

# Ethical Behavior and Communication

Considerations, Caution, and Commitments

July 31, 2019

A rule-of-thumb definition for ethics is “how we behave when we decide we belong together.”<sup>1</sup> Society generally understands that a commitment to ethical behavior and communication ensures the welfare of all interacting members and subgroups in the larger association. For a church or faith-based organization, the Bible underscores this commitment with high expectations and supreme motivations. In a letter to a congregation he founded, the apostle Paul wrote, “For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.”<sup>2</sup>

This brief paper on ethical behavior and communication was born out of study and lessons learned from churches and faith organizations that have experienced trouble when one or more of their members crossed the threshold of tolerable conduct, in actions or words. The circumstances of breaches of ethics vary widely, and the offenses may take many forms. In general, unethical behaviors usually refer to harmful interpersonal interactions, deceit, and theft within the context of the association. As the Scriptures clearly teach, unethical communications include gossip, slander, intentional misrepresentations, and other means of disparaging someone, either by spoken word or in writing.

Even the New Testament church that began in Acts 2 faced a major ethical matter, which was recorded in Acts 5. It is not unusual that highly familial organizations and associations eventually need to clarify their ethical standards. The highly missional orientation of churches and charities brings a bounty of goodwill and relational trust in their beginnings, therefore attention to formal standards might initially be lacking. Over time there will be breaches of conduct that come along with necessary changes, unpredictable events, organizational drift, conflicting aspirations, and other factors. It becomes necessary to ensure that there is consistency in the application of standards.

In order to uphold biblical ethics, to honor God and each other, there is great value in seeing church and faith-based entities as both family *and* community, bound by relationship commitments *and* principles. There is debate over to what degree the church is a family, institution, and community. But it is not in dispute that the church possesses a governing purpose of existence, essential principles, and basic processes for problem-solving, decision-making, moderating topics, and managing trouble.

There are two uncomfortable truths in relation to ethics. First, members sometimes need to talk about one another. Conversations about plans, hiring, firing, evaluating decisions, reporting problems, assessing situations, and the alignment of individuals with opportunities invariably will lead to discussions about people. It is in these situations that risk of a communication infraction is highest. Second, we will sometimes experience unpleasant behaviors, either as a perpetrator, victim, or both. Therefore, communications and conduct require ethical boundaries, defined here as “moral principles that govern a person's behavior, conducting an activity, and communications.”

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<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be?* Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Kindle Edition, 213.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:21, New International Version.

The following general considerations, caution, and commitments are meant to support, not replace, quality employee contracts, conduct and conflict-of-interest policies, confidentiality agreements, and internal processes of the congregation or faith charity.

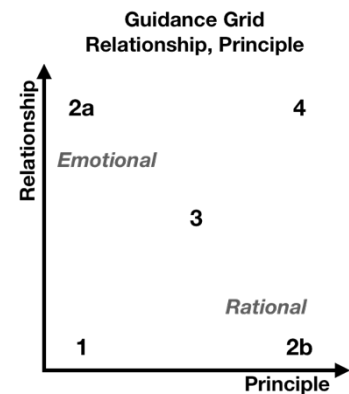
## Considerations

There are three broad categories of harm—financial, sexual, and psychological. Financial harm could be theft, misappropriation of funds, wrongful termination, sabotaging opportunities, or reputational damage that affects someone’s income. Sexual harm includes inappropriate affection, use of power to attempt to coerce a sexual encounter, and a sexual encounter itself.

Psychological harm can seem abstract and subjective, though not to the alleged victim. Such harm includes humiliation, criticism, control/shaming, manipulation, accusations, exploitation, blaming, insults, bullying, put-downs, gaslighting, slights, disparaging conduct, discrediting, libel, gossip, slander, maligning, defaming, denigrating, casting aspersions on, and lack of respect or indignities based on race, language, gender, marital status, et cetera.

## Caution

There is a natural tension in organizations that possess familial features, such as churches and charities. It has to do with the value one puts on maintaining relationships versus maintaining principles. The high currency in relationships leads members of the faith organization to win over an offender, or occasionally show mercy, rather than merely punishing the individual (Matthew 18:15ff; James 2:12-13). And being principled means not providing favors or cover for individuals based on status, role, name, likability, race, or gender. Consider the apostle’s counsel, “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism” (1 Timothy 5:21).



Using the Guidance Grid illustration, it is helpful to see zones that our churches and charities might operate within while managing problems.

A high value in relationships engenders trust, closeness, being able to read each other, intimacy, feelings of unity, and agape—self-sacrificing love. A high value in principle is symbolized by due process, detached factfinding, use of objective guides, and abiding by North Star values such as basic biblical morality—even at the cost of popularity and prized relationships.

Zone 1 is the place where an entity neither cares deeply about people nor values following sound principles. Zone 2a puts relationships above principle. There is the risk of a “bro factor,” group protection, sentimentality, favoritism, nepotism, and so forth. Insiders declare their harmony, but outsiders might not “feel the love.” Zone 2b puts principle above a commitment to developing relationships, pursuing unity and cooperation, and being merciful. Outsiders might find the insiders as transactional, cold, litigious, and self-preserving. Both zones 2a and 2b bring different but significant weaknesses, and individuals who operate within them don’t see their lack of biblical principles (2a) or lack of love ethic (2b).

Zone 3 is where under-functioning congregations and charities find themselves. The appearance of partiality is not so severe, and principles are not so violated that there is reason for alarm. However, in this zone there is neither sufficient quality of relationships nor high enough principles to consistently navigate serious issues.

Zone 4 is an achievable and biblical zone where people of faith can and should operate. When we possess brotherly love and high integrity, we can push past discomfort and hold ourselves accountable for serving by just principles *and* loving relationships. Hosea the prophet called God's people into this both/and convergence—"You must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always" (Hosea 12:6).

The Guidance Grid could be used to discuss how to deal with people in each quadrant, or as a self-discovery exercise: "How would you know if your style is inhibiting you from exhibiting ethical behavior?" It would be easy to name familiar individuals from historical or current events who consistently operated in one of the zones and discuss the consequences of their choices.

## Commitments

Churches and other faith-based organizations maintain their wholeness through integrating Christ's commands to love with a commitment to continually adhere to scriptural principles of morality and justice.

Christians are called to the highest standard of ethics to honor God. The following commitments of biblical ethics are worthy of recurring discussion and reflection.

I/we make a commitment to...

consistently treat others the way I want to be treated (Matthew 7:12)

respect the boundaries of sexual purity and marriage that are established in Scripture (Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Timothy 5:2)

avoid unnecessary activities or speech that would cause someone to stumble and or be caused harm (Luke 17:1-2)

go to a sister or brother who has something against me or someone I have something against and attempting to win them over, before I attempt to discuss the matter with others (Matthew 5:23-25, 18:15)

get both sides of a story when I hear allegations, prior to drawing conclusions of guilt and repeating the story as fact (Proverbs 18:17)

maintain confidentiality (Proverbs 20:19)

oppose slander (Proverbs 10:18)

to be honest about financial gains and motivations (Proverbs 13:11; 1 Timothy 6:10)

manage the Lord's resources in a way that is consistent with the higher expectations and practices understood by the broader community, especially the law (2 Corinthians 8:21)

make efforts to earnestly reconcile matters, rather than giving up quickly (Proverbs 16:6; Romans 12:18, 14:19)

embracing timeless scriptural obligations rather than compromising for the sake of personal convenience, or out of fear of others (Psalms 25:21)

disclose conscious biases that may affect how I/we or relationally close individuals might unduly benefit, or others might be hurt, during important conversations and decision-making (Proverbs 22:16; 2 Corinthians 4:2; Romans 12:17; 1 Peter 5:2-3)

That last commitment refers to a conflict of interest, defined as “a situation in which a person is in a position to derive personal benefit from actions or decisions made in their official capacity.” A breach of ethics in a conflict of interest is most likely to occur when someone engages in an activity that benefits them (or their close relationships) without disclosing or factoring in significant relationship history. A similar breach is acting in a way that will likely harm an individual, such as unjustified termination, without disclosing negative relationship history.

Unethically acting in one’s own interests is most likely to happen during planning; in reporting events; while hiring, firing, or making a recommendation; or in delivering a testimony when there is clear and unacknowledged partiality. Being partial or biased is not wrong or problematic in itself, but it is unethical not to account for prejudiced leverages of power and position that originate from one’s relationships or personal gains.

Other examples of unethical accounting for personal interests include situations in which a leader may, without full disclosure, expect congregants to purchase a book they’ve authored and will profit from; or they may pressure employees to enter into a landlord-tenant relationship by leasing a property owned by the leader; or the leader may lean on the organization to hire their family member; or they may otherwise exploit church resources for their own financial gain. There can be mitigating circumstances in these types of situations, in which case the actions can be reviewed and approved so as to avoid risk to any of the parties or any appearance of favoritism.

One of the most damaging breaches of ethics occurs when parties covertly propagate the relationship ecosystem with one side of a story in such a way that a certain perception becomes widely mistaken for reality. This wrong sometimes occurs along with “information gathering,” which refers to the process of purposefully gathering information in order to frame a negative view of someone. As a result, an individual’s work or character can be disparaged before the victim has a chance to defend themselves from aspersions, gossip, and slander. As Charles Spurgeon once said, “If you want truth to go round the world you must hire an express train to pull it; but if you want a lie to go round the world, it will fly: it is as light as a feather, and a breath will carry it. It is well said in the old proverb, ‘A lie will go ’round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.’”<sup>3</sup>

The best ways to make sure that the commitments are lived by is to talk about them, role-play scenarios involving ethical vulnerabilities, invite open dialogue, and have good procedures for qualified individuals to investigate matters. Ultimately, ethical commitments in faith organizations are linked to spirituality because our words and deeds should be regulated by Jesus’ command, “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”



The upheaval experienced throughout many of the International Churches of Christ during the early 2000s would not have occurred had there not been significant ethical lapses in leadership. Since that time there have been more eyes on areas where vulnerabilities previously existed, but we would benefit from greater resolve to evaluate our preparedness for ethical lapses in other areas.

The considerations of ethical distinctions among financial, sexual, and psychological categories help us to be watchful. The caution against being too focused on relationship or principle at the expense of the other reminds us to be consistent. And the scriptural commitments will help us transform our errors, preserve our wholeness, and distinguish our character.

This primer is not merely academic. Over the last decade there have been highly publicized breaches of ethics among churches, charities, and parachurch organizations. The large Mars Hill

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<sup>3</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Gems from Spurgeon*, Ichthus Publications. Kindle Edition.

congregation in Seattle, and two Chicago-area megachurches—the Willow Creek Church and the Harvest Bible Chapel—all experienced a major free fall stemming from serious ethical breaches. Within a year of each heartbreaking public disclosure involving their leader’s sexual misconduct (Willow Creek) or financial misconduct (Harvest Bible Chapel) or abusive and duplicitous conduct (Mars Hill), the congregations either dissolved, or the pastors and elders resigned. Each of these flagship congregations was leading or influencing hundreds of other congregations.

As we search our consciences and examine the Scriptures while leading spiritual endeavors, ethics is a topic we ignore at our peril. And the opposite is true. As we pay appropriate attention to our convictions, we will possess God’s favor and preserve our most cherished undertakings.