

## **Situation Ethics**

*"All you need is love."*

### **Introduction**

Situation Ethics was developed in the 1960's by Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher felt that the two big dangers in Ethics were legalism and antinomianism (do you know what these words mean??)

Fletcher suggests that we should have one law for every situation, the law of love.

### **Situation Ethics explained**

1. Rules cause problems. Fletcher thinks that Christianity and Judaism's attitudes to homosexuality are a prime example of an outdated reliance on rules.
2. The best midpoint between many laws and no laws is to have one law. Love is the one thing that is good. "Only the command to love is categorically good."
3. "Everything else without exception, all laws and principles and ideals are only contingent\*, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation."
4. There is one law of agape love (What is agape?) From this we may work out many rules of wisdom (Sophia) (eg. Do not kill) However these principles should only be used if the outcome is loving.
5. Hence the principles of sophia are general wisdom. They are not laws or rules. To insist on always obeying rules is legalistic, to have no rules is antinomian. So any principles can be overridden if the law of love requires it. Can you think of any situations where this might happen?

### **The Four Presuppositions of Situationism**

1. Pragmatism: "The right is that which works or satisfies for love's sake." Fletcher does not want theoretical solutions, he requires that a solution works.
2. Relativism: Love is the absolute, everything else is relative to it. Love is also relative in a way. It is changeless in its 'why' but contingent\* in its 'what' and 'how' (*What does Fletcher mean by this? Why does he refuse to use words such as 'never,' 'perfect' and 'always' in his writings?*)
3. Positivism: we do not use logic in ethics. We decide our values by looking at the situation. We make the rules rather than discovering them written in nature
4. Personalism: People are the ultimate moral value. "love people, use things." Everything is related to the good of persons.

### **Fletcher's principles in detail**

1. "only one thing is intrinsically good, namely love" Love is good because God wills it. Furthermore when the Bible refers to the image of God in man, it is not reason but love. All loving acts are good. A lie told to save a life is not a lesser evil. It is good in that situation.
2. "The ruling norm of Christian decision is love, nothing else." Where law and love conflict, we must follow love. Fletcher reminds us that Jesus summed up the whole law as 'Love God' and 'Love your Neighbour'

3. "love and Justice are the same, love distributes justice." The Apostle Paul suggests that we should owe no one anything except to love.
4. "Love wills the neighbour good whether we like him or not." Love is not an attitude or a feeling. Agape love is selfless and is not reciprocal.
5. "only the end justifies the means, nothing else." Fletcher is not suggesting that any end is justified by any means, but any loving end is justified by any means
6. "Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively." Love is the norm but it doesn't tell us what to do in a specific situation. Fletcher does not answer the question as to whether adultery is wrong, he replies "Give me a case."

**TASK:**

In pairs discuss Fletcher's Situation Ethics and attempt to write answers to the following questions

- Is this a Christian ethic?
- Is it absolute or relative?
- Is it deontological or teleological?
- What are its strengths and weaknesses as a way of making moral decisions?