



Dirk Willems Saving His Captor's Life

Virtue Ethics and Grace

One cold spring morning in 1569, a Dutch prisoner, Dirk Willems, who had been convicted of a crime, escaped from his jail cell through an upper story window by letting himself down with a rope made of knotted rags. As Willems was running away, a guard saw him and began to chase him. During the pursuit, Willems safely crossed the thin ice of a pond. The pursuing guard broke through the ice and floundered for survival in the frigid water. Hearing the guard's cry for help, Willems stopped running and turned back to pull the guard safely to shore. Following his rescue, the guard grabbed Willems and returned him to his prison cell. Some days later, Willems was taken from his prison cell and burned at the stake.

What was Dirk Willems' crime? He was a heretical Anabaptist believer. Dirk Willems' faith transgressed the 1535 edict of Emperor Charles V against the Anabaptists which prescribed beheading or drowning for heresy. By 1568, the Dutch governor, the Duke of Alva, through the aegis of King Phillip II (successor to Charles V) promoted more severe penalties including death by burning. Official court records contained the following information about Dirk Willems:

Born at Asperen ...at the age of eighteen or twenty years ... was rebaptized and further ... harbored and admitted secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines, and that he also has permitted several persons to be rebaptized in his ... house, all of which is contrary to our holy Christian faith ... and ought not to be tolerated, but severely punished, for an example to others ... therefore ... he shall be executed with fire, until death ensues [Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1951), 741-2].

What motivated Dirk Willems to sacrifice his escape opportunity to save his enemy? While his death added one

more person to the more than one thousand Anabaptist martyrs in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth century, Dirk's forfeiture of personal safety in exchange for the safety of his pursuer reflects a personal attribute that appears "superhuman." Saving an enemy at the cost of his life was an instinctive ethical choice for Dirk Willems.

The basis of a chosen ethical system motives an individual's moral decisions. For some, ethics are deontological in nature and thus emphasize rules or duties; for others, ethics are based on consequences of action (utilitarianism). And for still others, Christian virtue ethics flow from righteous character that expresses attributes of love, obedience, and humility. None of these attributes are native to human nature, but rather flow from a nature that has been transformed by God's grace. These attributes are not simply occasional tendencies or whims to do random deeds of kindness, but flow from a deep disposition entrenched within the being of the person. No one has the power to simply choose to be virtuous in this way, rather this virtue flows from the grace of Jesus.

In the Anabaptist paradigm, virtue ethics is the praxis of a transformed life. If one is truly Christian, then the way of Jesus is expressed in one's attitudes and lifestyle. The example of Dirk Willems illustrates the Christ-like virtue of suffering (*agape*) love, a love that gives of oneself for another, even at great cost. Anabaptists believe that the essence of Christ's grace is both substantive and ontological. When a penitent sinner renounces a sinful past and confesses Jesus as Lord, that sinner is changed into a saint by the endowed grace of Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus embodies the believer and transforms a carnal spirit unto a Christ-like spirit. This transformation action *is* the work of grace, a divine enablement empowering the believer to walk in the power of the resurrected Jesus, revealing a life of virtue.

In response to a query about which commandment was the greatest, our Lord replied:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12:30-32, NIV).

Initially it may seem that Jesus was focusing on deontological ethics by ordering the importance of two rules from a long list of commandments. Yet a closer examination reveals that Jesus was promoting another way of "doing ethics." The motivation for love of neighbor flows from an all comprehensive love of God. Naturally, our loves are fickle, transient, and competitive. We love beautiful people, financial success, a harmonious symphony, excellent cuisine, and the excitement of a competitive game of football. It is easy for loves like these to become the major motivators of our life instead of our love for God. Authentic love can only happen if we are truly transformed by grace.

In our American contemporary culture, public policy ethics vividly contrasts with this description of virtue ethics. Societal bioethical decision-making is typically based on principlism: personal autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and distributive justice. In specific situations where these principles conflict in application, the greatest value is given to personal autonomy. In contrast our Master calls his followers to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). Autonomy and personal rights rank low on the Christological ethical scale, but the virtues of love, humility, and obedience to the way of Jesus are elevated!

Virtue ethics have a practical dimension in that a different type of question is asked when assessing an ethical dilemma. In the secular principlism paradigm, the questions deal with individual rights and privileges. However, in Christian virtue ethics, we ask questions with answers that lead one to respond as Jesus would. What kind of a person must I be to respond in the manner of Jesus? Do I reveal love and humility which gives place to and enhances the well-being of the other person? Do my attitudes respect the image of God embodied in all *Homo sapiens*? Do my decisions value all of God's creation, especially protecting weak and vulnerable persons? Am I a responsible and just steward that values and shares God's precious creational gifts?

Remember the old hymn written by John Newton (1705-1807), the sea captain who spent much of his life transporting slaves from Africa to the Americas?

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

In the case of John Newton and for many of us, grace, God's divine enablement, is not instantaneous. Newton wrote the above verses following his initial conversion but while still operating a slave ship! However, a couple of years later, he left that career and became a minister of the gospel!

Let's allow grace to transform us,
Roman J. Miller, *Editor*

In This Issue ...

Applied bioethics is the connecting theme of our first three Regular Articles. Bruce McCallum, who argues for a new theological understanding of nature, suggests "cruciform nature" can provide insights into human genetic engineering. Co-authors, Adrian Teo and Donald Calbreath, take up the contentious issue of embryonic stem cells and contend that opposition to embryonic stem cell research is consistent with a Reformed Christian perspective. Next Dennis Sullivan researches the evidence to determine whether oral chemical contraceptives induce abortions and whether using "the pill" should be of concern for persons who are pro-life. In the fourth Regular Article, Robert Schneider blends his understandings of anthropologic evolution and creation in postulating a framework for human origins.

In the Communications section, Thaddeus Trenn declares that a physicalist understanding of humanness cannot discern the "mystery" or core of a person, since the human spirit is sourced in the eternal Christ, which is in essence "God stuff" rather than somatic material.

Three short articles in the News & Views section take on the issue of origin. Michael Everest maintains that Intelligent Design gets too much attention from Christians and thereby other understandings of origins are minimized. New Zealanders, Graeme Finlay and co-scientists, assert that evolution is an aspect of creation rather than the antithesis of creation. And finally David Siemens, Jr. argues that the evidence for theistic evolution trumps the evidence for intelligent design. In the Early Career Scientist section, student Jeff Mino uses "science" rather than science to describe intelligent design theory.

Finally, our journal issue concludes with eighteen book reviews in eight categories and then with seven letters to the editor from readers commenting on ideas from prior issues of *PSCF*.