

## Situation Ethics by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

### SITUATIONISM DEFINED

In the mid-1960s, Joseph Fletcher published the book, *Situation Ethics*, thereby securing for himself the dubious distinction, “the Father of Situation Ethics” (1966). Of course, Fletcher was by no means the first to advance the ideals of situationism. Men like Emil Brunner (*The Divine Imperative*), Reinhold Niebuhr (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*), Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Ethics*), and John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*) promoted ethical relativism before Fletcher’s popular expression of the same. Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger promulgated this same subjectivism. Though Fletcher at first attempted to deny this tie to existential philosophy (1967, p. 75), he eventually ended up admitting it (pp. 77,234). However, we need not think that situation ethics is a twenty-first-century phenomenon that was invented by modern theologians and social scientists. Situationism goes all the way back to Eden when Satan posed to Eve circumstances that he alleged would justify setting aside God’s law (Genesis 3:4-6).

Fletcher summarized his ideas in terms of six propositions that he came to identify as “the fundamentals of Christian conscience” (1967, pp. 13-27). This ethical theory stresses “freedom from prefabricated decisions and prescriptive rules” in exchange for “the relative or nonabsolute and variant or nonuniversal nature of the situational approach” (p. 7). “Right and wrong depend upon the situation” (p. 14). The “situation” is defined as “the relative weight of the ends and means and motives and consequences all taken together, as weighed by love” (p. 23). The situation ethicist feels free to “tinker with Scripture” and to form “a coalition with the utilitarian principle of the ‘greatest good of the greatest number’ ” (pp. 18-19; cf. p. 56).

Situationism is simply ethical relativism, in that it moves “away from code ethics, from stern and ironbound do’s and don’ts, from prescribed conduct and legalistic morality” (p. 24). Situationism bears close affinity with existentialism (pp. 26, 77,234). “Imitative practice,” uniformity and conformity, and “metaphysical morals” are all disdained (pp. 26,106,240). Objective principles and abstract rules are repudiated, in exchange for “freedom and openness” (pp. 72,76,233,235). Concrete absolutes are viewed unfavorably as “authoritarianism” and “rules-bound thinking” (p. 240).

Situationism calls for “creative” moral conduct, accommodation to “pluralism,” “freedom,” and “openness,” as well as “spontaneity and variety in moral decision-making” (pp. 78,123-124,235,241). Constant emphasis is placed on “love” as the only intrinsic good, with the loving thing to do depending on each situation that arises. Since “love” is the only inherent, intrinsic value, the moral quality or value of every thing or action is extrinsic and contingent—depending upon the situation (pp. 14,26,34,38,55,76,123-124).

Though Fletcher offered formal expression to these concepts several decades ago, it would not be an exaggeration to state that situationism has “gone to seed” in American society, and now constitutes the prevailing approach to making ethical decisions. As pollster guru George Barna remarked in a 2003 survey of American moral behavior:

This is reflective of a nation where morality is generally defined according to one’s feelings. In a postmodern society, where people do not acknowledge any moral absolutes, if a person feels justified in engaging in a specific behavior, then they do not make a connection with the immoral nature of that action... Until people recognize that there are moral absolutes and attempt to live in harmony with them, we are likely to see a continued decay of our moral foundations (2003, emp. added).

### FLAWS IN SITUATIONAL THINKING

At least two foundational errors cause Fletcher’s theory of situationism to be irreparably flawed. The first is the failure to grasp the Bible’s identification of the central concern of human beings: to love, honor, glorify, and obey God (Ecclesiastes 12:13; Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:37; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 2 Corinthians 5:9; 10:5; 1 Peter 4:11). Fletcher is virtually silent on this dimension of human responsibility. Instead, he focuses his entire theory on love for fellow man. While love for fellow man is certainly crucial to Christian ethics, and is absolutely mandatory for the Christian (e.g., Luke 10:25-37), it must be viewed in its rightful position, subsumed beneath the greater, higher responsibility of loving God. One cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor (e.g., 1 John 4:20-21). But, theoretically, one could love another person without loving God. Consequently, love for fellow man must be viewed in the larger framework of focusing one’s life on pleasing God first and foremost.

Since this must be the singular all-consuming passion of human beings, God’s Word must be consulted in order to determine how to love God and fellow man. In other words, to comply with the number one responsibility in life, one must

consult the absolute, prefabricated, prescriptive, ironbound do's and don'ts of Scripture! This, by definition, is love for God (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). It follows, then, that Fletcher is incorrect in identifying the only intrinsic good as "love" for fellow man (1967, p. 14). According to the Bible, intrinsic good includes fraternal love. But superceding even this love is filial love, i.e., love for God (Matthew 22:36-37; cf. Warren, 1972, pp. 87ff.). Consequently, God defines what love entails in man's treatment of both God and fellow man. But those definitions are found in the Bible in the form of prescriptive rules, regulations, and ironclad do's and don'ts.

The second fundamental flaw of Fletcher's brand of situationism is the subtle redefinition of "love." While Fletcher was correct when he identified love as an active determination of the will rather than an emotion (pp. 20-21), his idea of "love" is materialistic and secular, rather than scriptural and spiritual. "Love," to Fletcher, is what human beings decide is "good" or "best" in a given situation. This humanistic approach allows man and his circumstances to become the criteria for defining morality, rather than allowing God to define the parameters of moral behavior: "The metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws says, 'Do what is right and let the chips fall where they may.' The situational moralist says, 'Whether what you do is right or not depends precisely upon where the chips fall!'" (p. 26).

But the Bible simply does not place law and love in contradistinction to each other. In fact, according to the Bible, one cannot love either God or fellow man without law. The only way for an individual to know how to love is to go to the Bible and discern there the specifics of a loving behavior. When Paul declared, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:19), he did not mean that it is possible to love one's neighbor while dispensing with the law (cf. Fletcher, 1967, p. 70; Hook, 1984, p. 31). Rather, he meant that when you conduct yourself in a genuinely loving manner, you are automatically acting in harmony with the law (i.e., you are not killing, stealing, coveting, bearing false witness, etc.). God, in His laws, defined and pinpointed how to love. To treat any of God's laws as optional, flexible, or occasional is to undermine the very foundations of love.

In situationism, human beings become the standard of morality. The human mind, with its subjective perceptions of the surrounding moral environment, becomes the authority, in direct conflict with the words of an inspired prophet: "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). The psalmist certainly could be accused of being a "metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws." In his great psalm on the law of the Lord (Psalm 119), the writer conveyed his conviction that objective, prescriptive rules and prefabricated principles were indispensable to his survival. Observe carefully a small portion of his unrelenting extolment of divine laws: "You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently" (vs. 4); "I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments" (vs. 6); "Behold, I long for Your precepts" (vs. 40); "I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love" (vs. 47); "I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life" (vs. 93); "Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (vs. 104); "The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever" (vs. 160); "My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly. I keep Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You" (vss. 167-168).

To Fletcher, "love" directed toward one's fellow man is a materialistically defined love that he calls "personalism." "Personalism" is "the ethical view that the highest good, the summum bonum or first-order value, is human welfare and happiness" (1967, p. 33). Fletcher's ethical humanism is "a personalist devotion to people, not to things or abstractions such as 'laws' or general principles. Personal interests come first, before the natural or Scriptural or theoretical or general or logical or anything else" (p. 34, emp. added). What such assertions really mean in practical, behavioral terms is that, ultimately, human beings may do whatever they deem "good" or "best." A glance at Fletcher's illustrations shows that the most "loving" decisions are those that ease physical pain, alleviate hardship, lessen emotional suffering, or accommodate human desire and personal preference. For Fletcher, "evil" is physical imprisonment, separation from family, the hardship of unjust labor, an unpleasant marriage, or lack of commitment to a person (e.g., pp. 32,39). "Human happiness" is, by definition, what human beings think will make them happy—not what God says actually will bring true happiness—even in the midst of, and while enduring, unjust or unpleasant circumstances.

Sin, in situationism, is not "transgression of God's law" (1 John 3:4). Rather, "sin is the exploitation or use of persons" (p. 37). It is withholding what a person perceives to be the means to personal happiness. But this understanding of sin is a radical redefinition of love and happiness in comparison to the Bible. In contrast, the Scriptures make clear that "intrinsic evil on the purely physical level does not exist" and "neither pain nor suffering is intrinsically evil" (Warren, 1972, pp. 93,40). Since sin (i.e., violation of God's law) is the only intrinsic evil, "evil" and "good" exist only in relation to the ultimate will of God (pp. 39,41).

By Fletcher's definitions, many people in Bible history were not sinners as previously supposed, but were, in fact, mature, responsible individuals who acted lovingly: Eve (Genesis 3:1-6); Cain (Genesis 4:3); Lot and Lot's wife (Genesis 13:12; 19:16,26); Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3); the Israelites (Numbers 21:4-6); Balaam (Numbers 22-24); Saul (1 Samuel 13:9; 15:9,21); and Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6ff.). On the other hand, if situationism is correct, many persons in the Bible were not righteous, as is claimed, but were slaves to abstract rules and principles, and were unloving in their conduct toward their fellow man, including: Noah (Genesis 6; 2 Peter 2:5); Joseph (Genesis 39:7-12); Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:6-9);

Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-9); Joshua (Joshua 7:24-25); and John the baptizer (Mark 6:18-19). Here were people who set aside the preferences of their fellow man, ignored their contemporaries' desire for "happiness" and "self-fulfillment," and instead followed divine prescriptions—even though those precepts were considered to be contrary to the consensus view.

Taking into account the components of "the situation" as Fletcher recommends—"the end, means, motive, and foreseeable consequences" (1967, p. 25)—Uzzah would have to receive Fletcher's sanction as a loving, moral person (2 Samuel 6:1-7). His motive was unquestionably good, since he wanted to avoid the unpleasant end and foreseeable consequences of the Ark of the Covenant toppling from its precarious resting place. The means that Uzzah used were the only ones available to him at that particular instant in time. His only mistake, which resulted in his immediate execution by God, was his failure to give heed to the prefabricated, prescriptive, abstract, legalistic, absolute, metaphysical, ironbound "don't" of Numbers 4:15, —i.e., "don't touch!" [For a useful treatment of situation ethics, especially for young people, see Ridenour, 1969].

## SITUATIONISM ILLUSTRATED

The true nature of any false philosophy or ethical system is often apparent in the concrete examples that advocates set forth as illustrative of their position. Fletcher is no exception in this regard. He approves of divorce "if the emotional and spiritual welfare of both parents and children in a particular family can be served best" (1967, p. 23, emp. in orig.). He would approve of the suicide of a captured soldier under torture to avoid betraying comrades to the enemy (p. 15). Two additional instances are seen in the following comments. Fletcher said that he knew of a case, in which committing adultery foreseeably brought about the release of a whole family from a very unjust but entirely legal exploitation of their labor on a small farm which was both their pride and their prison. Still another situation could be cited in which a German mother gained her release from a Soviet prison farm and reunion with her family by means of an adulterous pregnancy. These actions would have the situationist's solemn but ready approval (p. 32).

Additional examples of situation ethics at work are seen in the statements: "Lying could be more Christian than telling the truth. Stealing could be better than respecting private property" (p. 34). Fletcher asks: "Is the girl who gives her chastity for her country's sake any less approvable than the boy who gives his leg or his life? No!" (p. 39). Further, a couple who cannot marry legally or permanently but live together faithfully and honorably and responsibly, are living in virtue—in Christian love. In this kind of Christian sex ethic, the essential ingredients are caring and commitment.... There is nothing against extramarital sex as such, in this ethic, and in some cases it is good (pp. 39-40, emp. in orig.).

Consider also the situation ethicist's view of abortion:

When anybody "sticks to the rules," even though people suffer as a consequence, that is immoral. Even if we grant, for example, that generally or commonly it is wrong or bad or undesirable to interrupt a pregnancy, it would nevertheless be right to do so to a conceptus following rape or incest, at least if the victim wanted an abortion (p. 36; cf. Hook, 1984, p. 34).

When one abandons the objective standard conveyed by the eternal God from Whom flows infinite goodness, the means for assessing human behavior is then "up for grabs," and is pitched into the subjective realm of human opinion in which "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Such a person will inevitably begin misrepresenting the biblical treatment of Christian liberty and freedom, and will maintain that "freedom in Christ" means being relieved of the "burden" of a "legal code."

The Bible certainly speaks of the wonderful freedom that one may enjoy in Christ. But biblical freedom is a far cry from the release from restriction, restraint, and deserved guilt touted by the antinomian agents of change (cf. Hook, 1984, pp. 43ff.). The Bible does not speak of the "flexibility and elasticity" of God's laws (pp. 29-31). Rather, with sweeping and precise terminology, Jesus articulated the sum and substance of exactly what it means to be "free in Christ." In a specific context in which He defended the validity of His own testimony (John 8:12-59), He declared the only basis upon which an individual may be His disciple. To be Christ's disciple, one must "continue" in His word (vs. 31). That is, one must live a life of obedience to the will of Christ (Warren, 1986, pp. 33-37). Genuine discipleship is gauged by one's persistent and meticulous compliance with the words of Jesus.

The freedom that Jesus offers through obedience to His truth is noted in His interchange with the Jews over slavery. Those who sin (i.e., transgress God's will—1 John 3:4) are slaves who may be set free only by permitting Christ's teachings to have free course within them (vs. 34-37). This kind of freedom is the only true freedom. Genuine freedom is achieved by means of "obedience to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). Freedom from sin and spiritual death is possible only by obedience to God (vs. 51).

## CONCLUSION

Probably no greater threat to the stability of society exists in our day than the humanistic, antinomian philosophy of situationism and its multi-faceted pluralistic and/or post-modernistic manifestations. It is part and parcel of the general

rebellion against the authority of God's Word that engulfs America. Vast numbers of people are living life and making decisions based upon their own subjective perceptions and personal feelings. For them, the concepts of right and wrong, truth and error are obscure, blurred, hazy, gray, and complex. What is wrong in one situation may be right and acceptable in another. Satan has done his job well. He has made great strides in American culture in the last half century in his effort to break down biblical values and moral absolutes. He has succeeded in replacing this framework with a tolerant, open, permissive attitude and outlook that refrains from passing judgment on anybody or anything. The "I'm OK, You're OK" perspective has been embedded firmly into American civilization.

The mindset of today's situationist is not new. We humans do not generally regard rules and regulations as positive phenomena. We usually perceive them as infringements on our freedom—deliberate attempts to restrict our behavior and interfere with our "happiness." Like children, we may have a tendency to display resentment and a rebellious spirit when faced with spiritual requirements. We may feel that God is being arbitrary and merely burdening our lives with haphazard, insignificant strictures. But God would never do that. He never has placed upon anyone any requirement that was inappropriate, unnecessary, or unfair. During the Israelites' final encampment on the plains of Moab prior to their entrance into Canaan, Moses articulated a most important principle: "The Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes...for our good always" (Deuteronomy 6:24, emp. added; cf. 10:13). God never would ask us to do anything that is harmful to us. He does not restrict us nor exert His authority over us in order to purposely make us unhappy. Quite the opposite! God knows exactly what will make us happy. Compliance with His Word will make a person happy (John 13:17; James 1:25), exalted (James 4:10), righteous (Romans 6:16; 1 John 3:7), and wise (Matthew 24:45-46; 7:24).

Those who wish to relieve themselves of restriction will continue to invent ways to circumvent the intent of Scripture. They will continue to "twist" (2 Peter 3:16) and "handle the word of God deceitfully" (2 Corinthians 4:2). They will exert pressure on everyone else to "back off," "lighten up," and embrace a more tolerant understanding of ethical conduct. But the "honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15) will "take heed how [he/she] hears" (vs.18). The good heart is the one who "reads...hears...and keeps those things which are written therein" (Revelation 1:3, emp. added). After all, no matter how negative they may appear to humans, no matter how difficult they may be to obey, they are given "for our good."

The Bible simply does not countenance situation ethics. Jesus always admonished people to "keep the commandments" (e.g., Matthew 19:17). He kept God's commands Himself—perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26). And He is "the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9, emp. added).

## REFERENCES

- Barna, George (2003), "Morality Continues to Decay," [On-line], URL: <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=152&Reference=F>.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1955), *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press).
- Brunner, Emil (1947), *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Chesser, Frank (2001), *The Spirit of Liberalism* (Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs).
- Cox, Harvey (1965), *The Secular City* (New York: MacMillan).
- Dungan, D.R. (1888), *Hermeneutics* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light).
- Fletcher, Joseph (1966), *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Fletcher, Joseph (1967), *Moral Responsibility* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Hook, Cecil (1984), *Free in Christ* (New Braunfels, TX: Privately published by author).
- Hook, Cecil (1990), *Free to Change* (New Braunfels, TX: Privately published by author).
- Lucado, Max (1996), *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas, TX: Word).
- McGarvey, J.W. (1910), *Biblical Criticism* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard).
- McGarvey, J.W. (1974 reprint), *Evidences of Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).
- Metzger, Bruce M. (1968), *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press), second edition.
- Metzger, Bruce M. (1971), *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Society).
- Niebuhr, Reinhold (1932), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's).
- Ridenour, Fritz (1969), *The Other Side of Morality* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books).
- Robinson, John A.T. (1963), *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Warren, Thomas B. (1972), *Have Atheists Proved There Is No God* (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press).
- Warren, Thomas B. (1986), *The Bible Only Makes Christians Only and the Only Christians* (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press).
- Woods, Guy N. (1989), *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).