it relies too much on the immature reasoning abilities of the child. It expects "adult" moral decisions

by “child” minds—and, in many cases, unregenerate hearts. It can also encourage the disregard of clear commands (“thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”) of scripture in favor of a changing personal standard.

Yet, some Christian schools find applications for this view as well. For example, have not many of us learned that we get better results when we **guide** our children, explaining **why** we have certain standards, rather than merely **telling** them to obey (“because I said so”)? Do we not try to treat each child with respect—and expect the same in return—and emphasize adherence to the spirit as well as to the letter of the law? Do we not counsel students that the important goal is “what one can become rather than one’s present state?” Do we not try to emphasize development of critical thinking skills so that the students can make moral decisions? And do we not expect more of students whose intellectual ability is “ready” to learn increasingly higher standards of morality? Human reasoning tends to pragmatize things instead of allowing Scripture and biblical principles to guide in the decision-making process.

Morality As Godliness

In spite of the fact that some applications from the preceding views can be gleaned for classroom use and because each view has some very objectionable elements, the Christian educator must find another, better way to approach the development of morality in students. The ideal approach is the one in which the student functions “at all moral levels at once” (i.e., behaviorally, cognitively, and spiritually).

The strength of defining morality as godliness lies in its reliance on an absolute, unchanging standard rather than on societal whims, deceptive personal feelings, or flawed and immature reasoning. Because practically all definitions of morals and morality focus on standards, rules, or principles, the entire issue hinges on **which** standard one accepts. For all believers, that standard **must** be the Bible. Although there is room in Christianity for Christian **liberty**, there is only one standard—God’s Word.

The view that morality is godliness emphasizes **both** outward behavior and inner reasoning because, in Clouse’s words, “Godliness is manifested not only in what we do and in how we think but also in what we can be through Christ. . . .” It goes beyond teaching the letter of the law (“Thou shalt not kill,” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”) to emphasize Christ’s higher standard (Do not even be angry with your brother, and do not even look upon a woman to lust after her). It recognizes that the law regulates only outward behavior whereas the higher standard “monitors the cognitions that precede behavior.”

This view assumes that the child is born with not only an evil nature but also the potential for both good and bad behaviors, reasoning, and decisions. Personal salvation increases one’s propensity to do right, but nonetheless the individual willfully chooses to do either good or evil. Behavior may be **influenced by** environmental, personal or church background, but those factors are never truly excuses for immorality.

Merely teaching our students to “be good” is not enough; even a “good” student may in reality be very immoral. Rather, we must teach them to be **godly**. According to our standard, Scripture, godliness is nothing less than perfection (“Be ye holy, for I am holy.”). That is God’s standard, not man’s. Lest we excuse ourselves that it is an impossible standard, we have Christ as our living role model, “tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.” The degree of our students’ morality, then, is limited only by their perception of God’s holiness. Therefore, if we want moral students, we must continually emphasize God’s holiness.

In short, this view holds that what one does is an indication of one’s relationship to the Lord and an understanding of who God is. But it also operates fully aware of the true condition of one’s heart. A true Christian is not one who is a Christian outwardly but who is a Christian of the heart. Godliness, then, is knowing what God knows, viewing things as He views them, thinking as He thinks, and then acting according to His understanding.

In Christian education, the issue is how teachers can educate their students such that they accept God’s Word as their own personal standard and act consistently in adherence to its principles. The educator must teach, as John Stott wrote in *Balanced Christianity*, both “micro-ethics” (personal morality) and “macro-ethics” (social responsibility), and both must be based on the principle of godliness.

Dennis L. Peterson is a freelance writer living in Taylors, SC. He taught various subjects, including history and writing at the junior high, senior high and college level and in a home-school cooperative for seventeen years. He has written numerous articles on education, history, and writing for both Christian and secular markets.