

Can Christian Ethics Be Saved? An Agenda for a Marginalized Discipline

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Converging Concerns

This essay will attempt to do four things: trace the history of Christian ethics as an academic discipline, map the current geography of the discipline, defend it from neglect and misunderstanding, and attempt to propose fruitful future directions for it, especially among evangelicals and Baptists. One might say that my project here is a top-to-bottom rethinking of the marginalized discipline of Christian ethics and its place in our academic institutions at the beginning of the third Christian millennium.

My work is occasioned by several converging concerns. The first is the disturbing dismissal of Christian ethics as a viable discipline on the part of certain learned skeptics in the Christian world. For example, in the September/October 2001 issue of the evangelical magazine *Books and Culture*, theologian Stephen Webb opened an article provocatively entitled “Danger! Christian Ethics” with the following claims, among others:

- “Christian ethics is nothing more than simply being a good Christian.”
- “Christian ethics becomes just another name for Christian theology.”
- “What Christianity teaches about ethics is nothing different from or more than what Christianity teaches about Jesus Christ.”
- “Christian ethics is not only an empty idea; it is also a dangerous one.”
- “The study of religious ethics is one of the last strongholds of liberal Protestantism in the academy.” (p. 21)

This assortment of half-truths and untruths deserves a response on numerous levels. I will engage its claims throughout this essay. *For now it simply indicates that some scholars and some academic institutions are not convinced that a discipline called “Christian ethics” exists or that it ought to exist.* Webb’s claims reflect the broader marginalization of Christian ethics in the evangelical and Baptist academy. It is not an accident that so few evangelical educational institutions employ Christian ethicists or even offer courses in the subject. I believe that this marginalization of ethics is a disastrous mistake, and will show why I believe that in this paper.

Skepticism about Christian ethics as a discipline relates, I think, to popular Christian weakness in ethical reflection and ethical living in the midst of a morally confused culture. That is the second occasion for this paper. Done well, Christian ethics the academic discipline serves Christian churches and Christian people in the formation of their way of life—their own Christian ethics. The North American Christian scene is characterized by the same rampant moral incoherence and relativism that afflicts our culture. If our Christian intellectual life were characterized by the stronger academic practice of a convictional Christian ethics, and if the Christian public began to attend more closely to this work, perhaps the lived ethics of the

Christian world would improve. That hope animates not just this paper but all my efforts in Christian ethics.

The third occasion for this paper is an honest recognition of the unsettled state of contemporary North American Christian ethics. Among the best Christian ethicists these days is Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke Divinity School. In the preface to his significant book *With the Grain of the Universe*, the compilation of his 2000-2001 Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews University, Hauerwas has the following to say:

I never dreamed that I would be asked to give the Gifford Lectures. Theologians did not have a conspicuous role in the Gifford Lectures in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, I am not even a proper theologian but a representative of the even more disreputable field called Christian ethics, and it is not clear that I am a competent worker in that “field” because it is not apparent what constitutes competence in Christian ethics (p. 9).

With characteristic puckishness, Hauerwas here manages to describe his own primary field (and mine, and about 1000 others of us) as “disreputable”—and to make the more significant claim that there is essentially no standard for competence in Christian ethics. Hauerwas is not saying that there are no competent ethicists, but instead that there is no “center” defining what competence looks like in ethics.

As one who has studied and practiced Christian ethics for fifteen years now, I think that Hauerwas is not far wrong in his claim about the lack of clear standards of competence in Christian ethics. So one occasion for this essay is to sketch how evangelicals should define such competence as we strengthen our involvement with this discipline and in turn perhaps strengthen the discipline itself.

A fourth and final concern animating this paper is my sense of both a personal and professional need to build bridges out of the evangelical/Baptist subculture to the broader church and its associated academic guilds.

At one level, this is merely personal. I am a Baptist evangelical by conviction; yet I am also a practicing member of the Christian ethics guild. Living in two worlds, I have a natural interest in building bridges between them.

But the need for bridge-building is more than personal. I think that the rather stark divorce between the vast (“red state”) evangelical and Baptist subculture and most of the leading (“blue state”) professionals who write and teach Christian ethics is bad for both. In recent years I have noticed a growing interest in dialogue and engagement with evangelical Christians on the part of these Christian ethicists. As I will attempt to show a bit later, we should rush through this open door, not only for the sake of the ethics guild and the churches it serves, but also for our own sake.

Tracing the History of Christian Ethics

When mainstream Christian ethicists say “the academic discipline of Christian ethics,” what they normally mean is: that discipline practiced by those who have earned a PhD. or equivalent degree in Christian ethics or a closely related field; identify themselves as Christian ethicists; write scholarly and professional publications in the field; teach Christian ethics in college, university, or seminary settings or engage in full-time professional work that is closely related to the field; find one of their primary professional/institutional homes in the organization called the Society of Christian Ethics (SCE).

Yet, as mainstream ethicist Edward L. Long of Drew University himself put it in his 1984 history of the Society of Christian Ethics, “It is important not to equate the history of the Society with the history of an academic discipline. Christian ethics is as old as Christianity itself and even has roots in OT thought...A history of Christian ethics resembles a history of Christian thought and is integrally related to it.” (*Academic Bonding and Social Concern*, 160). At one level, then, there is no discrete history of Christian ethics. It is simply the ethical aspect of historic Christian thought. Let’s call this historic Christian moral thought “Christian Ethics A” because it was here first—it can be witnessed in Scripture and every era of church history. Christian Ethics A is the church’s reflection on its own moral life and on its engagement with society. It is a perennial activity of the church.

The precursor of modern North American Christian ethics can be found in the late 19th century. Coming on the heels of a variety of social reform movements, often spearheaded by evangelical Christians, both universities and seminaries began to offer classes in contemporary social problems in the 1880s and 1890s. This development dovetailed with the birth of the Social Gospel movement with its deep concern for the suffering and injustice created by unfettered laissez-faire industrial capitalism. The goal of the very first coursework in Christian ethics was to help students translate widely shared Christian moral principles into social action in a troubled and suffering world. The first and most influential of these classes was an 1883-84 course at Harvard taught by Professor Francis Greenwood Peabody. Let’s call this germinal moment in the development of Christian ethics as a discipline “Christian Ethics B.” Long rightly points out that the “social passion” of these early practitioners of so-called “applied Christianity” or “social Christianity” or “Christian sociology” has always been a central characteristic of the field which later came to be called Christian ethics.

Despite the steady existence of courses in social or applied Christianity in the period between the late 19th century and World War II, it was not until the 1950s that the contemporary discipline of Christian ethics began to take shape. What eventually became known as the Society of Christian Ethics (SCE) was founded in 1959 after several years of preliminary meetings. Over time its agenda has evolved to include various aspects of the entire moral tradition of the Christian faith (Christian Ethics A). Yet at its heart the discipline retains the “social passion” of

the 19th century “Social Christianity” (Christian Ethics B) that was such an important part of its birth as a discipline.

North American evangelical disengagement from the mainstream discipline of Christian ethics has been obvious from its very origins. This disengagement clearly was linked to the context in which Christian ethics B was born—the Social Gospel. Though evangelicals were vigorously engaged with urban social reform efforts when that movement began, theological drift in the Social Gospel movement, as well as the related fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s, sheared evangelicals away from social engagement for a long season, at least from 1920 to around 1975. This half-century, unfortunately, coincided precisely with the consolidation of mainstream Christian ethics as an academic discipline, as well as with the urgent social and moral problems of an era that included economic crises, totalitarianism, World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and other morally significant social upheavals.

One of evangelical theologian Carl F.H. Henry’s signal postwar contributions was his effort to offer evangelical reflection on both “personal” and “social” Christian ethics and to lead others to do the same. But despite his careful, even magisterial works in this area—and despite being a member of the Society of Christian Ethics—Henry's work did not signal either his own integration into mainstream Christian ethics or lead many other evangelical thinkers to beat a path in that direction.

In general, when most evangelical universities, seminaries, and even parachurch organizations attempted ethical analysis or instruction in ethics, with certain important exceptions these efforts were undertaken by those not trained in the field. The same pattern remains broadly true today. But ethics cannot be reduced to theology (or philosophy, or biblical studies, or worldview studies, or whatever), so the weakness of these efforts has been profound, leading to what evangelical thinker Daryl Charles has rightly called "the unformed conscience of modern evangelicalism."

As a kind of parenthesis, however, it is important to note that Southern Baptists historically have constituted something of an exception to this evangelical disdain for the discipline of Christian ethics. Both "social Christianity" and Society of Christian Ethics-type ethical instruction were introduced at Southern Seminary at the same time as they were appearing in the broader academy. Southwestern Seminary began to develop its own mainstream Christian ethics tradition with the coming of T.B. Maston in the 1940s. Even today, ethics continues to be taught and ethics professors continue to be sought at the now conservative-led Southern Baptist seminaries. Though it is fair to say that the denominational transition has been hard on the vitality of the (Southern) Baptist ethics tradition, Christian ethics maintains a presence at both conservative and moderate Baptist seminaries that generally exceeds what is offered elsewhere in the evangelical Christian world.

Mapping the Contemporary Discipline of Christian Ethics

So it is time to offer evangelical Christianity, and to some extent the various Baptist communities, a fresh introduction to the discipline of Christian ethics and those who practice it.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of this discipline today is its diversity. This diversity can be mapped in several ways, and offers a nice snapshot of the field.

Christian ethicists are Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and nearly every variety of Protestant: Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, Anabaptist, Pentecostal/charismatic, and so on. Mainline Protestants have long played a leading role in mainstream Christian ethics but, contra Webb, Christian ethics today *cannot* accurately be reduced to a “bastion of liberal Protestantism.” The Catholic voice in the SCE (31% of SCE membership), just to name one example, is strong and quite well-represented at every level of leadership and activity. While there do exist some “religious ethicists” representing no particular confessional tradition, they are actually rather few in number. Most Christian ethicists ground their work in a recognizable theological tradition to which they retain some measure of loyalty and whose sources and methods are visible in their work.

It is certainly fair to say that the discipline of Christian ethics has tended to lean to the center-left theologically while encompassing a wide range of views. In this way it has reflected similar trends in the broader academy. Yet it is clear to me that the SCE exhibits considerable theological groundedness. Meanwhile, there is sufficient diversity of perspective within the Society to keep anyone from getting too comfortable. I believe that engagement with reasonably diverse perspectives contributes to the sharpening and self-correction that is essential both to good scholarship and good discipleship.

The last two decades within Christian ethics have seen the growth both of demographic diversity and ethical perspectives to match. The SCE was interested in racial issues from its beginning, and in women's empowerment since the 1960s. Over time the guild has helped to nurture the training, development, and inclusion of a significant number of black, Hispanic, female, Asian-American, and other scholars from previously voiceless groups. Meanwhile, from these groups has begun the emergence of contextual social/theological ethics: feminist ethics, Hispanic ethics, etc. This effort at inclusiveness is consistent with the founding vision of Christian ethics and contributes greatly to the field's richness and diversity, and makes for a stark contrast with the overwhelmingly white and male face of most evangelical and Baptist scholarship.

A major source of diversity within Christian ethics is by methodology. I have already noted the existence of contextual methodologies. These tend to emphasize engagement with biblical and theological themes and truths with careful attention to cultural and social location and personal or group experience. Sometimes these treatments drift from Christian orthodoxy but most of the time they do not.

Such approaches are complemented by a variety of methodological options. Various philosophical, theological, biblical, and social scientific methodologies can be seen in Christian ethics. These approaches are sometimes rooted deeply in longstanding confessional traditions; other times they represent the innovations of current thinkers. The fact is that there is no single “way” to do Christian ethics, despite various proposals that have been made over the years. This contributes to the unsettled state of affairs in the discipline and often to an overemphasis on methodological disputes at the expense of consideration of concrete moral norms.

One longstanding characteristic of the SCE is its focus on social issues. In my training I frequently heard “social ethics” used as the main term denoting what I was learning to do, and that language remains significant in the SCE. As we have seen, Christian ethics as a specialized discipline was born with industrialization and its ills. It came into its own in the mid-20th century in response to the convulsive social crises of those years. Given those roots, mainstream Christian ethics has tended to focus its gaze on pressing social issues like these, updating its issue set with the times. Thus today the issue mix includes economic globalization, the environment, family ethics, racial justice, bioethics, and so on. Varieties of professional ethics—business, ministerial, legal, medical, journalistic, etc—have also won an important place in Christian ethics. Matters of public policy are always on the agenda. Thus a key source of the diversity in contemporary Christian ethics has to do with issue specialization. Bioethics, for example, is a vast enough concern to be its own field, but other arenas of social concern also have attracted specialists who give their careers to addressing them.

Of course, it is important to note that the mainstream guild offers diverse proposals for how Christians should respond to such issues. There is certainly a left-liberal contingent, perhaps most visible on issues of sexual ethics. And yet the strong Catholic presence, as well as more conservative voices within the mainline academy (and among the evangelicals already involved in the field) keeps the discipline from becoming merely a “bastion of liberal Protestantism.” Deepened evangelical engagement would only help balance the scales all the more.

A final note here: in what may be taken as a kind of a reaction to this focus on contemporary issues, other ethicists now specialize in perennial concerns and themes in ethics, such as character, ecclesiology and ethics, the history of ethics, liturgy/worship and ethics, covenantal ethics, moral psychology, and the interpretation of the Bible for ethics, or in the work of major moral thinkers of past and present. In the resurgence of interest in such themes one sees mainstream Christian ethics going back to Christian ethics A and doing work of great value to evangelicals if we would attend to it.

Unlike what is normally the case for the other theological disciplines, Christian ethics places its practitioners in many places of service other than the classroom. The diversity of the discipline can, in part, be found in this vocational pluralism. Certainly Christian ethicists often inhabit academia. At its origins, Christian ethicists tended to cluster in seminary settings, but by now the secular university, church-related school, evangelical college, university divinity school,

freestanding seminary, and so on, all find their way onto this map. But ethicists also can be found in churches, religious orders, denominational agencies, research institutes and thinktanks, government departments, parachurch lobbying, advocacy, and activist organizations, and in hospitals, health care bureaucracies, businesses, and the military. Whatever it is that this “disreputable” profession does, there appear to be a number of institutions interested in it.

An intriguing way to map the discipline is by what might be called ethics tradition or key ethics icon. That is, since the discipline's founding it has been possible to identify traditions in Christian ethics associated with key figures either living or dead. Often these are then linked with particular divinity schools or universities where those traditions live on long after their originator has left the scene. Some of the most significant of these ethics icons and the traditions associated with them would include:

- The Reinhold Niebuhr/Union Seminary NY tradition—built around the great mid-century Protestant ethicist/theologian, with a strong emphasis on engagement with current national and international issues based on the grand themes of Protestant theology.
- The H. Richard Niebuhr/Yale Divinity tradition—built around Reinhold’s more retiring brother H. Richard, this tradition has always been more methodologically rigorous and theologically focused.
- The James Gustafson/University of Chicago Divinity School tradition—Gustafson, one of the distinguished ethicists of the last generation, anchored a vigorous tradition in ethics at Chicago. The early Gustafson was a centrist Protestant of moderate Reformed leanings who engaged most of the important methodological disputes of his day with care and skill; the constructive work of the later Gustafson has been rather idiosyncratic, more theistic than Christian, but still fascinating.
- The Stanley Hauerwas/Duke Divinity School tradition—The most recent powerhouse ethicist to make this rarefied list, Hauerwas has built at Duke a tradition of Christian ethics offering a kind of neo-sectarian “Christ against culture” vision along with a strong emphasis on the retrieval of character and a focus on narrative.

These four streams of tradition hardly exhaust the list: one could also name a Dietrich Bonhoeffer tradition; a John Howard Yoder/Anabaptist tradition; an older Paul Ramsey/Princeton tradition now mainly abandoned; a Karl Barth/Paul Lehmann Princeton Seminary tradition; a Martin Luther King tradition; a feminist tradition that is quite collaborative but perhaps most closely identified with Beverly Harrison of Union Seminary; a strong sociology of religion/social ethics tradition at Emory University, associated with Jon Gunneman; multiple centers for a Catholic tradition in ethics, but especially Notre Dame, Boston College, and Georgetown; the vigorous work in Christian ethics also being undertaken in several California institutions of various confessional traditions; and influential voices from Great Britain and the Continent.

While the existence of major schools of tradition centered around key figures still is a factor in mainstream Christian ethics, the impact of these schools appears to be weakening in light of the increasing decentralization of the field. Dozens of schools offer doctorates in Christian ethics and the horizon is not dominated by the kinds of towering figures once common in an earlier era. Christian ethics appears to be irreducibly diverse, but the field with few exceptions clings to its Christian identity and its social passion to address grievous public wrongs. The range of diversity certainly makes it hard to identify obvious standards of competence in the field. This contributes to the unsettling sense that various ethicists make various proposals but a methodological center for the discipline is never quite found (Long, 164). Even so, considerable sophisticated and very high-quality work happens nonetheless--much of it at some of the finest educational institutions in the world, and much of it remarkably relevant to evangelical and Baptist life.

The Necessity of Christian Ethics

In light of all of the foregoing, I would like to offer a brief defense of Christian ethics, aimed especially at an evangelical and Baptist audience. I want to claim that without attention to Christian ethics as an academic discipline, four very unwelcome things tend to happen in the Christian community; and thus that evangelical inattention to mainstream Christian ethics has contributed to the existence of these four problems in our midst today.

Without Christian ethics, the moral dimension of the Scriptures gets overlooked.

I usually define street-level Christian ethics (that is, the work that all of us as Christians are called to do) as *the Spirit-empowered effort of communities of Christian people to understand and to incarnate a way of life that conforms to God's will and advances God's kingdom*. Christian ethics the academic discipline helps Christians do this work of moral discernment and moral living. Ethics has to do with who we as Christians fundamentally are (moral character), what kinds of decisions we make and how we go about making them (moral decisionmaking), what kinds of goals we embrace (moral intentions), how we see the world and its possibilities (moral vision), how we characteristically conduct ourselves (moral practices), how we interact with and seek to change society (moral activism)—and more. These various dimensions of Christian character and conduct are demonstrated and worked out in various arenas: in individual life, in families, within the church, in the professions and the workplace, and in public life (culture, politics, law). For guidance in all of these areas, we desperately need biblical direction.

The Bible is indeed filled with moral content. But much of the time the moral dimension of the biblical message is overlooked or grossly misinterpreted. Christian ethics as a discipline helps Christians attend to and apply the moral commands, moral vision, morally significant narratives, and moral observations coursing through the Word of God. This discipline also calls our attention to the moral implications of core theological propositions of Scripture, such as the sovereignty of God and the goodness but fallenness of creation. Of course ethicists are not the

only ones who do this work, and no claim to exclusivity is intended in any of what I say here. But it does seem to be the case that ethics calls the church to attend to aspects of Scripture and the doctrines emerging from Scripture that are otherwise overlooked. Evangelical engagement with Christian ethics would help ensure attention to such biblical texts, themes, and principles .

Without Christian ethics, the moral tradition of the church gets overlooked.

The classic theological curriculum includes study in church history and the history of Christian thought. In my experience, the discipline of Christian ethics plays a key role in keeping alive the *moral heritage* of Christian thought. Just as there is a history of Christian theology that must be remembered and transmitted, there is also a history of Christian ethics.

The moral tradition of the Christian church has two dimensions—what Christians have *believed* about morality, and how Christians have *behaved* morally. It is important, for example, to know what Martin Luther or John Calvin or Menno Simons had to say not just about election or the sacraments but also about family, government, and economic life. It is also important to know what role they played in the fierce religious and political battles of their time, and of the legacy of their moral thought and practice for Protestant social ethics and western culture to this day. The same holds true with every other major thinker in Christian history. Likewise, a morally sensitive history of the church as a whole deserves to be attempted.

One of the salutary developments of our time is the retrieval of the heritage of the church. Tom Oden's project in patristic biblical interpretation—the Ancient Christian Commentary series—makes a great example of this. On a much smaller scale, a branch of the ethics guild is doing similar archaeology in Christian moral thought. A recent annual meeting included papers on Calvin and the emotions, John Chrysostom's treatment of marriage, Luther on the self, Schliermacher on religious experience in ethics, as well as discussions of Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Karl Barth, and the history of treatment of aboriginal peoples in North America. The more we dig around in the ancestral past, the more we discover riches beyond measure—as well as painful evidence of sins and missteps worth avoiding in the future.

Without Christian ethics, the church's treatment of contemporary social problems is weakened.

Stephen Webb says: "What Christianity teaches about ethics is nothing different from or more than what Christianity teaches about Jesus Christ." At one level, this is a truthful statement. Glen Stassen and I have offered an introductory text in Christian ethics based on Jesus' teachings, and it has 198,000 words in it. So Jesus tells us quite a bit about Christian ethics. But of course many of those words are devoted to teasing out answers to such issues as whether an infertile couple should decide to pursue in vitro fertilization. Or what stance the church should take on poverty in American society. Or what to think and do about genetic engineering. Or what the church can do to prevent divorce and build successful marriages. The direction that Jesus offers to Christian ethics is a matter of considerable effort. It cannot simply be derived from

christological formulations or, far worse, “what would Jesus do” slogans.

That effort involves interaction with other fields of study. Christian ethics—Christian social ethics, at least—is interdisciplinary. Most Christian ethics programs require training both in the classic theological/ethical canon and also in a social or natural science—sociology, economics, biology, genetics, political science. That’s because Christian ethics is more than “just another name for Christian theology.” It is the interaction of Christian theology with a fallen world on behalf of the church’s efforts in moral discernment and moral action.

It may have been possible in the 16th century for the church’s leading figures—Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc—to do it all. They could be theologians, pastors, ethicists, and biblical scholars. Given the scope, complexity, and rapidly changing nature of today’s social problems, as well as the explosion of Christian scholarship, specialization is salutary today, even required. Ethicists tend to specialize in particular moral issues, and to work in an interdisciplinary fashion with social scientists dealing with the same issues. Somehow, again contra Webb, it will not quite do to say “Christian ethics is nothing more than simply being a good Christian.”

Without Christian ethics, the church loses an essential bearer of its internal and external prophetic witness.

Mainstream Christian ethics has always been struck by the example of the prophets and by the prophetic moral teachings of Jesus—perhaps the most neglected parts of the canon in evangelical and Baptist life. Our discipline has always found its heartbeat at the intersection of God’s love and human misery. The prophets called Israel to return to God, to keep the covenant once made with God, to do justice and love mercy, to protect and care for the widow, the orphan, and the alien, to live out God’s compassion for the poor and victimized. And the prophets did not cease to bring a fiercely critical word from the Lord to the people of God, not because of disdain for God’s people but instead out of the highest kind of love.

As a discipline, we have resisted the reduction of Christian faith to the affirmation of right doctrine. We have resisted the reduction of Christian morality to the recitation of right convictions. We have resisted the reduction of Christian spirituality to the generation of individual good feelings. We have sought to keep the poor and the victimized before the conscience of the church and the culture. And we have called the church away from triumphalism and toward a teachable humility fitting for God’s elect-but-fallible people. This stance certainly challenges Webb’s careless claim that Christian ethics is “an empty idea”—whether it is also “a dangerous one” perhaps depends on whether one welcomes a prophetic voice or does not.

Strengthening Christian Ethics

I want to propose that rather than rejecting or marginalizing Christian ethics as an academic discipline, evangelicals and Baptists need to heighten their efforts in the field, in four

ways: training more ethicists, participating more heavily in the Society of Christian Ethics, producing first-rate scholarship in Christian ethics, and allowing the broad social passion of Christian ethics to be felt again within our churches. Doing these things will have a positive impact both on our churches and on the discipline of Christian ethics.

The dearth of evangelical ethicists has left a gap in seminary and Christian university faculties that is proving very difficult to fill. Even where these schools seek professionally trained ethicists they have difficulty finding people with both the appropriate training and evangelical theological convictions. This trend becomes self-reinforcing. The lack of ethics instruction and highly trained ethics teachers at evangelical colleges and seminaries helps to limit the number of our students who then pursue ethics at the graduate level. Those who do pursue graduate study in ethics are then less likely to be evangelicals or be in contact with evangelicals.

The same thing needs to happen in Christian ethics as has happened in philosophy, history, theology, and sociology of religion. Young scholars of excellent academic abilities and solid theological convictions need to be trained well and then sent to the best doctoral programs in ethics that can be found. As they do good work they will find employment in excellent universities and make their mark in the profession. The door is open in ethics just as it is in other fields if evangelicals are willing to walk through it. One of my fondest hopes is to eventually place a number of my finest students in ethics doctoral programs, and to see them eventually take their evangelical vision to the Ivy League and many other unexpected kinds of places.

The Society of Christian Ethics has an Evangelical Ethics Interest Group. I have served as co-leader of this group for some time. Each year, a rather substantial number of ethicists surface for our late-night group session at the annual convention. Two years ago, when Dennis Hollinger and I presented a paper on evangelical ethics in the broader SCE setting, a large number of non-evangelicals showed up.

All of this is to say that the mainstream ethics guild both needs and welcomes the respectful but vigorous participation of evangelicals who teach and write about ethics. Within the 950-member Society self-identified evangelicals are likely no more than 5%. But someone is teaching ethics at Christian universities and in our dozens of seminaries and Bible colleges, and as far as I can tell few of these participate in the SCE. Involvement in the Society will both enrich evangelical teaching and have an impact on the direction of Christian ethics as a discipline.

The reason why scholars like George Marsden, Alvin Plantinga, Miroslav Volf, and Nicholas Wolterstorff are taken seriously by non-evangelicals is simply that they produce good work. By the canons of the disciplines in which such scholars work, they are excellent. Their work demands attention. Even in a discipline that leans center-left, certain meritocratic standards still prevail. Often evangelicals convince themselves of a vast left-wing conspiracy against us when what is really going on is that our own ghettoization has kept us from reaching the level of excellence that might get our work noticed.

If and when evangelicals produce good scholarship in ethics, we are taken seriously. Richard Mouw, John Howard Yoder, Stephen Mott, Oliver O'Donovan, James McClendon, Gilbert Meilander, Glen Stassen, and Christine Pohl are examples of evangelical scholars representing a variety of traditions whose work has earned the attention of ethicists of all stripes. We need to produce more such work, and soon.

Many fine scholars have documented both the rich early history of American evangelical social and political engagement and then its sudden abandonment in the 1920s after the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

Evangelicals finally wised up and reentered public ethical engagement, beginning in the 1970s. Unfortunately, especially at the popular and mass activist level, we have not always done our work well. But there is unlikely to be a second evangelical withdrawal from such social engagement. Evangelicals are in the public square to stay. The issues are too important to walk away from, and faithful discipleship demands our continued engagement.

Yet even today few evangelicals (academic or otherwise) who engage public ethical issues do so in dialogue with the leading professionals of the field. As we have seen, one result of this estrangement has been some pretty shoddy ethical writing. Another has been a weakening of that passion for justice and righteousness that is so obviously biblical that evangelicals cannot forever neglect it.

But this is a new day. Evangelicals are back in the public square, and with plenty of moral passion in need of refinement and direction. And the Christian ethics guild is ready for interaction with evangelicals. For our own sake, we need to pursue that interaction.

Conclusion

The mainline is fading, and everyone knows it, even the mainline. As early as 1984, in his history of the discipline of Christian ethics, Edward L. Long worried:

If the institutional expressions of Christianity in our immediate milieu progressively decline in quality, even if they do survive, that also will undermine the possibility of doing Christian ethics well...If robust Christian ethics can exist only within a context of vibrant faith and viable religious institutions, and if those very contexts are eroding right under our very noses, then business as usual for a society such as ours will not insure a promising future (Long, 176).

My colleague George Guthrie has spoken to me of how evangelical scholars now dominate large sections of biblical scholarship simply because it is increasingly only evangelicals who still care enough about the biblical text to bother with it. In other words, the erosion that Long worried about has already deeply affected mainline involvement in biblical

studies. The mainliners now desperately need evangelicals in their midst to keep their churches and academic enterprises alive.

My experience of the mainstream ethics community is that in the midst of signs of their own decline they find evangelicals a refreshing, renewing, and hopeful presence in the discipline. An evangelical spirit in ethics (the right kind of evangelical spirit) reminds the discipline as a whole of its origins and founding passions. Our careful attention to a Bible in which we still wholeheartedly believe, passionate grounding in a personal relationship with Christ, desire for excellence in the service of Christ as Lord, and Kingdom vision for the transformation of the world, are like a breath of fresh air in a scholarly guild that once was characterized by more of this spirit as the foundation of its social passion--and at some level wishes it still was. (For this description of characteristics of evangelical ethics, see Dennis Hollinger/David P. Gushee, "Evangelical Ethics: Profile of a Movement Coming of Age," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000): 181-203).

I continue to think that one of the best definitions of evangelicalism is simply that it is a renewal movement within Protestant Christianity, calling fellow believers to what they once and truly believed. To renew we must engage rather than withdraw. To renew successfully might mean to make ourselves obsolete; that is, as a renewal movement. Instead we might just find ourselves reintegrated into a renewed church and into a scholarly guild deeply affected by our biblical vision.