

Ethics in Public: Considering Community in Moral Evaluation

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Abstract: *This article considers the place and importance of community when assessing moral events. Two areas of public ethics are considered here. First, this work evaluates the phenomenon known as “second-order moral accountability,” which is the idea that an individual may be reckoned guilty of the sins of another, or make another guilty of one’s own sins, simply by being present within a given community. Second, this article investigates the exercise of Christian liberty in the public square with a focus on so-called adiaphora ethical issues, which are subjects that are considered to be morally indifferent within a particular context.*

Key Words: *adiaphora, Christian liberty, community, conscience, public ethics, second-order moral accountability.*

Carl F. H. Henry, arguably the father of evangelical ethics, titled his mid-twentieth-century basic ethics volume *Christian Personal Ethics*.¹ Indeed, the title Henry chose is quite appropriate for an introductory ethics text as, biblically speaking, moral reasoning is both Christian and personal—at least within the evangelical tradition. It is interesting to observe that in his book Henry focuses almost entirely upon the moral formation of individuals, scarcely mentioning the context in which his readers would live out their ethics—that is, the community. In all fairness to Henry, seven years after publishing *Christian Personal Ethics*, he did write a companion volume in which he explored the place of community in moral reasoning.² However, a perusal of modern-day introductory Christian ethics textbooks reveals that few evangelical ethicists have given much space to the concept of community in moral evaluation.³

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

² Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

³ For example, the following volumes lack any substantial discussion of the place of community in moral evaluation: John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg,

The purpose of this article is to consider the place and importance of community when assessing moral events. In this study two related aspects of ethics within community will be investigated. First, this work will look at the concept that can best be described with the phrase “second-order moral accountability.” In short, second-order moral accountability is the idea that an individual may be reckoned guilty of the sins of another, or make another guilty of one’s own sins, simply by being present within a particular community. Second, this work will investigate the exercise of Christian liberty in the communal public square, with a focus upon so-called *adiaphora* ethical issues. Moral topics classified as *adiaphora* in nature are those that are viewed as being morally indifferent within a given community. By examining Christian liberty and *adiaphora* ethical issues, this article will highlight the importance of considering the conscience of others who witness, or who are likely to witness, one’s engagement in morally indifferent practices within the public square.

In considering the place of community in moral evaluation, with a focus upon the two areas identified above, the goal of this work is not to minimize individual moral accountability, nor to suggest a community-based hermeneutic, nor to argue for some form of societal utilitarianism. In fact, this work will assume the validity of an evangelical, deontological, divine-command theory of Christian ethics.⁴ Yet, a historic liability of moral reasoning that focuses solely upon individuals is that the context of moral events can become minimized or even neglected. In other words, within a system of personal ethics it is possible to so emphasize individuals that the communities in which moral agents reside are either overlooked or viewed as not being relevant to moral evaluation. The aim of this article, then, in considering the place of community when assigning moral praise or blame is to offer a corrective to ethical approaches that have, perhaps, not weighed the importance of community in the process of moral evaluation.

Part 1: Second-Order Moral Accountability

As was noted above, the phrase “second-order moral accountability”

Ethics for a Brave New World, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Wayne A. Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). One contemporary basic ethics book that does discuss the importance of the context of moral events is John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

⁴ My approach to Christian ethics is detailed in David W. Jones, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013).

is the idea that an individual may be reckoned guilty of the sins of another, or make another guilty of one's own sins, simply by being present in a given community.⁵ While it is difficult to find formal support for second-order moral accountability in academic literature, the concept is often present as an assumption in popular moral reasoning. Take, for instance, the notion that Christians ought to boycott a certain retail establishment because the store sells pornographic magazines. Such boycotts are often justified with the claim that to patronize the retailer makes one guilty of the sin of pornography by way of affiliation. Another popular example comes from the political realm where some believe that to vote for a candidate whose personal moral failures are well known, or who endorses sinful public policies, renders an individual voter culpable of, or at least complicit in, the candidate's known immorality.⁶

In the above examples, second-order moral accountability seems like a useful concept—and it may even be so—for it could help mobilize Christians to curb the spread of pornography in the public square, as well as to assist in keeping immoral candidates from public office. Indeed, these are worthwhile goals. Yet, while the moral objectives in view are praiseworthy, it is the contention of this work that the idea being employed in the process of moral evaluation—that is, second-order moral accountability—is not legitimate and, as will be demonstrated below, is ultimately not a viable concept. Note, however, that the problem with the above (and similar) examples is not the moral event itself, but the mechanism being employed in order to explain or to justify the ethic. We'll investigate this idea below by surveying an Old Testament passage, looking at a New Testament text, consulting an example from Jesus's ministry, as well as considering the practicality of second-order moral accountability. After this, we'll review three caveats related to second-order moral accountability, before moving on to consider the ethics of Christian liberty in the public square.

⁵ Generally speaking, those who espouse second-order moral accountability teach that moral culpability increases with proximity within a community. Thus, advocates of this view teach that while an entire community may be guilty of an individual's sin, those closest to the offender actually bear the most guilt. Note that we can affirm the idea of moral proximity (or proximate obligation) without endorsing the idea of second-order moral accountability.

⁶ Examples of other contemporary issues where second moral accountability has been discussed include receiving vaccinations developed with stem cells harvested from aborted fetuses, investing in so-called "sin stocks," paying taxes to immoral governments, and participating in pagan holidays such as Halloween, among many others.

Old Testament Example: Exodus 20:5–6

At first glance, holding the concept of second-order moral accountability up to the light of Scripture may seem to yield support for the idea. One Old Testament passage that appears to affirm this notion is the second commandment of the Decalogue.⁷ To elaborate, after stating the second commandment,⁸ which prohibits the manufacture and worship of idols, God declared to his people, "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exod 20:5–6).⁹ A cursory reading of this passage could lead one to the conclusion that within a given community—in this case, a family—God imputes the moral guilt of one member to others in the clan, visiting the iniquity of a particular family member upon those who are not present, or perhaps even upon those who are not yet born.¹⁰

Further investigation, however, into Old Testament biblical teachings about the dynamics of sin and guilt reveals that this interpretation of the second commandment cannot possibly be correct, for other passages clearly contradict such an understanding. For example, Deut 24:16 reads, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin."¹¹ Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel wrote, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt

⁷ Other passages that speak to the corporate nature of the effects of sin, or at least recognize its presence, include Exod 34:6–7; Num 14:18.

⁸ In this article I am using the traditional Protestant enumeration of the Decalogue common among most non-Lutheran Protestants. For more on the enumeration of the Ten Commandments within various faith traditions, see my work *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 132–34.

⁹ All Scripture citations are taken from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Observe that this is exactly what the Israelites incorrectly believed was happening to them as their culture deteriorated prior to the Babylonian exile, as they claimed, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer 31:29; Ezek 18:2).

¹¹ Note that both 2 Kgs 14:6 and 2 Chr 25:4 record King Amaziah's explicit enforcement of Deut 24:16 upon his ascendance to the throne of Judah. Another example of this principle is David's objection to God's slaying of the Israelites after his own sin of taking a national census. In 2 Sam 24:17 David complains to God as he rhetorically asks, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done?" The Israelites, then, were slain not because they had committed David's sin of pride and self-reliance, but because they were guilty of their own sins and were affected by David's sin.

of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek 18:20). In light of these citations, as well as other similar passages,¹² it seems clear that the Old Testament does not endorse second-order moral accountability—at least not in the sense in which it is commonly understood.

This, however, invites the question: How, then, are we to understand the generational warning appended to the second commandment? Rooker explains, “The text does not say that God holds one’s descendant, a son or grandson, personally responsible for his father’s sins (Ezek 18:20). Nor does this text say that the generational extension of punishment has anything to do with the legal administration of justice. But the text does hold out the threat that one’s descendants may suffer for their parent’s sin.”¹³ In other words, in the second commandment God reminds his people of the fact that sin is never just personal—that is, it always affects others, especially those to whom one is closest.¹⁴ In sum, then, while the second commandment does not teach second-order moral accountability, as we assess moral events in the public square we must keep in mind the multi-generational effects of individual sins upon the community.¹⁵

New Testament Example: 2 John 10–11

A New Testament scriptural text we’ll consider that relates to the idea of second-order moral accountability is 2 John 10–11. The short book of 2 John was written by the apostle John in order to warn a particular church about false teachers who were traveling in their general area. Specifically, John wrote to exhort believers in this church to *not* show hospitality to the itinerant heretics should they appear in their immediate community. Note that in the early church era, where safe lodging was not readily available, nomadic teachers and missionaries—whether authentic

¹² See, e.g., 1 Kgs 8:32; 2 Chr 19:1–3; Isa 3:10–11; Jer 31:29–30.

¹³ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 44. Rooker continues, noting, “The threat of harm to one’s descendants functions as a powerful deterrent as one naturally grieves over the affliction of his children and grandchildren more than his own hardship” (45).

¹⁴ In his commentary on the second commandment, Brian Edwards helpfully observes, “Children suffer greatly for the sins of their parents, not by some arbitrary decree of a vengeful God but by the law of cause and effect.” Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments* (Surrey, UK: DayOne, 2002), 92.

¹⁵ Another area in the Old Testament where second-order moral accountability is sometimes discussed is the Jewish ceremonial laws. For example, ceremonial laws specified that if one came into contact with a corpse, it rendered one unclean (cf. Num 19:11; Hag 2:10–14). Note, however, that when uncleanness was transferred under such laws, it was ceremonial in nature, not sinful; thus, such laws are not an example of second-order moral accountability.

or corrupt—often relied upon the kindness and generosity of others in order to facilitate their ministries.¹⁶ Given these dynamics, and the presence of false teachers in their region, John instructed the church, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine [i.e., the gospel], do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 John 10–11).

Taken at face value, this passage may seem to affirm the idea of second-order moral accountability, for John refers to Christians who share in the deeds of false teachers by receiving them into their homes. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that John does not teach that showing hospitality to heretics makes one guilty of the sin of advocating false doctrine. Indeed, the term *κοινωνέω* that John employs in 2 John 11, which is rendered “shares” in many English translations, means just that—to support, to commune, or to enable.¹⁷ Thus in this passage John’s exhortation to the church is to not naively lodge itinerant false teachers, for doing so would enable the heretics’ harmful ministry.¹⁸ The unintended sin committed by the well-meaning believers who show hospitality, then, is not the error of false teaching; rather, in supporting these traveling deceivers, naïve Christian hosts would fail to discern truth and to love their neighbors well. By warning the church about this possible sin, John was simply endorsing Paul’s earlier New Testament teaching that God “will render to each one according to his [own] deeds” (Rom 2:6).¹⁹

Jesus’s Example: Matthew 22:15–22

A third biblical text relevant to the topic of second-order moral accountability is Matt 22:15–22. In this well-known narrative from Jesus’s ministry, the Pharisees and Herodians were testing Christ, as they tried to provoke his downfall. In this passage these religious and secular leaders attempted to catch Jesus in a verbal trap as they asked him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Matt 22:17). The tax in view here was most likely the poll tax, which was universally despised by the Jews, for it was used to finance the occupying Roman army. With their question, then, these scheming leaders sought to entangle Christ as follows: If Jesus

¹⁶ The importance of Christian hospitality can be seen in the epistle of 3 John. Whereas 2 John warns Christians to *not show* hospitality to false teachers, 3 John encourages Christians to *show* hospitality to fellow believers.

¹⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 351–52.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy in this passage that John does not explicitly address the issue of guilt.

¹⁹ A similar Pauline passage is Col 3:25, which reads, “But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.”

spoke *against* the payment of taxes, the Herodians would have charged him with rebellion against Rome; if, however, Christ advocated *for* the payment of taxes, then the Pharisees would have accused him of disloyalty to the Jewish nation. Given the sensitivity of this question, Jesus's response is quite instructive. Perhaps in contrast to the expectation of Herodians, in his reply, Christ clearly supported the payment of taxes, but not before reminding his listeners that the coin he'd been handed was engraved with Caesar's image; therefore, since the coin was produced by Rome, it logically belonged to Rome.

Of interest to this study is the fact that Jesus did not understand the payment of tax monies, some of which would surely be used to finance immoral activities, as being an act that rendered one guilty of the many historically documented and egregious sins of Rome, which were financed, in part, by tax revenues.²⁰ Indeed, as was the case with the other biblical passages surveyed above, in this example from Christ's ministry we can see that second-order moral accountability is not endorsed. Jesus's response, though, ought not to have surprised his hearers, for Matthew records an occasion from earlier in Christ's public ministry where Jesus had explicitly taught about moral accountability. On this occasion Christ noted that in the end times, "The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each [one] according to his [own] works" (Matt 16:27).²¹

Practical Considerations

Another aspect of second-order moral accountability to consider is the viability of the practice. In reviewing this idea, it becomes evident that second-order moral accountability would be very difficult to implement, at least in a consistent manner. To elaborate, by way of illustration, when writing about boycotts, Frame notes that if second-order moral accountability were a valid principle, "We would have to boycott any corporation that contributed in any way to immorality in society. On that basis, we would have to boycott nearly every business, withdrawing almost entirely

²⁰ Note Paul's similar and equally arresting teaching to the persecuted Roman church that believers are to "render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Rom 13:7).

²¹ We should note that second-order moral accountability is not possible, even voluntarily (apart from the atonement). In Rom 9:3 Paul expresses his desire to be held accountable for the sins of his brethren, even though he knew this was an impossible transaction (cf. Rom 8:38–39). See, also, Moses's similar desire at Exod 32:32.

from the world of commerce. Scripture never takes that approach."²² In fact, contrary to the notion of withdrawing from society, Paul instructed the Corinthian church that they *were* to associate with sinners in the public square as he noted, "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor 5:9–10). Clearly, Paul was not an advocate of second-order moral accountability, for such a notion is not supported in Scripture, nor is it viable for those who live in the fallen world.

Three Caveats

From the biblical passages considered above, it seems clear that second-order moral accountability is not taught in the Bible—at least not as an isolated practice. Furthermore, even if it were a valid concept, second-order moral accountability would be nearly impossible to implement with consistency. These facts notwithstanding, three caveats are in order. First, we must not confuse second-order moral accountability with the error of influencing, manipulating, or persuading another person to commit a sin. In other words, just because each one will be held accountable for his own sin, does not mean that it is permissible to influence another person to commit a sin, intentionally or otherwise. In such cases, the one who inspires transgression may not be guilty of the sin of the one who has been influenced; yet, the enabler is guilty of his own sin, which at a minimum would include a lack of neighbor love. Observe that Jesus identified love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment (cf. Matt 22:39);²³ therefore, the one who fails to properly love his neighbor is guilty of a great sin.

Another caveat related to second-order moral accountability is the

²² Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 447. Later Frame writes, "Scripture does not forbid us to give money to organizations implicated in sin.... If we boycott all sinners, we will not be able to buy anything at all" (805). However, Frame is not opposed to boycotts per se, as he later writes, "I do not think it wrong for Christians to boycott industries or companies which they believe are doing social and/or religious harm in the world.... On the other hand, I do not believe that Scripture requires us to boycott such organizations" (897).

²³ A scriptural example of such a sin is in the account of Ammon and Tamar in 2 Sam 13:1–21. In this narrative, Ammon's cousin Jonadab encouraged him to rape his half-sister Tamar. While Jonadab was not himself guilty of the sin of rape, the fact that the text describes him as being a cunning or crafty man (cf. 2 Sam 13:3) shows that he was not without sin.

concept of the corporate effects of sin. In short, awareness of the corporate effects of sin is the realization that we live in a fallen world, we are surrounded by those who are predisposed toward sin, and we ourselves are great sinners. Therefore, even though second-order moral accountability is not a valid concept in regard to guilt, we must acknowledge that our entire context is biased toward sin. Said differently, because the world is sloped toward sin, the community oftentimes carries us in that direction.²⁴ The danger in failing to acknowledge this is that it may lead one to view sin as normative. Yet, a recognition of the corporate effects of sin will position us to better see our own sin and the sins of others, as well as the impact of sin upon the world—including its inhabitants and structures. Such an awareness will enable us to effectively confront sin, wherever it may be found. By way of example, note that when the prophet Isaiah appeared before God, prior to presenting his prayer request, he acknowledged, “Woe is me, for ... I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5).²⁵

A third caveat related to the concept of second-order moral accountability is the doctrine of original sin, which is sometimes referred to as inherited sin. The passage most often cited in support of this doctrine is Rom 5:12–19.²⁶ In this passage Paul teaches, “Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). In reference to this verse, Grudem explains original sin as follows, “When Adam sinned, God thought of all who would descend from Adam as sinners. Though we did not yet exist, God, looking into the future ... began thinking of us as those who were

²⁴ Although it is an extreme example, God’s rationale for the so-called Canaanite genocide highlights the corporate effect of sin, as well as its perils. In Deut 24:18, God commanded his people to eradicate the Canaanites “lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God” (cf. Exod 34:10–16; Num 33:55; Deut 7:4). Note, however, that contact with the Canaanites would not have made Israel guilty of the Canaanites’ sins; rather, it would render Israel guilty of their own sins that they’d be influenced to commit because of the Canaanites’ example (cf. Prov 13:20; 1 Cor 15:33).

²⁵ Another verse that illustrates awareness of the corporate effects of sin is Ps 119:136. Here the psalmist prays to God, saying, “Rivers of water run down from my eyes because men do not keep Your law” (cf. Exod 34:9; Ps 119:158; Ezek 9:5–6; Dan 9:20).

²⁶ Other important passages related to the doctrine of original sin include Ps 51:5; 1 Cor 15:21; Heb 7:7–10.

guilty like Adam.”²⁷ At first glance, the idea of original sin seems to support the concept of second-order moral accountability. Note, however, that this doctrine does not teach all men are guilty of Adam’s sin. Rather, this doctrine holds that all men sinned in Adam, whether it be *with* Adam as our federal head or *through* Adam as our progenitor. Therefore, original sin teaches that man is held guilty of his own sin in Adam. Grudem explains, “[Original sin] is ‘original’ in that it comes from Adam, and it is also original in that we have it from the beginning of our experience as persons, but *it is still our sin, not Adam’s sin, that is meant.*”²⁸

Part 2: Christian Liberty in the Public Square

A second important topic that relates to ethics in the communal public square is the exercise of Christian liberty. Christian liberty is the idea that there is a degree of freedom in the application—but not the content—of God’s moral law as it is applied in one’s life. This teaching relates to practices that are not explicitly prohibited, or specifically allowed, in the Bible. Thus, Christian liberty may include activities in which believers are free to engage; or, it may entail practices from which believers are free to abstain. Examples of areas where this teaching has been invoked in the past include consuming alcohol, worship practices, music styles, games of chance, military service, places of employment, matters of commerce, eating practices, the observance of special days, and the like. In each of these areas Christians have historically agreed that there is a degree of freedom in how the unchanging moral law of God is applied. As we’ll explore in the discussion that follows, the exercise of Christian liberty in the public square is not subjective; rather, it is governed by several important, objective factors.

Frequently theologians will refer to practices that fall under the umbrella of Christian liberty as *adiaphora* ethical issues. The term *adiaphora* literally means “things indifferent”; thus, activities related to Christian liberty are commonly understood to be morally indifferent in nature. Out of convention, we’ll use the phrase “*adiaphora* issues” in the dialogue below; however, we should note that this term is actually misleading, for when considered in the context of a moral event, every volitional act is either

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 624.

²⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 624 (italics original).

moral or immoral.²⁹ In the following discussion concerning *adiaphora* ethical issues we'll consider the place of weaker and stronger brethren in the community, review the importance of conscience in moral decision making, and conclude by suggesting several principles that will hopefully aid the practice of Christian liberty in the public square.

Weaker and Stronger Brethren

Oftentimes, assigning moral praise or blame is as simple as evaluating an ethical event in light of God's revelation in Scripture. In regard to *adiaphora* issues, however, another factor that must be considered is the presence or absence of weaker or stronger brethren in the context of the moral event. In fact, in the two most lengthy and significant passages in the Bible on the doctrine of Christian liberty, Rom 14:1–15:13 and 1 Cor 8:1–10:33,³⁰ Paul repeatedly exhorts believers to be mindful of the presence of weaker brethren in the community. When engaging in morally indifferent activities, such a purposeful awareness and vigilance is a mark of thorough-going neighbor-love. Since few people would self-identify as weaker brethren, Paul defines his categories when he discusses weaker and stronger brethren.

In mentioning weaker brethren, Paul characterizes such individuals as being weak in faith (cf. Rom 14:1, 23), lacking full biblical knowledge (cf. 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10–11), and having a fragile conscience (cf. 1 Cor 8:7, 10–12; 10:28–29). However, from Paul's discussion, it is clear that a weaker brother is not any immature believer, a so-called carnal Christian,³¹ or a believer who happens to disagree with an aspect of one's theology or ethics. Rather, in Paul's discussion a weaker brother is identified as someone who will be caused to violate their own conscience, in regard to an *adiaphora* issue, because of the influence and example of another Christian in

²⁹ For more information on the essential components of a moral event, see Jones, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 1–27. The fact that every volitional act is either moral or immoral is why Paul instructs the believers in Colossae, "*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Col 3:17 [italics added]; cf. 1 Cor 10:31).

³⁰ Other key passages that address Christian liberty include 1 Cor 6:12; Gal 5:13; and Col 3:17.

³¹ While sometimes used to describe individuals who maintain a loose connection with the church, the idea of a "carnal Christian" is questionable, at best. Although it is certainly possible to backslide for a short season of time, Jesus taught that there will be many at the last judgment who have knowledge of Christ but who are not truly regenerate. According to Jesus, the way to tell the difference between an unregenerate "carnal Christian" and a true follower of Christ who is backslidden is, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16).

the community.³² It is important to observe that in regard to *adiaphora* issues, for the weaker brother, the sin committed is not engaging in or abstaining from a particular act. Rather, it is the defilement of their own conscience (cf. Rom 14:22–23; Titus 1:15).

In Paul's epistles stronger brothers are described as individuals who have a mature faith (cf. Rom 14:22), possess an abundance of scriptural knowledge (cf. 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10–11), and have a biblically-informed conscience (cf. 1 Cor 10:29–30). While we may be tempted to view a believer who is a meticulous law-keeper as a stronger brother, ironically such individuals are actually described as weaker brethren in Scripture. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the Bible identifies the stronger brother as he who is without extra-biblical moral scruples and a legalistic spirit. Indeed, stronger brethren exhibit a gracious freedom in Christ, for they understand that God's moral law is, as James wrote, "the law of liberty" (Jas 1:25; 2:12) and that, as Jesus taught, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).³³ Note that in Scripture the stronger brother is always called to accommodate his actions—that is, to sacrifice his Christian liberty—for the sake of the weaker brother. This is because the stronger brother can do so without sinning, while the weaker brother can only accommodate his actions by violating his own conscience and thereby sinning.

Christian Liberty and the Conscience

Another factor to consider as we exercise Christian liberty in the community is the conscience. Indeed, the conscience is a frequently cited concept in the Bible, and it is an important component in the process of moral decision making. Scripture describes the conscience in various ways. Positively, the Bible speaks of having a "good conscience" (Acts 23:1; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 1 Pet 3:21), a "clear conscience" (Acts 24:16; 1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3; Heb 13:18; cf. 1 Pet 3:16), a cleansed conscience (cf. Heb 9:14), and a conscience without guilt (cf. Rom 9:1; 1 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 1:12). Negatively,

³² We ought not to confuse a weaker brother with a so-called "professional weaker brother." A professional weaker brother is someone, like the Pharisees in the Gospel narratives, who attempts to manipulate others to conform to their own extra-biblical moral scruples. At Matt 15:14 Jesus's instructions concerning such individuals are clear: "Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (cf. Prov 16:22; 26:4; 29:9; Matt 7:6).

³³ This is not to say that stronger brethren disregard the moral law. Rather, mature believers have a transformed mind such that they desire to keep God's moral law, realizing that it is the only way to true freedom. Bear in mind the fact that true freedom is not the opportunity to do whatever one wants; rather, it is the ability to do what one is designed to do.

Scripture mentions the possibility of an “evil conscience” (Heb 10:22), a defiled conscience (cf. Titus 1:15; Heb 9:9), a weak conscience (cf. 1 Cor 8:7, 10), as well as a seared conscience (cf. 1 Tim 4:2).

Whether it is functioning positively or negatively, the conscience can be defined as the component of the human constitution that bears witness to the morality of actions (cf. Rom 2:15). The conscience communicates an inherent moral ought-ness that stems from humans being made in the image of God. In a perfect, unfallen world the conscience would accurately and comprehensively reflect God’s moral will. However, since the fall of humanity, the conscience has been susceptible to being co-opted by sin. This is because the conscience is informed by the mind (or the intellect) and the brain is part of the fallen fleshly body (cf. 1 Cor 4:3–4; Eph 2:1–3). While believers receive a new immaterial nature at the moment of conversion, they must wait for a new material body until their resurrection at the return of Christ. Consequently, prior to glorification, Christians must wrestle with the sinful flesh, which includes the mind (cf. Rom 7:13–25). Additionally, the conscience is continually being conditioned by one’s experiences, which are oftentimes sinful in the context of the fallen world.³⁴

The fact that the conscience can be misled by the fallen mind and misaligned on account of sinful experiences means that it is possible for one’s conscience to be wrong. In Pauline terminology, an individual whose conscience has been misinformed, or is as-yet unformed, in regard to an *adiaphora* issue is a “weaker brother.” Concerning morally indifferent practices, when a stronger brother causes a weaker brother to violate his own conscience—even though the weaker brother’s conscience may be incorrect—it is a sinful act. In such cases the stronger brother, in effect, encourages the weaker brother to disregard his conscience (cf. Rom 14:23). This is wrong, for in regard to non-morally indifferent practices, the weaker brother needs to follow his conscience. The possibility of this phenomena highlights the need for all believers to be aware of the presence of weaker brethren in the community. Moreover, Christians must be continually filling, training, and programing (or, perhaps, re-programming) their minds with the truth of the word of God.³⁵

Principles of Christian Liberty

In regard to *adiaphora* issues, familiarity with the Bible, awareness of

³⁴ For a helpful work on the Christian conscience, see Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

³⁵ Paul touches upon and exemplifies this idea as he claims, “My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 9:1).

the presence of weaker brethren, and being sensitive to the consciences of others are indispensable components of doing ethics in public. In light of these factors, we can summarize a general approach to morally indifferent practices with several objective principles related to Christian liberty.

First, no one should impose their own moral scruples upon another in regard to morally indifferent practices. We must keep in mind the fact that God is the ultimate Judge of humanity, not man. Paul instructs the believers in Rome, “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother” (Rom 14:13). This means that Christians who engage in morally indifferent practices ought not to despise those who do not do so (cf. Rom 14:1; 15:1). Likewise, those who abstain from *adiaphora* activities must not judge those who do so (cf. Rom 14:3). All such practices should be rooted in a godly mind (cf. Rom 12:1–2; Phil 4:8).

Second, those who engage in morally indifferent practices must be convinced in their own minds that such acts are helpful to the body of Christ, realizing that we all will be judged for our actions (cf. Rom 14:5, 12, 14, 23). In writing about *adiaphora* issues at 1 Cor 6:12 Paul notes, “‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.” Similarly, in 1 Cor 10:23 Paul writes, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up” (cf. Rom 15:2). Morally indifferent practices, then, must be profitable for oneself and for others in the community, and ought not to enslave humanity—be it physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

Third, morally indifferent practices must be done unto the Lord—that is, in service to God, exalting God, and for the glory of God (cf. Rom 14:6–8; 15:6–7; 1 Cor 6:13; 10:31). In other words, *adiaphora* practices should be done in Jesus’s name, and one ought to be able to thank him for them (cf. Col 3:17). This means that morally indifferent practices must be appropriate for the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul instructs the Corinthian believers, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? ... You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20).

Fourth, morally indifferent practices must not become a stumbling block for weaker brothers (cf. Rom 14:13, 15, 20–21). Paul cautions the Corinthian church, “But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.... And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (1 Cor 8:9–12). *Adiaphora* acts, then, ought

not to tear down other believers, but should promote peace, joy, love, edification, and even evangelism among the members of the body of Christ (cf. Rom 14:17, 19; 15:8–13; 1 Cor 8:1; 10:31–33).³⁶

Fifth, as has been noted above, a morally indifferent act becomes sinful for a believer if it causes him to transgress his conscience. As he writes about *adiaphora* practices, Paul teaches, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Rom 14:14). In this passage, Paul is not teaching that morality is subjective; rather, he is highlighting the importance of not violating one’s conscience. Paul later states the same truth differently as he claims, “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). John, too, expresses this idea as he writes, “If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” (1 John 3:21).

Sixth, a stronger brother must always be willing to sacrifice his Christian liberty for the sake of a weaker brother (cf. 1 Cor 8:13; 10:28–29). Indeed, a truly mature Christian ought to be strong enough to sacrifice his freedom for the welfare of and service to a weaker brother in the community. In regard to morally indifferent practices, an unwillingness to accommodate one’s actions for the sake of a fellow Christian is a sure sign that one is, in fact, a weaker brother. Regarding this principle, Paul’s exhortation to the Galatian believers is helpful, as he writes, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).

Seventh, and finally, the one who engages in morally indifferent practices must act in imitation of Jesus, for he is Lord (cf. Rom 14:9). Paul concludes his discussion of *adiaphora* issues in the book of Romans, writing, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself.... Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:1–3, 7). In short, then, as is the case with other areas of Christian living, so in regard to Christian liberty, believers must imitate Christ.

³⁶ The judgment of the Jerusalem council as recorded in Acts 15:19–21 endorses the idea of considering the lost in our public ethics. In this decision James notes that keeping several of the Jewish ceremonial laws would be prudent for Gentile converts: “For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). It seems that unsaved Jews in Gentile cities are in view here (cf. 1 Cor 9:22).

Conclusion

This article has sought to investigate the place and importance of community when assessing moral events. In considering the concept of second-order moral accountability, the argument presented in this work was mainly *deconstructive* in nature, as the survey of select biblical passages demonstrated the fallacy of second-order moral accountability. As was noted in the preceding discussion, oftentimes the conclusions that are reached in instances where second-order moral accountability is used are helpful, and sometimes even biblically faithful; yet the principle of second-order moral accountability is invalid. In such instances the problem is often not the moral conclusion that is reached, but the mechanism by which the moral conclusion is supported.

In contrast to the arguments against second-order moral accountability, the review of Christian liberty in the second half of this article was largely *constructive* in nature. Here this work sought to highlight the differences between weaker and stronger brethren, to draw attention to the place of the conscience in moral decision-making, and to give Christians several objective principles to follow in their exercise of Christian liberty within the public square. In short, then, while evangelicals still have more work to do, by discussing these two related aspects of ethics within community, hopefully this article will encourage evangelicals to develop a robust and biblically faithful doctrine of ethics in public.