

# Situational Ethics

When Jesus Christ returns to Earth, He desires His Church to be “*a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing*” (Ephesians 5:27). But in recent decades, many churchgoers have adopted unbiblical liberal moral philosophies and standards and live lives little different from non-churchgoers. Many of these churchgoers claim to be born-again of the Holy Spirit but they have worldly attitudes to absolute truth and absolute rights and wrongs.

Romans 14:1-13 reveals that God does not have one absolute standard about some matters. But in most moral matters, the Bible shows He does have absolute standards involving black and white choices.

Contrary to this Biblical approach is the modern humanistic philosophy called *situational ethics*. Situational ethics teaches there are no absolute rights and wrongs and there are no absolute commands which humans must obey. This philosophy says there are so many supposedly justified exceptions about sex outside marriage, stealing and other moral issues, that we can only give people flexible guidelines but never any rules to follow.

According to situational ethics, what is right in one situation or set of circumstances may be wrong in another situation or circumstance. Under this popular philosophy, right and wrong is determined by changeable human customs and standards and not by God’s commands and teachings in His written Word.

In 1995, 35% of adult Americans claimed to be born-again.<sup>1</sup> Also in 1994, 70% of Americans stated they “consistently allow (their) lives to be guided by the Holy Spirit”.<sup>2</sup> But in 1998, 66% of these supposedly born-again Christians believed there was no such a thing as absolute moral truth.<sup>3</sup> This means that in 1998, two-thirds of supposedly “born-again” Christians in the U.S. followed situational ethics and/or similar worldly philosophies instead of having Biblical absolute standards to many moral issues. This is even though a large percentage of these followers of situation ethics claimed to be consistently guided by the Holy Spirit.

Commenting on the philosophy of situational ethics, Elwell’s “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology” says: “Nygren’s summary, ‘Where love is, no other precepts (or commands) are required’, enshrines the theme of situational ethics. In its popularized form, situation ethics does not, however, depend upon Christian insights. Its chief exponent, Joseph Fletcher, quotes scriptural phases and precedents whenever convenient, and cites eight ‘proof texts’ for his ‘love norm’, including words of Jesus about the great commandment and Paul on love’s fulfilling the law, but he sees nothing particularly different or unique in a Christian’s choices...Moreover, Fletcher rejects all revealed norms but the command to love. Nothing outside a situation, such as historical revelation, can enter into a situation to prejudice it. Jesus **had no rules or system of values**; revered principles, even the Ten Commandments, may be thrown aside if they conflict with love. To break the seventh commandment (about adultery) may be good: it depends whether love is fully served. Sexual intercourse before marriage – if the decision is made ‘Christianly’ – could be right. There is no personal ethic, since morality rests on love-relationship: which makes the Sermon on the Mount largely superfluous...‘Faith working through love’ offers a

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, “Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators”, Word, Dallas, 1996, page 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 67.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, “The Second Coming of the Church”, Word Publishing, Nashville, 1998, page 123.

*foundation for the love norm, but it is not essential; a sincere, intelligent, and wise man may reject Christ without affecting his situationist morality.”*<sup>4</sup>

Situational ethics is a ridiculous contradictory philosophy which is based on the illogical statement: “*It is absolutely right that there is not one thing which is absolutely right*”.

## **God’s possible suggestions for us maybe to obey some of the time**

The tragic result of so many churchgoers interpreting the commands of the New Covenant according to non-Christian ethical philosophies like situational ethics, American pragmatism and pagan natural law philosophies is that they change Jesus’ Words in John 14:21: “***He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me***” to “He who has My possible suggestions and considers maybe obeying some of these if this suits his reasoning, situations and practical circumstances, it is he who loves Me.”

## **Most Uniting Church leaders follow the apostate Joseph Fletcher**

A Uniting Church minister who put up with increasing sin and compromise in the Uniting Church in Australia for many years, recently left this group over the final nail they hammered in their coffin – ordaining homosexual ministers.

This minister told me that the compromising liberal Uniting Church ministers and leaders who agreed to this above abomination, label as “legalists” anyone who opposes homosexuality and the ordination of homosexual ministers. This is evidence these liberal Uniting Church leaders are followers of the founder of situational ethics, Joseph Fletcher – a man who ended up turning from Jesus Christ.

Fletcher’s gradual turning from Jesus Christ over many years typifies the turning from Jesus Christ of the majority of leaders of the Uniting Church in Australia over many years.

The same Uniting Church minister who recently left his decaying religious church, said that the liberal executive leaders of the Uniting Church claim that anyone in the Uniting Church who dares to challenge the sins in the Uniting Church, are accused of committing the sin of judging and are strongly disciplined by their executive leaders.

But then the same executive leaders never discipline Uniting Church ministers who commit adultery.

## **The hypocritical situational ethics of liberal pagan Romans**

In his writing “The Shows”, Tertullian (155-220 A.D.) wrote about the hypocritical standards by which pagans or heathens in Roman times decided what was good and evil: “*The heathen, who have not a full revelation of the truth, for they are not taught of God, hold a thing evil and good as it suits self-will and passion, making that which is good in one place evil in another, and that which is evil in one place in another good. So it strangely happens, that the same man who can scarcely in public lift up his tunic, even when necessity of nature presses him, takes it off in the circus, as if bent on exposing himself before everybody; the father who carefully protects, and guards his virgin daughter’s ears from every polluting word, takes her to the theatre himself, exposing her to all its vile words and attitudes; he, again, who in the streets lays hands on or covers with reproaches the bawling pugilist, in*

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<sup>4</sup> Elwell, page 1020.

*the arena gives all encouragement to combats of a much more serious kind; and he who looks with horror on the corpse of one who has died under the common law of nature, in the amphitheatre gazes down with most patient eyes on bodies all mangled and torn and smeared with their own blood; nay, the very man who comes to the show, because he thinks murderers ought to suffer for their crime, drives the unwilling gladiator to the murderous deed with rods and scourges; and one who demands the lion for every manslayer of deeper dye, will have the staff for the savage swordsman, and rewards him with the cap of liberty. Yes and he must have the poor victim back again, that he may get a sight of his face – with zest inspecting near at hand the man whom he wished torn in pieces at safe distance from him: so much the more cruel he if that was not his wish.”<sup>5</sup>*

Tertullian records that the pagan Romans decided what was good and evil or right and wrong on the basis of what suited their own self-will and evil passions in each situation. In other words, the Romans decided what was right and wrong on the basis of a philosophy which was similar to the modern evil ethical system of situational ethics.

Note that Tertullian quotes the following examples of gross hypocrisy among Roman pagans in the 100's and 200's A.D.:

1. Many Roman males would not expose their genitals in many public places even if they urgently needed to pass urine but at the circus or amphitheatre some would expose their genitals before large numbers of males and females.
2. Many pagan Roman fathers would guard and protect their virgin daughters from hearing immoral talk but would then take them to Roman theatres where they would be bathed in continual filth.
3. Many Romans would look with horror on a corpse of a person who had died of natural causes, but then at the amphitheatre would gaze at the mangled torn bodies of gladiators.
4. Many Romans would say murderers should suffer death for their crime, but would force gladiators, most of whom were not murderers, to murder other gladiators.

## **False arguments used to try to justify situational ethics**

When I was at university, I read philosophy books which argued that there are no absolute rights and wrongs. These books tried to prove this by giving examples of the most extreme moral dilemmas. Here are some examples of these:

- Imagine a situation in which a criminal with a gun tells a married man to rape the latter man's daughter otherwise the criminal will himself rape and then shoot her. What should the father do?
- Imagine a circumstance in which a member of the secret police in a nation ruled by a dictatorship threatens that if you do not spy on your spouse, giving information about her Christian beliefs which will result in the latter being sent to gaol, these police will shoot your mother and your children.

But such extreme examples of making people choose between two very evil courses of action do not prove there are no absolute rights and wrongs. Instead these examples prove how evil are human minds which plan such evil sets of choices for others.

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, “The Shows”, Chapter 21.

## **Not situational ethics but a God-approved exception**

In the 1940's, some Christians lied to German Nazi soldiers and secret police in order to protect Jews from being captured and murdered. If these Christians obeyed the Biblical command about not lying (see Ephesians 4:25 and Colossians 3:9) and told the truth to the Nazis, this would have resulted in the brutal murder of more Jewish men, women and children.

The Bible itself reveals God approves of His people lying to save the lives of others from brutal murderers. This God-approved exception to His command about not lying is found in Exodus 1:15-21. In this circumstance, the Hebrew midwives lied to the wicked Egyptian Pharaoh in order to save multitudes of Hebrew babies from his murderous intentions.

Exodus 1:20-21 shows God approved of their lying and He regarded their actions as an expression of godly fear of Him. This is the only type of God-approved exception in the Bible to His absolute command about not lying. This is not an example of situational ethics, but is one God-ordained exception to His absolute command.

## **Twisting Jesus' Words to support evil**

Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6 and Luke 6:6-10 refer to Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Some people may think, "These verses show that the situational ethics philosophy is right. This is because by miraculously healing the disabled man's hand, God showed He excused Jesus' disobedience to the Sabbath command. God excused this disobedience because Christ had acted with such love and grace towards the needy person. Through this example involving Jesus, God revealed that He does not mind us disobeying some of His commands if we have a loving intention to do good to someone else in a particular matter."

But the above involves horrendous Biblical interpretation. In Romans 13:8-10, Paul teaches that someone who truly obeys God's broad command to love others will express this by obeying God's specific commands about murder, adultery, stealing, coveting and so on.

Also, in Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6 and Luke 6:6-10, Jesus was not saying that His loving act of healing on the Sabbath involved a breaking of the Sabbath command. Instead He was doing what was lawful on the Sabbath – performing a loving miracle for someone. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God does not perform miracles through His prophets on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees had added their own foolish extra-Biblical law to the original Sabbath command. They taught that God would not perform miracles on the Sabbath. Jesus opposed their extra-Biblical addition to God's Sabbath command.

When Peter said in 1 Peter 4:8 "*love will cover a multitude of sins*", he did not mean love is an excuse to be involved in disobediences to God's more specific commands. This would be contrary to Romans 13:8-10.

## **We must not be hypocrites**

Many of the most sinful hypocrites in church history were people who spoke constantly about God's love, loving God and loving others, but who had little real interest in obeying the Bible's specific applications of the love commands. For example, the false prophet Grigorii Rasputin who led many Russian churchgoers into deception in the early 1900's said "...all

*commandments are subservient to love, it contains all wisdom, greater than Solomon's, and love alone is real, all the rest is scattered fragments, through love alone can heaven be reached."*<sup>6</sup>

But Rasputin used to seduce many of his female disciples into having baths and sexual intercourse with him. His servant, Akulina Laptinskaya said that Rasputin "*used the word 'grace', meaning that by sleeping with him, a woman came into the grace of God.*"<sup>7</sup>

Jude 4 refers to condemned false teachers and religious hypocrites in the early church who used God's grace as an excuse to disobey His specific commands against sexual immorality: "**...ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness...**"

In the 100's A.D., the heretical followers of the Gnostic Basilides taught that because believers in Jesus Christ were not under the Mosaic Law, they were free to practice sexual immorality and other types of greedy lusts.

Tragically, some churchgoers today use love and God's grace as a supposed excuse for Christians to disobey God's commands which apply to abortion, euthanasia, having sex outside marriage, homosexuality, not smacking children and other sins.

God's grace provides those with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and accompanying heart repentance with forgiveness of their sins, salvation and other marvellous blessings (see Ephesians 1:7-8, 2:7-9 and Romans 8:32).

But God's grace also empowers believers to resist temptation (see 1 Corinthians 10:13 and Philippians 4:13), not be ruled by sin (see Romans 6:1 and 6:15), repent of their sins (see Romans 2:4), live righteous godly lives, denying worldly evil desires (see Titus 2:11-12) and serve God acceptably with reverence and a godly fear of the Lord (see Hebrews 12:28).

When Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, He did not tell her "Neither do I condemn you, go and deliberately sin some more." Instead He said: "**Neither do I condemn you, go and sin NO MORE.**"

## **The morals of American Evangelicals**

In 1989, George Gallup Jr. of Gallup Polls stated, "*At the same time, American religious life is characterized by a series of gaps. First, there is an 'ethics gap' between Americans' expressed beliefs and the state of society they shape. While religion is highly popular in America, it is to a large extent superficial; it does not change people's lives to the degree one would expect from their level of professed faith. Related to this is a 'knowledge gap' between Americans' stated faith and the lack of the most basic knowledge about the faith.*"<sup>8</sup>

Many American Evangelicals have adopted moral standards about sex, honesty, disciplining children, abortion, watching partly pornographic movies, money, paying tax and so on which are based on Satan-inspired *situational ethics, humanism and the ends-justifies-the-means philosophies.*

Such people forget one of the major disagreements God has had with the human race since the Fall is *about what is right and wrong.* Humans find it very difficult to accept what God defines as right as being absolutely right and what he declares is wrong as absolutely wrong.

The 1988 poll by Gallup and Castelli<sup>9</sup> found that out of the then American population:

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<sup>6</sup> Alex De Jonge, "The Life and Times of Grigorii Rasputin", Collins, London, 1982, page 195.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 170.

<sup>8</sup> G. Gallup and J. Castelli, "The People's Religion", Macmillan, New York, 1989, page 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 45.

- 94% believed in God.
- 90% prayed.
- 88% believed that God loved them and only 3% believed this is not the case.

But note these beliefs were not reflected in many Americans' attitudes to God's commands about daily moral living:

- Only 33% of all Americans believed sex before marriage is always wrong.<sup>10</sup>
- Only 15% of unmarried Americans believed sex before marriage is always wrong.<sup>11</sup>
- *Only 43% of American churchgoers said pre-marital sex was always wrong. 15% of churchgoing Americans said pre-marital sex was right in all circumstances.*<sup>12</sup> Another 23% of churchgoers said pre-marital sex was sometimes wrong and 13% said it was almost always wrong. There were 6% who did not answer the question.

This meant even back in 1988, at least 51% or *just over half* of American churchgoers were following sinful unbiblical moral philosophies like situational ethics in their attitudes to sex before marriage.

In 1988, the estimated total population of the United States was 245,404,000.<sup>13</sup> In 1991, 49% of adult Americans attended church each week.<sup>14</sup> This equaled 120,247,960 churchgoers in total. Of these churchgoers, at least 51% or *61 million* in 1988 had wicked unbiblical attitudes to sex outside of marriage. These 61 million churchgoers were trying to be followers of both Joseph Fletcher – the situational ethics “Jezebel” – and of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' Words to the compromising hypocritical Church of Thyatira in Revelation 2:18-23 apply to these 61 million American regular churchgoers: ***“And to the angel of the church at Thyatira write, ‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and beguile My servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death. And all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.’”***

These tragic figures about 61 million American churchgoers' attitudes to sex before marriage are a reflection of the fact that pollster George Barna found 52% of American Evangelical Christians in 1991 said there was no such thing as absolute truth<sup>15</sup> and only 15% of Americans in 1995 regarded the Bible as the most significant influence on their beliefs about whether there are absolute moral standards.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, page 74.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 76.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “The World Book Encyclopedia”, Volume 20, World Book Inc, Chicago, , page 100.

<sup>14</sup> George Barna, “Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators”, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1996, page 33.

<sup>15</sup> “Renewal News”, Summer 1997 edition, edited by Brad Long, Presbyterian Renewal Publications, page 8.

<sup>16</sup> George Barna, “The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators”, page 104.

It is then little wonder that so many well-known American preachers and churches who do not emphasise repentance, turning from known sin and naming specific sins from their pulpits are so popular and receive such massive financial support in the U.S. (Note George Barna stated that 30% of Americans in 1998 believed adultery is not wrong. <sup>17</sup>)

As stated earlier, in 1998, George Barna found that moral attitudes among supposedly born-again Christians in the U.S. had deteriorated even further, with 66% or two-thirds of them saying there is no such things as absolute moral truth. <sup>18</sup>

In his book “Holiness and the Spirit of the Age”, the International Executive Director of Youth With A Mission Floyd McClung stated about the United States: “*One survey showed that 43 percent of Christian teenagers engage in sexual intercourse by age 18, and 65 percent participate in petting and fondling.*” <sup>19</sup>

A survey quoted by Gene Edward Veith <sup>20</sup> claimed that about 56% of single so-called “born-again” Christians in the United States in the early to mid-1990’s were engaging in sex outside marriage. According to Veith, polls suggested that whereas in earlier decades if American Christians were involved in sex outside of marriage, mostly they experienced *shame* and *guilt*, a large percentage of American Christians from the 1990’s onwards seem to believe that sexual immorality is not as bad as previously thought. <sup>21</sup>

Also in his book “Acts”, Ajith Fernando writes of a large Evangelical church in the United States whose pastor said about half of its members who get married had already had sex with their marriage partners before marriage. <sup>22</sup> It is true God totally forgives sexual immorality when it is sincerely confessed and repented of by a believer. But this does not mean` that God regards sexual immorality as some minor matter.

## **Professor Hunter’s survey of U.S. Evangelical colleges and seminaries**

Do not think Gallup’s comments above only relate to non-Evangelical, non-Charismatic and non-Pentecostal church groups and to non-churchgoers in the United States.

James Davison Hunter, an Evangelical professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia did an extensive study in 1982 to 1985 of the beliefs and attitudes of nine of the thirteen member colleges of the Christian College Consortium – Evangelical higher education institutions. He also did a study of seven major Evangelical theological seminaries in the U.S. – Fuller (at Pasadena, California), Conservative Baptist (Denver, Colorado), Asbury (Wilmore, Kentucky), Talbot (Los Angeles, California), Westminster (Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania), Gordon – Conwell (Hamilton, Massachusetts) and Wheaton Graduate School (Wheaton, Illinois). Hunter’s book “Evangelicalism – the Coming Generation” contains the details of these surveys. (Note Hunter’s statistics here relate to the beliefs of these Evangelical College and Seminary students, lecturers and tutors which in some cases may not have been expressed in their lifestyle.)

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<sup>17</sup> George Barna, “The Second Coming of the Church”, Word Publishing, Nashville, 1998, page 66.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, page 123.

<sup>19</sup> Floyd McClung, “Holiness and the Spirit of the Age”, Word Publishing, Milton Keynes, England, , page 22.

<sup>20</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr, “Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture”, 1994, pages 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ajith Fernando, “The N.I.V. Application Commentary – Acts”, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, page 426.

The following statistics <sup>23</sup> reveal that right back in the early 1980's, many supposedly Bible-based Evangelical Christian theological colleges and higher education institutions in the United States had many lecturers and students who followed unbiblical ethical systems like *humanistic situational ethics*, *the ends justifies the means* and *other similar Satan-inspired unbiblical ethical philosophies*.

Activity	Percentage of Evangelical College Students who believe the activity is morally right at least-sometimes.	Percentage of Evangelical theological seminary students who believe the activity is morally right at least sometimes	Percentage of lecturers and tutors at Evangelical colleges and seminaries who believe the activity is morally right at least sometimes
1. Smoking cigarettes	49%	62%	54%
2. Casual sexual petting before marriage	77%	67%	87%
3. Heavy sexual petting before marriage	55%	39%	60%
4. Having sex before marriage	11%	8%	24%
5. Engaging in homosexual-practices as adults	6%	3%	16%
6. Having sexual affairs while married	3%	2%	10%
7. Watching R-Rated movies	93%	89%	92%
8. Watching X-Rated pornographic movies	31%	36%	61%
9. Being dishonest about income tax	14%	9%	Not given

Hunter said *nine out of ten* of the above-mentioned Evangelical College and theological seminary students claimed to *have a born-again experience*. <sup>24</sup> Also Hunter recorded that about 13% of the college students and about 11% of the seminary students stated they were from

<sup>23</sup> James Hunter, "Evangelism – The Coming Generation", The Uni of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pages 61 and 175.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, page 11.

Pentecostal or Holiness churches with a sizeable number of Charismatics added.<sup>25</sup> He said 58% of college students and 60% of seminary students surveyed were Baptist.<sup>26</sup>

## **We need a thorough depaganisation and re-Christianisation of Christians**

There are millions of present-day Christians whose attitudes and practices are products of both Biblical and pagan non-Christian influences, philosophies and moral standards.

God is calling all Christians to rid themselves of all pagan and non-Christian attitudes and behaviour and to become more Christ-like and Biblical.

### Bible Study Questions

1. What are the major differences between worldly situational ethics and God's written Word's approach to right and wrong?
2. Think of practical examples in which you or your fellow Christians have been following the standards of situational ethics in your attitudes to various moral issues.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.