

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CHRISTIAN ETHICS



# Introduction

New Testament scholar, Vern S. Poythress, PhD, is keenly aware that “American and European cultures are losing their roots in the Bible. As a result, the culture is disintegrating and terrible sins and sufferings crop up all around us.” And he is not the only one. Carl F.H. Henry expressed his concern about society as a whole in this way: “The problem of authority is one of the most deeply distressing concerns of contemporary civilization. Anyone who thinks that this problem specially or exclusively embarrasses Bible believers has not listened to the wild winds of defiance now sweeping over much of modern life. Respect for authority is being challenged on almost every front and in almost every form.”



# Introduction

However, this is nothing new. In 1611, John Donne warned that we were “entering unknown and dangerous waters.” And so he wrote, “’Tis all in peeces (pieces), all cohaerence (coherence) gone.” In our own lifetime, American novelist, poet, cultural critic, and farmer Wendell Berry observed that “the old union of beauty, goodness and truth is broken.” The question is, “Why?” Why is culture disintegrating? Why such rebellion, lawlessness, defiance, and rejection of authority?

In his 1985 national best-selling book, *Habits of the Heart*, American sociologist Robert Bellah (1927-2013) noted that “only gradually did what we have called ontological individualism, the idea that the individual is the only firm reality, become widespread.”



# Introduction

If the transcendental virtues (beauty, goodness, and truth) are broken, as Berry claims, where do we look? And, how do we answer Francis Schaeffer's question, *How Should We Then Live?* His keen philosophical and theological mind clearly saw that "people's presuppositions (the basic way an individual looks at life) lay a grid for all they bring forth into the external world. Their presuppositions also provide the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their decisions." His own position was that "the biblical message is truth and it demands a commitment to truth." If his statement is true, it means that we must "live under God's revelation. Here there are morals, values, and meaning, which are not just the result of statistical averages."



# Introduction

Since God has clearly spoken through Creation, His only-begotten Son, the *imago Dei*, and His inspired, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word, what accounts for people, even Christians, living independently of the triune God without the moral compass of His commandments? Why are there so many diverse ethical views about important issues and confusion in decision-making? A partial answer is provided by Dr. Wayne Grudem: “I am concerned that teaching about ethics has been neglected in many evangelical churches today – partly because the issues seem complex, partly because pastors do not want to be accused of sounding ‘legalistic,’ and partly because the surrounding non-Christian culture is hostile to Christian moral values, so anyone who teaches biblical ethics is likely to be criticized by unbelievers.”

# Introduction

For whatever reason, this could be the first time that you have ever been exposed to teaching on Christian ethics. If you listened to my own personal story in my introduction to ethics last week, you were exposed to language, ideas, and concepts which may have been a bit intimidating. But take heart. Our study of Christian ethics will be a delight to you. We will begin slowly and build from the ground up. My intention will be to make the complex simple, for God intended for us to know Him and to do what is pleasing in His sight. As He promised, “the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov. 4:18). So, let’s begin our journey down that path.

# Our First Step: Becoming Aware of the Language of Ontological Individualism

- “I really feel this is the right thing to do.”
- “You have the answer within you. Find that, and you will know what to do.”
- “Let your conscience be your guide.”
- “No one will even notice. Who cares? Just do it.”
- “Go ahead. The majority of people feel the same way as you.”
- “If it’s done with love, it must be right.”
- “It all depends on the situation.”
- “You are free to do whatever is in your best interest.”
- “My facts are different than your facts.”



# Our Second Step: What Is Christian Ethics?

- “Ethics is theology, viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts, and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not” (John Frame).
- “Biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behavior which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces” (John Murray).
- “Christian-theistic ethics deals with man’s *summum bonum* (highest good), man’s standard of living, and with man’s ethical motive, and obtains its light on all these problems from the Scriptures” (Cornelius Van Til).

# What Is Christian Ethics?

“Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us about which acts, attitudes, and personal character traits receive God’s approval, and which do not?’”

[Note: Grudem indicates that his definition is adapted from John M. Frame’s definition as given in his book, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*].

The aim of ethics, as Grudem states, is “to collect and synthesize the teaching of all the relevant Bible passages about that topic and then to apply that teaching wisely to various life situations.”



**Wayne Grudem, PhD**  
Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies  
Phoenix Seminary

# A Concise Definition of Ethics



**Dr. John M. Frame**

1939 – (80 years old)

Reformed Theological Seminary

Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus

**“Living under God’s law,  
in God’s world,  
in the presence of God himself.”**

# Our Third Step: A Practical Model

When I studied Hebrew for the first time, Professor Jack Scott wanted to move our class into the actual translation of the Hebrew text as soon as possible. While other language professors want students to learn the alphabet, word definitions, grammar and syntax before translation, Dr. Scott had decided that his method would be to have us translating Scripture almost from the beginning. In short, it worked. I think all of us were surprised that we were actually translating I Samuel 3 in such a short time. Then, as we continued throughout the year, he added to our linguistic knowledge. I have decided to employ his method in the field of ethics. Therefore, we will begin with a workable model that you will be able to use this coming week.

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

**DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Christian Ethics is Triperspectival**

**SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

**EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE**





# The Relationship Between All Three Perspectives

1. Every ethical decision involves the application of a law (norm, principle) to a situation (facts), by a person (self).
2. The situation, law, and person are part of an organic whole, together revealing God's Lordship.
3. Each perspective covers the same ground with a different emphasis.
4. The knowledge of God's law (norm), the world (situation), and the self (existential) are interdependent and ultimately identical.
5. All three perspectives represent the same knowledge viewed from three different "angles."
6. Scripture must interpret Scripture; we must read every part of the Bible in the light of the rest.

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

## DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

### Human Knowledge

1. Knowledge of God's norms
2. Knowledge of our situation
3. Knowledge of ourselves

God's  
Authority

**HUMAN  
KNOWLEDGE**

God's  
Control

God's  
Presence

None can be achieved adequately without the others. Each *includes* the others. Each, therefore, is a "perspective" on the whole of human knowledge.

**SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

**EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE**

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

## DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

- What does God say about it?
- What does God's Word tell me to do?
- What norms, laws, and principles has God revealed about it?
- What is authoritative?
- God's will revealed through nature, history, conscience, theophany, prophecy, and Scripture.

Standards  
Principles  
Laws  
Norms  
"Oughts"

The word **deontological** is derived from the Greek word **deon**, which means "that which is binding, needful, right, proper, duty." Deontology, then, is "that branch of knowledge which deals with moral obligations" (OED).

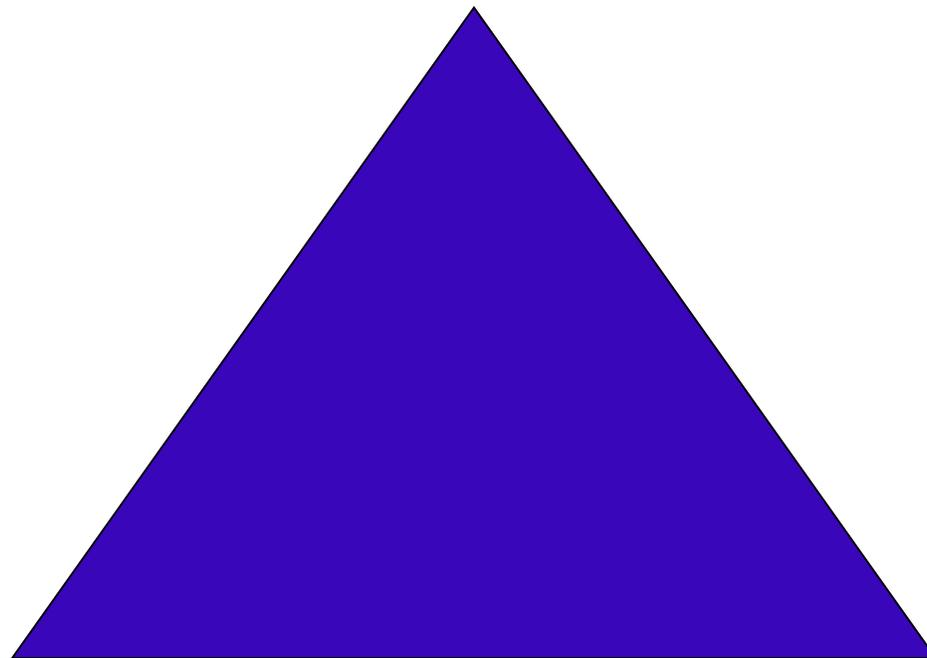
SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

# What “Binds” You?

## DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Book of Mormon
- Parental Messages
- Old Testament (Jews)
- Bhagavad-Gita (Krishna)
- Koran (Islam)
- The Sayings of Confucius
- Vedas (Hindu)
- Pali Canon (Buddhism)
- University Professors

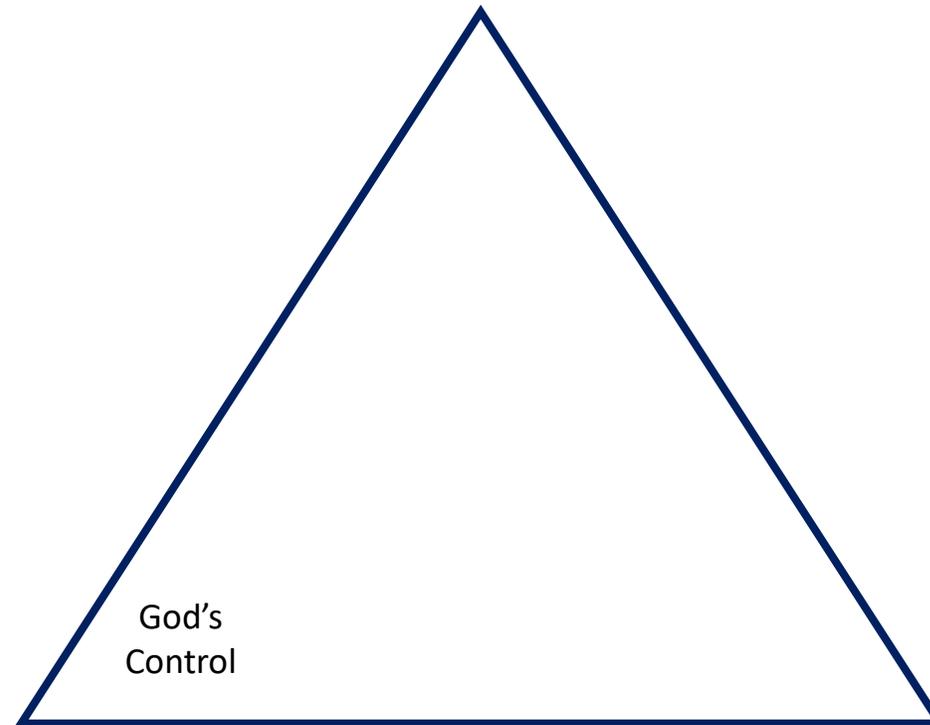


- Cultural Norms
- Government Laws
- New Age Philosophy
- Ayn Rand
- Marx
- Freud
- Benjamin Franklin
- Voltaire
- Bible

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

- Knowing God involves knowing His world – studying it.
- What are the facts of the situation?
- What are the qualities of the object? What are the God-honoring uses for the object?
- What do I learn by studying God's world (natural revelation), including His mighty acts of creation, providence, and redemption?
- God wants His people to apply His Word to their own situations.

DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

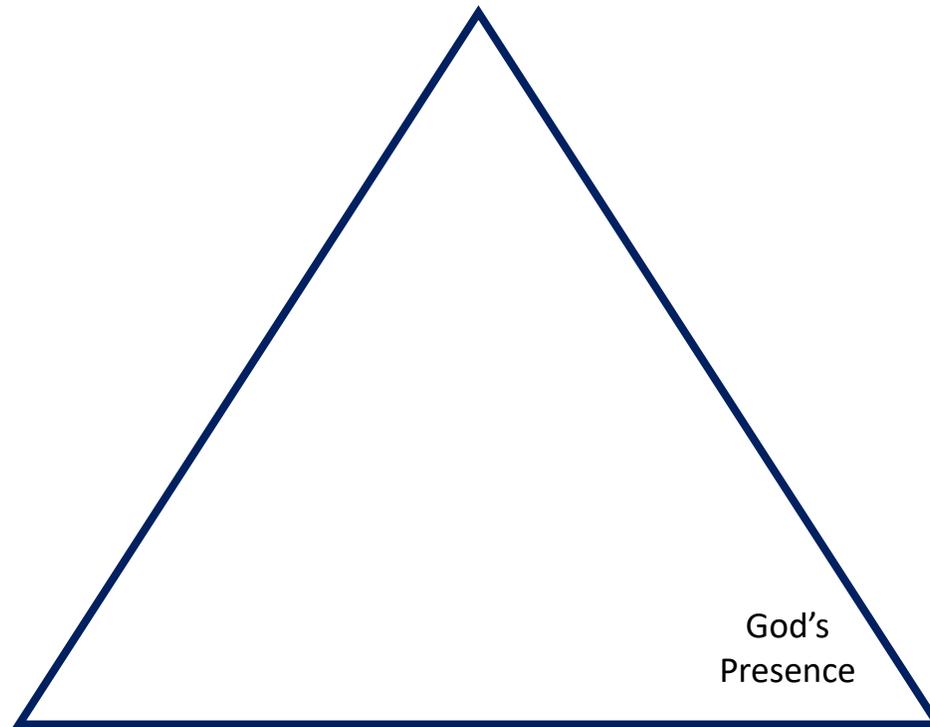


SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



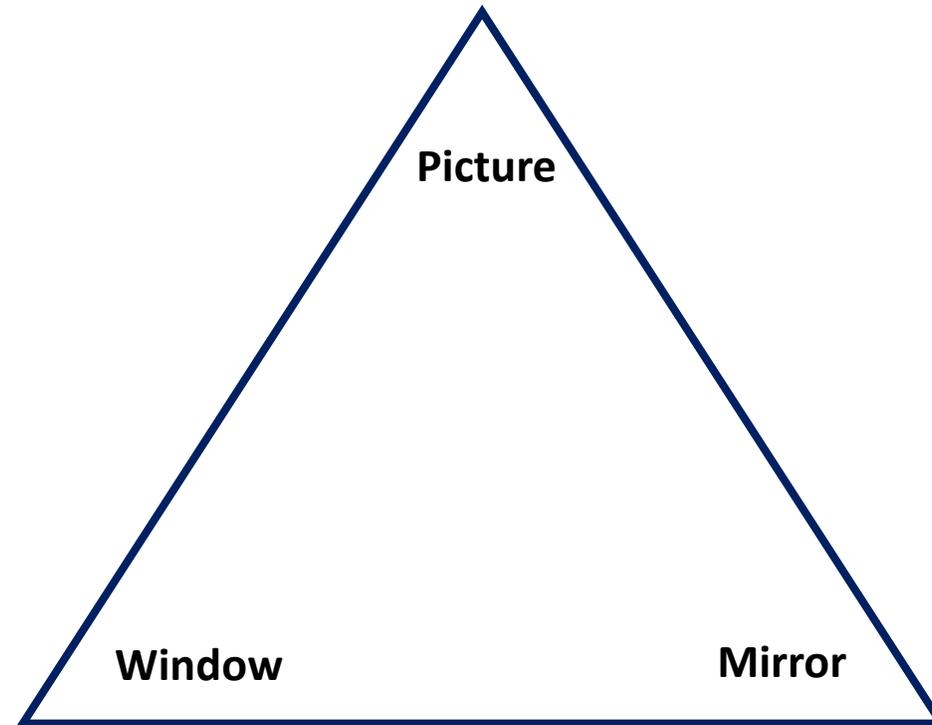
SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

- “I cannot know myself rightly until I see myself as God’s image” (Frame).
- How am I a part of the problem and a part of the solution?
- What am I thinking, feeling, believing?
- What are my motives?
- Will I choose to obey?
- Have I prayed?

# The Triangle of Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

**DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**



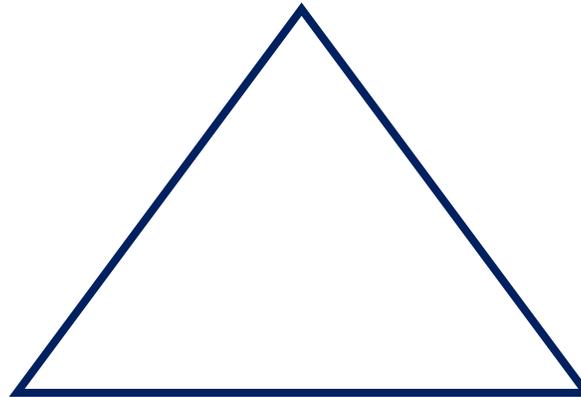
**SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

**EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE**

# Exercise: Is Drinking Wine Forbidden or Pleasing to God?

## DEONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

What does the whole Bible say about drinking wine?



## SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

What are the facts of the situation?

## EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

What am I thinking, feeling, believing?

# Wine in the Old and New Testaments

- Matt. 9:17
- Mk. 2:22; 15:23
- Lk. 1:15; 5:37-38; 7:33; 10:34
- Jn. 2:3,9,10; 4:46
- Rom. 14:21
- Eph. 5:18
- I Tim. 3:8
- Titus 2:3
- Rev. 6:6; 14:8,10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3; 19:15

There are six Hebrew words for wine in the Old Testament: one for mixed wine, one for new wine, two for red wine, one for strong wine, one for sweet wine, two for winebibber, one for wine fat, and three for winepress.

# Some Questions for Consideration

1. What is wine, how is it made and aged, and what are its functions?
2. Who is drinking the wine and with whom is he/she with?
3. What affect does the wine have on its consumer?
4. What is the condition of the person drinking the wine?
5. Where is the person drinking?
6. When is the person drinking?
7. How much is the person drinking?
8. Does the situation call for the person to drink wine, to invite a friend to drink wine, to forbid another to drink wine, etc.?
9. What is excess? What is moderation?
10. Is the person drinking wine violating the law?