Too often ethical discussions have focused on how we would respond to the major questions of our day. Capital punishment, nuclear war, euthanasia, to name a few, have been the subject matter for general texts on modern moral issues. Unfortunately, these texts do not deal with the kind of ethical issues facing us on a daily basis. Living faithfully to the person of Jesus is a call that should challenge us every day as we work, as we relate to friends and strangers, and as we function as parents and spouses. The purpose of this essay is twofold: 1) to identify the values that form the core of our common heritage as Christians; and 2) to outline how we can defend and promote those values in our everyday existence.

The Nature of Christian Ethics

For a Christian, the primary task of ethics is none other than the endeavor to remain faithful to the person and work of Jesus. John Howard Yoder captures this well in his book, *The Priestly Kingdom*. There he argues that each generation faces the task of attempting to be faithful to the beliefs and values of Jesus in their own historical context. In each new age, individuals face the difficult chore of discerning which responses to their unique ethical dilemmas embody best the values of Jesus. In simple terms, this means that we are called to apply our Christian values to the challenges of daily living.1

Central to faithfulness is the duty to fight for a just, loving world. In theory, but not always in practice, Christianity has stressed the need to join the poor, the widowed, the elderly, and the powerless in their quest for social, political, and economic justice. Oftentimes, the call for a just society requires us to be a "voice for the oppressed." In many societies, the concerns of the oppressed are ignored and their voices silenced. In such a situation, we are instructed to confront the evil with our voices and resources.

It is at this point that a warning must be issued. Evil must be resisted, but it must be resisted in a manner consistent with our beliefs and values. World War I teaches us a valuable lesson. During this conflict, the Christian churches played an active role in supporting the American war effort. In particular, they spread so-called atrocity stories, many of which were false or embellished. These stories fueled the war sentiment and the hatred of the enemy. After the
war, preachers were repulsed by their behavior, since their conduct was contrary to the values of Christianity.²

The lesson to be learned from this experience is that faithfulness, and not effectiveness, must be the cornerstone upon which Christian ethics is built. Stanley Hauerwas, in his book, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, avers that Christians must resist the temptation to use unjust means which promise good results. He writes, "Christians have rightly felt much in accord with those, such as Kant, who argue that there are some things we cannot do, no matter what good might accrue."³ Stated succinctly, his argument is that our primary goal is not effectiveness, but faithfulness to Jesus.

**Christian Values**

At first glance it may appear difficult to list and describe the values at the core of the Christian faith. An historical examination of the various Christian denominations reveals that churches have responded differently to the moral issues of the day. The Mennonite tradition, for example, has emphasized the necessity of non-violent resistance as the appropriate response to social evil, while the Catholic tradition has frequently used the just war theory to defend the use of warfare as a last resort. Clearly, Christianity is not one unified body that responds to ethical issues in the same manner.

Nonetheless, there is a common heritage of Christian values and beliefs to which the various Christian denominations seek to be faithful. As Jersild and Johnson state in their book, *Moral Issues and Christian Response*, "this heritage embraces certain ideals and values which claim allegiance of those who call themselves Christian, whatever their particular church affiliation."⁴ These core Christian values flow from the Judeo-Christian stories found in Scripture. Scripture not only identifies the values, but it also helps us understand the precise meaning of the values. Without these stories, the values are mere abstractions. It is not enough to tell a person to love one's neighbor. We must also discuss what Scripture says love entails.⁵

To construct a complete list of the core values in such a short space is impossible. My intent here is to outline the values that can help us live "faithfully" in our ordinary, daily lives.

**Dignity and Worth of Each Individual**

In a world that often treats the individual as a cog in a wheel or as an object, it is important to stress that each person has an inherent dignity and worth. Elton Eenigenburg, in his book, *Biblical Foundations and a Method for Doing Ethics*, reminds us that one of the moral corollaries of the image of God
motif is that "God has bestowed upon us an inherent dignity or sanctity that in a perfect world would never be violated."  

The implications of the creation of humankind in the image of God are significant. First, this motif calls us to acknowledge and affirm the dignity of others, even those who are our enemies or those who have erred. A simple example comes to mind. In disciplining, parents sometimes move beyond merely correcting children for their mistakes. At a recent school event, I witnessed a parent grab a child by the collar and call him a variety of names, including stupid, worthless, and a failure. It is important to offer a young person good advice, but unfortunately, parents forget that the child is still a person. Similar examples can be found during wartime, when we dehumanize the enemy. We might disapprove of someone's actions, but this is not a license to dehumanize that individual.

Second, this motif reminds us of our obligation to nurture everyone physically, spiritually, and emotionally. In a world where so few consume so much, poverty, malnutrition, and prejudice rob people of the opportunity to develop their full capabilities. Ronald Sider reports, for instance, that more than a hundred million impoverished children will die in the 1990s. To address these issues of justice, Christians must assume the moral responsibility of improving the lot of the poor and making their lives more human.

**Deferring Gratification of Wants**

In America we have been taught to satisfy our wants and desires immediately. Advertising is the prod; credit cards are the means. Advertising, especially that geared to children, raises the expectation that something is needed now. Credit cards are the avenue by which to purchase an item, even if the resources are not available. This has led to what some have called the "expectation syndrome." For many, what is a luxury in one generation has become a need in the next generation. A quick examination of our society verifies this fact. Our homes today "need" a dishwasher, a microwave, two televisions, two phones, and a Nintendo. The list is endless. We need something, and we want it now.

Christianity teaches us to defer our gratification of wants and to be willing to sacrifice for a higher good. This value encourages us to see beyond self-gratification. Williams and Houck note that "accepting this value creates a wider vision of the 'good life,' a new kind of care for others, and a more comprehensive range of considerations in making decisions." It helps us realize that the pursuit of the common good should transcend the effort to satisfy our wants. The good of the community and its members becomes the focus.

The early church captured this point in its analysis of work. Work is something all of us will do in our lifetime; yet few of us reflect upon the
question, why work? The writers of the early church were well aware that one reason for working is to provide for such basic needs as food and shelter. Nevertheless, they argued that the primary purpose of work is to gain resources that could be used for charity. Seen in this light, work is elevated to a higher status. Work provides an opportunity for service and not just for the meeting of wants. As such, both our work and our individual existence become more meaningful. The willingness to sacrifice for the benefit of others results in a more rewarding life.

**Stewardship of the Earth**

The movie, *Dances with Wolves*, reminds us of the damage humans have done to the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants. The startling scene of skinned buffaloes lying on the open prairie is a stark reminder of how humans have failed in their responsibility to care for the earth. Polluted streams, toxic dump sites, acid rain, and the decreased old growth forests are the product of poor management of our resources.

Genesis 1:24-31 tells us that we are given the role of caretakers of God’s creation. Although the resources of the earth can be used for the benefit of humankind, we are called upon to manage responsibly those resources. It is our task to cultivate and preserve the earth, so that future generations may have a healthy environment. This is not an easy task, given the conflicting interests of different groups in society. The recent debate in Oregon on the amount of trees permitted to be cut in our forests demonstrates this difficulty. For some, harvesting trees is a source of their livelihood, while for others, this activity is seen as a further stripping away of a scarce resource. In the midst of this debate, Scripture instructs us that the value of good stewardship of the earth is to be promoted and defended.⁹

On a personal level, this value demands a reexamination of our lifestyle. The overconsumption of resources by a few threatens the environment. As a rich nation, we are asked to use willingly less of the earth’s resources. Pope Paul VI, in his message for the World Day of the Environment (June 5, 1977), stated it succinctly: "it [this value] calls for a simplicity of life style and a society that intelligently conserves rather than needlessly consumes."¹⁰ The key word is simplicity. Simplicity means being frugal and not wasting resources.

**Agape Love and Forgiveness**

The most difficult challenge facing Christians in any age is to practice agape love. In our world love is a much overused word with very little meaning. For Jesus, however, agape love is defined in no uncertain terms as love of enemies.
To a normal person, this demand seems strange and almost beyond our capabilities. Our natural inclination is to hate enemies and to hold grudges against them. Enemies, or those who are hostile toward us, are often the target of our anger and revenge.

In the New Testament, we are asked to forsake revenge and to return hatred with love. In The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer encourages us to treat the enemy as we would our friends. He writes, "we are to serve our enemy in all things without hypocrisy and with utter sincerity . . . If out of love for our brother we are willing to sacrifice goods, honour and life, we must be prepared to do the same for our enemy." Love requires us to forsake the temptation to give what we receive from the enemy and instead to display unqualified love. Love expects nothing in return. Even when the enemy continues to be unresponsive to our love and forgiveness, we are asked to reach out towards them.

Agape love is closely tied to the value of forgiveness. The words of Matthew 5:21-26 teach us of the necessity of reconciliation. In verses 23 and 24, the Gospel writer tells us that we need to leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled with our brother or sister. Bitterness, hostility, and division must be put aside. Years ago at a chapel service at Western Theological Seminary, we were asked to act out these verses. It was a powerful moment to see people get up and approach their enemies. Many opportunities for reconciliation are available on a daily basis. Removing barriers through reconciliation is a simple, but important way to be faithful to Jesus’ ideals of love and forgiveness.

Joy Over Happiness

Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that there is a distinction between happiness and joy. In our nation, there is a great stress placed upon happiness. Happiness is seen as our goal and it can be attained when we have our basic needs and desires satisfied. A new house, a new car, a date, and even a vacation can provide the occasion for happiness. Yet, as Hauerwas suggests, happiness is shallow and transitory. Feelings of happiness can leave as quickly as they come.

Joy, on the other hand, is more enduring. Joy is a common word during the weeks surrounding Christmas, but it quickly disappears from our vocabulary at other times of the year. This is due to the fact that the meaning of joy is frequently not understood. Hauerwas understands joy to be the result of our willingness to be surprised. To live joyfully means to be open to the discovery that we have resources to live the Christian life that we did not know we had. He argues, "often joy is the result of our facing what we otherwise wished to avoid and discovering that our willingness to confront the difficult or the unpleasant helped us to discover that we possessed resources we did not
suspect." As Christians, we value the joy of being surprised by our ability to live faithfully.

There is nothing more rewarding for a parent than to witness a child experiencing such joy. Encouraging a son or daughter to handle a difficult situation, rather than relying upon the intercession of a parent, provides an opportunity for that child to discover hidden abilities and resources. My daughter’s experience in dealing with a group of children teasing her permitted her to marvel at her skill in handling ongoing conflicts.

Hope

There is today a growing pessimism in our society. This is not surprising, considering the moral and legal problems facing this nation. Vandalism, spousal and child abuse, poverty, misconduct by politicians, and homelessness are causing individuals to question whether we are in the midst of a moral crisis. We are fearful that we have lost our moral bearings. This fear has led to a lack of confidence in not only our ability to resolve moral conflicts, but also in our ability to live life with zest and vitality. This pessimism manifests itself in ordinary conversation as some wonder why anyone would want to bring a child into such a world.

Christians are a realistic, but hopeful people. It is our belief that life, despite its many hardships and trials, can be lived with vitality. In a strange sense, having a child is a sign of that hope. When we had our third child, many asked us why we did not stop with two children. Our answer was that the child was a symbol of our hope. Life may be difficult, but we are confident in a God who promises to walk with us and who assures us of his redemption.

Our hope also helps us to envision the world as it should be. Although there will never be a perfect world, Scripture does give us a sense of what is uniquely possible and an ideal of what can be. Martin Luther King offers a vision of the "Beloved Community"; a community in which each person can develop to the fullest, a community where love and not legal coercion regulate the social order, and a community which fosters love, service, and equality in society. Our goal is to create a nobler social order whose marks are peace, justice, and equality.

This vision can motivate others to pursue a common moral purpose. Visions have an emotional appeal which can tap the deep reservoir of human energy and capacity. Our hopefulness serves as a force to invite others to join us in a common quest for justice. Without a vision and without hope, it is difficult to capture the imagination of people. In bringing up children, parents will discover that their hopeful excitement will lead their children not only to seek actively, but also to develop a passion for the Christian life.
Values in Action

Outlining how to live out our values in everyday life is a simple task. Matthew 25:34-40 gives us a list of things that we can do daily to promote and defend our Christian values: consoling those who are ill or dying, spending time with those who are lonely, or feeding those who are hungry. In many cases, a value will be promoted. A personal example illustrates this. A few years ago I was undercharged on a restaurant bill. I brought this to the attention of the waitress. My hope was that this would teach my children and the waitress the value of honesty. In other cases, a value will be defended. Oftentimes in a hospital context, the dignity of the patient will be ignored. Family members may at times fight in the presence of a patient in a coma. It is important at those times to remind the family that the person is still present physically and perhaps mentally. Proper respect for that patient necessitates that such conflicts take place outside the patient’s room.

The opportunities for promoting and defending values are numerous. What we are called to do is to "seize the moment." Christians must be alert to the opportunities to be of service. Daily life and work are constantly offering us opportunities to witness to the values of Jesus. With watchful patience, we can seize those opportunities to teach, to console, to visit, and to work for the good of others.

As we try to be faithful, we must be mindful of the importance of style. Style refers to how we do an action. Daniel Maguire argues that how we do something is as important as what we do. According to Maguire, style is important, because the "how strips away our avowed motives and shows our real ones." Style, in other words, exposes our true inclinations.

Unfortunately, our style frequently ruins the action that is performed. In disciplining a child or helping a person in need, one must be mindful of one’s style. Discipline that insults or aid given in a condescending manner will produce adverse effects. Manner and timing are essential ingredients. Take the case of a child who receives her first failing grade. This is a time for encouragement and comfort, and not a time for further humiliation.

Students often ask what is the most important ethical value or principle. Reflecting upon the issue of style, one quickly realizes that at the heart of Christianity is the question, does this act build up the person or the community, or does it harm that person or community. Paul makes this point in his treatment of food offered to idols. His advice to the Corinthian community (1 Cor. 8:1-13) about the weak is straightforward: "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (v. 13). For Paul, our conduct should always be guided by a consideration of its impact on others in our community. Considerate love should be the rule.
Conclusion

Rituals play a crucial role in our everyday life. Through rituals, we reveal what is important in our lives. James Burtchaell asserts that "rituals provide us with intense moments of meaning, opportunities to display the powerful operative forces that shape the way we live." In simple terms, rituals help us to celebrate what we value.

Much like a ritual, our daily actions reveal the values that are at the core of our existence. Our deeds are in a unique sense rituals which embody the values that organize and structure our lives. Through these deeds, we highlight and celebrate our faithfulness to the person, Jesus. We do this most often not in heroic deeds, but in the simple and most common deeds of everyday life. To be faithful requires an attentiveness to the opportunities to do justice in our everyday activities. In gratitude to what God has done for humankind, we strive to embody the values of service, love, and justice in our daily conduct.

How do we learn to live the Christian life? It takes practice. Just as young children master such skills as tying their shoes or drinking from a cup without spilling by practice, so too we learn to live faithfully by practice. We have to practice continually what we want to become. This is the avenue by which we can make generosity, kindness, and compassion part of our daily behavior. Practice is the secret to good living. Only through practice can we develop a consistent pattern of living in faithfulness to our values.

ENDNOTES


9. For a more thorough treatment of this value, see Williams and Houck, op. cit., 27-28; and Eenigenburg, op. cit., 28.


13. Stanley Hauerwas offers an excellent discussion of the need for hopeful and confident people. He ends his essay with the following remark: "We may even learn what it means to worship a God who comes to us promising not uncertainty, but hope, to sustain confidence in a sinful world." See Stanley Hauerwas, "Rev. Falwell and Dr. King," *Notre Dame Magazine*, 28-29.

15. Barclay in his commentary on 1 Corinthians makes the following observation: "It may be that that course of action is safe enough for him; but he has not only himself to think about; he must think of the weaker brother." See William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1969), 85.
