

A matter of principle

IT'S OFTEN ASSUMED that normal human beings instinctively understand the difference between right and wrong, and the way we behave towards others is embedded in our character – that we either have moral principles, or we don't.

We may have been brought up believing that the government only acts for the good of its citizens and corporations work for the good of all people. Yet, unfortunately, history tells us a different story.

The behaviour of mill owners in England during and after the industrial revolution was disgraceful and their only consideration was the bottom line. Some of these men claimed to be religious, attending church every Sunday, yet their refusal to put workers above financial gain showed they exercised little moral fortitude.

Men and women marched to two world wars, often to their deaths, because they were told they were showing allegiance to their "king and country". Yet those who instigated the conflict often showed little allegiance to their people. Their aims (destroying the "enemy" and thus gaining more power) were based on political rather than egalitarian principles.

But when the Vietnam War became a reality things changed. On this occasion people from all walks of life saw it as their duty to voice their moral concerns, despite the threat of jail. Protests saw thousands take to the streets in every capital city in Australia and across America. It was a defining moment in history and since then, in such democratic countries, people have not been afraid to speak against the government.

Standing up for what we believe to be right, despite and in spite of the consequences, is the dilemma we must all face at some time, Canadian ethicist Dr James Read tells *Warcry*. As an ethicist Dr Read attempts to formulate principles of moral behaviour into a code we can all understand and benefit from.

Jesus Christ spoke of loving others just as much as we love ourselves. How does our behaviour to each other reflect the moral and ethical teaching of Jesus?

Pam Ling
Editor-in-chief

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Warcry Mission Statement

This publication aims to share the love and message of Jesus Christ in an informative and informal manner. It also serves to raise the profile of The Salvation Army as both a relevant Church and community organisation.

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ETHICS

WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

6 WHOEVER COINED THE PHRASE "LIFE WASN'T MEANT TO BE EASY" MUST HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT ETHICS. BUT, ACCORDING TO EMINENT CANADIAN ETHICIST DR JAMES READ, IT'S HARDLY IN OUR INTEREST TO KEEP ETHICS BURIED IN THE TOO-HARD BASKET. BY BARRY GITTINS

> LABELLING PEOPLE'S ACTIONS "good" or "bad" is an inherently flawed process. We have a limited understanding of ourselves, let alone others!

But if we're going to live in community, cheek by jowl, then we have to know what we are willing to accept from each other and what we will reject. What rules do we apply to this game of existence we play every day?

When you take time to think about life there's a lot of room to manoeuvre. Take, for example, these thorny situations.

A clergyman plots to assassinate his head of government. A woman goes to the bed of another man to try and spare her husband's life. People rebel against their rulers and use terrorism and guerilla tactics to gain their ends.

In the first scenario, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was part of a conspiracy to end Hitler's life during the Second World

War. Bonhoeffer paid for his choice with his life. Sarah, wife of the Jewish patriarch Abraham, twice faced the choice of sacrificing her freedom and dignity to save those she loved. And nations such as the US, Israel or South Africa would not exist if their citizenry had not rebelled against the status quo of "lawful" control.

The way we live our lives, the choices we make, and the reasoning we use to justify our choices – this is the stuff that lends flesh to our purest dreams.

It is how communities agree on an accepted morality; a standard of living that is agreed to by the majority of people.

Without care, without serious consideration of people's rights and responsibilities, we can come unstuck in those areas of life where there is no easy answer – where ambiguity's "grey" replaces clarity's uneasy "black and white".

That's where Dr James Read (right) comes into the picture. Dr Read is the executive director of The Salvation Army's Ethics Centre in Manitoba, Canada, and a bioethics consultant. He is an "ethicist", or one who teaches ethics.

Read is a gentle, softly spoken man. He sits peacefully and holds your gaze with interest; keen to understand another perspective. His humble, quiet persona lends both a marked contrast and a sense of authenticity to his passionate, provocative message.

"I think that we have to name evil deeds for what they are," Read says quietly. "It comes back to being committed to protecting and supporting those who can't or won't speak for themselves."

Read, who obtained his Doctorate in Philosophy from the prestigious University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), is "one of a kind", heading the only such institution the Salvos have throughout the world.

Yet, for all his academic qualifications, communication skills and hard work, Read's message is a simple one: "Our society needs people who can discern between right and wrong."

When it comes to living in a way that can help others, Read points to the importance of corporate groups such as Christians.

Read says the church is called to bring Jesus Christ's message of love, respect and peace to a world that needs to hear it. The question is: "Can the church participate in social debate about ethics without getting all preachy and irritatingly holier-than-thou?"

Again, Read is positive, even optimistic, about the way Christians can act as helpful change agents in our societies. And that means being open to social needs while remaining true to the Bible's relevant messages.

It's a distinction that Read finds in one of his favourite Bible verses: "Jesus tells his friends they need to be 'as wise as serpents

and as innocent as doves'. Without losing its own moral compass, the Bible, the church needs to have an external focus on those around it.

"We need to be on the lookout for those who are being overlooked and silenced, no matter how kindly or unintentionally. On the whole, the church does fulfil that role."

Read's experience has taught him that the church has a role beyond being perceived as the "conscience of a nation, which can sound really self-righteous and priggish". Everybody, he says, should be aware of the



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opportunity and the need to participate – to be authentically involved in helping their fellow human beings.

"The church has to participate, before it gives its opinions and beliefs. We have to show a respect for the individual's rights, a concern for the distribution of good. We don't merit a voice in our community if we stand by while people are forced to the margins of that community."

Acknowledging his need for a greater understanding of the Australian scene, Read draws parallels between the reconciliation process in Australia and in his own homeland, Canada.

"In our case, there is a process where wrongs against the Inuit and other indigenous peoples have been acknowledged. We need to build relationships, to see that

all human beings share in a common journey. When you hurt my sister, when you hurt my brother, you hurt me.

"I believe that Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation. That was Christ's mission. We are aiming for a world where there are no pecking orders, no unfair hierarchies and we don't exclude people from a state of wellbeing. And that's a universal role, too, that goes through the church and beyond the church to the countries, societies and communities in which we live."

When asked to describe his perspective on "situational ethics", where there are no absolutes and (in a mildly Machiavellian way) the ends justify the means, Read wisely takes the time to think his answer through.

"As a Christian, I believe that you cannot know the ethical thing to do unless you know the situation. But I also believe there are inherent values. We do well when we remember the words of Jesus, who cautioned us about judging people. The same measures we use to judge others should and will be brought to bear against ourselves.

"For me, the most important value is 'agape' – the Greek word for God's love. Agape is something we need to be able to understand and live out. I think some people, wrongly, say that Christian ethics is primarily a matter of attending to the needs of others without reciprocation, or any interplay between us. That's not the fullness of what the Bible says.

"The church is called to be 'in the world but not of it'. We are dual citizens, of this life and a life to come. But that's a different state than being resident aliens. There's no excuse to ignore people's pain or tolerate injustice.

"I don't think the church is called to embrace isolation. I think that kind of separateness, without any interaction between the church and the world, is wrong. The church is not called to be separate or apolitical."

Read readily acknowledges the flawed relationships within the various Christian denominations, and that the holy institution sometimes lacks a common perspective and, consequently, a united voice.

He also concedes the church has a chequered history, with a proven human tendency to be fallible. Among the right decisions, such as the protection of the innocent and the campaign against slavery, there have been wrong decisions and weak concessions to states, principalities and governments.

But within that flawed expression, Read says, the church finds its voice. "Behind our human machinations and plans, our failings and achievements, there is a greater hand working." The hand of God, Read believes, can help guide our thoughts and actions – if we have the courage to pursue the right path.