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Are Ethics Scriptural?:

Comparing the Librarians' Code of Ethics with Scripture

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ABSTRACT

Most professionals define themselves by codes of ethics, core values or principles of conduct. The American Library Association code of ethics has existed since 1939. The current code focuses on service, authors' rights and employment issues. Does the ALA code of ethics principles exemplify God-honoring values for ethical guidance? This paper compares selected scriptures to the principles of the code with examples from the field of librarianship.

The American Library Association (ALA) has had an official Code of Ethics since 1939. (Code, 1939) ALA sets standards for American libraries, librarians and library education. The code of ethics focuses on service, access, authors' rights and employment issues. The wording in the code's principles has similarities to biblical scripture. Gregory A. Smith, (2002a) states "libraries on Christian campuses can inculcate God-honoring values in at least four areas: the ethical use of information, respect for other members of the community, discipline in research, and Christian morality in general" (p.183). Does the ALA code of ethics exemplify God-honoring values for ethical guidance? To examine this question, this paper compares selected scriptures to the principles of the ALA code of ethics with examples.

Professional codes may have many purposes and functions for the profession's members. Mark Frankel (1989) categorizes codes in three types: aspirational, educational, and regulatory with eight functions or mixtures of these. (Frankel, 1989) The ALA code's first sentence, "as members of the American Library Association, we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees and library staffs" states its purpose as aspirational and educational (ALA Council, 1997, para 1). The introduction serves as public notice for the expectations and ideals of library service. The code also serves a professional socialization function as defined by Frankel, "to foster pride in the profession and strengthen professional identity and allegiance" (Frankel, 1989, p. 111). Librarians may use the code's principles to guide ethical decision-making. Brenda Philip, (2001) an academic reference librarian, reports using the code in her decision-making while interacting with students. She notes "most professions have

a code of ethics; in fact, the existence of such a code could be viewed as the first step to being recognized as a profession" (p. 9). Librarians consider themselves professionals as defined by their code's principles. The American Library Association generates standards, guidelines and best practices, but is not a regulatory agency. However, there are no sanctioning mechanisms or procedures for members and many of America's librarians are not members of ALA.

Library school curriculums introduce principles of librarianship, including the code of ethics. Roy Sturgeon, (2007) an international law librarian, states that all information professionals should care about the code. "Codes can be, among other things, a way of enhancing the professional's reputation and professional trust, and of defining and sensitizing persons to their professional responsibility" (p. 57). The ALA code was written by librarians to state principles of excellence. Thomas Froehlich, (2000) a library science professor at Kent State University, writes "while a mature information professional is likely to be ethical without a code, it may be useful to publicize the goals and ideals of the profession, to raise consciousness about issues and potential abuses, to articulate the profession's collective beliefs and/or to set standards or to delineate expected behavior" (p. 6).

Librarians are guided by their own judgment based on their experience, background, religious belief and professional code. While it is highly unlikely the ALA Code's authors had a Bible at hand to supply appropriate phrases, the committee of librarians set a moral tone similar to scriptures in writing the code's principles.

ALA Principle I

"We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies;

equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.” Librarians who follow the code’s service expectations and practice good reference skills also match Paul’s advice when he wrote to Timothy and Titus to teach sound doctrine, listen respectfully and know their content. “You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful” (2 Timothy 2:23-24). ALA’s first principle encourages librarians to provide conscientious service. Paul’s advice includes instructing to the highest level – truth.

Librarians teach with the best resources available while avoiding arguments and debates on controversial issues or policies. Equitable service and access is more likely to be based on economic equality rather than on ethnicity or nationality. Libraries are the source of information, entertainment, and computer access for the less privileged of society. Librarians do not usually ask for people’s identification before assisting them, but the institution or community may restrict some services, such as electronic resources, to its community or tax-based members. Librarians who strive to provide equitable service with the best resources available demonstrate the respect noted in scriptures. School and academic librarians also add instruction in the use of the resources. Yet, is it reasonable to assume the first student seeking a specific article receives the same detailed explanation as the twentieth student who is likely handed the article to copy? Students prefer the quicker result without an explanation, but is this the courteous conscientious service defined by scripture and the code’s first principle?

ALA Principle II

“We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.” Principle II and Paul’s admonition to Titus emphasize being good examples, strong in our convictions. “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your

teaching show integrity, seriousness” (Titus 2:7). The principle of intellectual freedom – free thought, free speech and the free flow of information – is a cornerstone for libraries. Thomas Froehlich (2000) summarizes “freedom and self-determination as the first professional value” with the statement: “A librarian should maximize the amount of freedom a client or patron enjoys in the repertoire of materials in the information centre or library, given constraints imposed by the organization (e.g., unreasonable expenditures) or the law (e.g., for many countries, the non-inclusion of pornographic materials in collections)” (p. 264).

Librarians want their users to have the freedom to pursue their queries without restrictions. However, community standards, society’s benefit, and individual morality may limit freedom. Intellectual freedom issues include censorship, privacy, confidentiality, user behavior, filtering, collection development/evaluation, and access issues involving government information, electronic information, and children’s access to information.

One of the most discussed intellectual freedom issues is censorship. Since research is best achieved when based on previous literature, librarians advocate for the maximum freedom in choice of information. Researchers need full access to previous writings to not repeat history’s mistakes. To avoid the censors, librarians may practice a form of censoring by not selecting marginal materials. G.A. Smith’s, [Christian Librarianship: Essays on the Integration of Faith and Profession](#), (2002) includes several essays on the librarian’s selection role and intellectual freedom. Smith advocates purchasing materials that present both sides of controversial issues.

Even the Christian college library is compelled to collect many items that do not acknowledge God in their search for truth. While some will contribute information that is highly useful and accurate, others will be provided so that students and faculty can analyze, critique, and respond to their false claims. In sum, the Christian librarian can and should value the principle of intellectual freedom (p. 33).

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J.R. Johnson’s (2002) essay summarizes the mission of the selection process. “Exemplary Christian institutions of higher education whose mission is to pursue truth in the various disciplines of study will seek to understand and engage others with diverse viewpoints in an effort to grow together in understanding truth and to share their understanding of biblical truth when appropriate” (p.147). Engaging in discussions or debating issues create ownership in our beliefs. D.G. Davis and J.M. Tucker in “The Master we serve,” (2002) support selection in achieving intellectual freedom stating Christian librarians “believe that ultimate truth, not defined by temporary fashion, will be victorious when given the opportunity for fair comparison” (p. 45). These three essays illustrate the positive view noted in scripture, to act responsibly with integrity.

Librarians selecting materials to match their communities’ needs are neither censors nor promoters of challenged topics. Lester Asheim, long-term graduate library school professor, provided the classic definition defining the difference between selection and censorship.

Selection, then, begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control. Selection’s approach to the book is positive, seeking its values in the book as a book, and in the book as a whole. Censorship’s approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found – anywhere within the book, or even outside it. Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect – not the right – but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading. The selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own (Asheim, 1953).

The ALA code’s second principle promotes intellectual freedom matching Paul’s admonition to Titus in seeking the greater good.

ALA Principle III

“We protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted,

borrowed, acquired or transmitted.” The apostle Paul encourages us to practice humility, respect, courtesy and seeking the best interests of others. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had” (Philippians 2:3-5). Principle three builds on the second principle’s intellectual freedom issues with regard to the individual’s rights when seeking information and the librarian protecting the interests of the user.

Brenda Philip, in “Let’s not keep the code a secret,” (2001) reports, “confidentiality seems to be the most frequently challenged and defended of the principles outlined in the codes of ethics in an academic library setting” (p. 8). To maintain confidentiality, most automated library systems are programmed to discard users’ records by removing the link between users and items used. All library personnel must be trained to observe the users’ rights to privacy and confidentiality as well. Librarians may also define levels of confidentiality depending on their service design. Those libraries with a team service effort may discuss users’ research across library functions (reference, reserve, interlibrary loan, purchasing) without dismissing confidentiality. Users may also opt for less confidentiality. Karen Coombs, University of Houston librarian, notes the growing option for users to negate their privacy in order to have materials recommended, similar to Amazon’s “customers who bought this also purchased” option (2007, p. 28). The ALA code’s third principle shows respect and high regard for the user, which matches Paul’s admonition to the Philippians to value others.

ALA Principle IV

“We respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.” A biblical discussion of this principle is in Paul and Peter’s counsel. “Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor,

then honor” (Romans 13:7). “Show proper respect to everyone, love your fellow believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17). Paul and Peter advocate responsible citizenship with respect for others similar to the ALA principle.

Principles III and IV focus on respect for others’ rights. These principles reinforce the wording in the ALA code’s preface: “We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations” (American Library Association Council, 1997, para. 3). Gretchen Hoffman, (2004) an intellectual property attorney with experience as an academic librarian, writes on the balance between copyright and fair use:

The purpose of fair use goes back to that primary purpose of copyright law – to allow others to use works that are protected by copyright so that they can comment on those works, so that they can create other works; in other words, fair use allows a person to use someone else’s work for certain productive purposes. Also, fair use is based on free speech rights and criticism. Fair use developed fundamentally for the purpose of criticism, teaching, scholarship and commentary (p. 113).

The copyright law details the distinction between fair use and violation of the owners’ copyright.

Doug Johnson, (2007) who writes on ethics in schools, adds the responsibility of institutional “watchdog” to librarians to train and monitor the ethical use of technology. He discusses these challenges: 1) encouraging intellectual freedom in a filtered environment, 2) preventing plagiarism made easier through digital resources, 3) growing concerns over privacy and confidentiality of networked information and 4) needing evaluation skills for the “free” Internet (p. 8-10). The concept of “free” information is a misnomer. Someone paid for the access to the information through fees or taxes. Librarians recognize the Internet as an information tool for research. They recommend researchers be critical information users of all research tools, especially the Internet.

They also advocate responsible use in not plagiarizing. Scholars who reference intellectual property should respect the fair use principle and honor the author with proper citation. To be responsible citizens as directed by Peter and Paul we should follow fair use guidelines and pay authors’ copyright fees when they are due. Following the ALA codes’ fourth principle, librarians respect copyright and promote its fair use so everyone may learn from the past and build on others’ experiences.

ALA Principle V

“We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.” In comparison, Paul directs us to our fundamental employer. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:17, 23-4). This principle is one of the most difficult to sustain in daily interactions. To advocate for another’s benefit is a more active role than being respectful and fair – it seeks the best for the other person. If respect and trust is lost, it is very difficult to regain, if it can be salvaged at all.

In libraries, there are constant exchanges between employees that are enhanced with recognition of each individual’s contribution. Herbert Cihak in “Coaching library support staff: the three R’s that count,” (1999) recommends library leadership coach with respect for ideas, letting employees redefine their responsibilities to meet the needs of the organization and rewarding their accomplishments (p.10-12). Personnel management in libraries is the same as other organizations. Are employees encouraged to voice their opinions and valued for their contribution? How are team members to collaborate if they don’t trust or value each other? Working on group projects or in teams necessitates mutual respect to accomplish

goals. Competitive, unproductive or paranoid employees need retraining for the benefit of all involved.

In academics, mutual respect aids student learning when librarians collaborate with their fellow faculty. Teachers may rely on their library colleagues as research experts and as resources for copyright issues. Thomas Leonhardt in "Behind the scenes: respect and open communication," (2003) writes "in order to be good stewards of all the resources entrusted to us, we must treat each other respectfully" (p.8). Active listening demonstrates respect and is a good communication skill for all employees to practice.

The ALA code's fifth principle matches biblical guidelines to personal relations. In the workplace, Christians serving the Lord should be better employees than those seeking to please an imperfect master.

ALA Principle VI

"We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions." In scripture, Paul and Peter focus on working for others' best interests. "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13). "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). This principle promotes humility and disapproves of prejudiced or self-promoting attitudes.

The code's sixth principle applies to leadership as a servant attitude. Davis and Tucker (2002) note those in leadership roles should demonstrate servanthood. "Fairness, consistency, loyalty, and concern for one's staff contrast favorably with those intent on self-promotion or engaged in manipulative behavior" (p.46). Leaders with discernment

focus on what is best for others and how their actions affect others rather than selfish arrogance. Dan Sanders, United Supermarkets' CEO, discusses servanthood and the mentoring process stating, "Great leaders understand servanthood comes first, before mentoring friendship. In sustainable organizations, connecting what people do on a daily basis with the higher purpose is paramount" (2008, p.66). Libraries, which are service industries and with predominately female employees, easily adapt to the servanthood management model. The ALA code's fifth & sixth principles match people centered servanthood management similar to the "good shepherd."

ALA Principle VII

"We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources." The prophet, Daniel serves as a model for personal beliefs and convictions in the workplace. "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way" (Daniel 1:8). Daniel firmly believed and followed his convictions, yet sought ways to be a good servant.

Principle VII is related to Principle I in supplying accurate and unbiased responses. The Harvard University Librarians Assembly when adopting ALA's 1981 professional ethics statement "assumed that the Statement in no way inhibits people from speaking their minds, but merely imposes on them an obligation to clarify to listeners whether they represent official or personal views" (Harvard, 1986, p.58). Everyone has the right to express their opinion, but both sides of issues should be explored to make informed decisions. Librarians should not promote their own agendas. Also, non-profit organizations and academic institutions usually have policies not to campaign for individual politicians.

Librarians are not devoid of morals, impassively responding to queries. They are responsible

adults and members of society. School and academic librarians also function as mentors and examples. While assisting researchers, the goal is to present materials supporting both sides of an issue without bias. David Isaacson, (2004) a university reference librarian, writes on how the librarian's personal and professional lives collide. He notes the "reference desk is not a soapbox" as it is "unethical to proselytize for our favorite causes with patrons who expect objective professional assistance" and "with or without buttons or signs, public service librarians are never completely neutral or objective information providers" (p. 50). It is the librarian's obligation to discuss ideas and suggest alternative points of view while assisting researchers with impartiality. Elizabeth Irish in her article "And ne'er the twain shall meet," (1992) concludes that the ALA code provides moral guidelines, but "if we hold our personal ethics higher than our professional ethics we should follow the higher value" (p. 16). Christian librarians have a higher calling to be true to their convictions as exemplified by Daniel. Librarians' professional responsibilities blend with ethical decisions placed in context with personal beliefs.

ALA Principle VIII

"We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession." Paul advises evaluating ourselves honestly so we may all work together with our best gifts. "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:3-5). Ephesians 4:11-13 also calls on individuals to work together. Paraphrasing Paul's words produces similarities to many management authors writing on employee teamwork.

Principle VIII addresses continuous improvement of each individual and the teamwork to accomplish tasks. All librarians and staff members assigned duties advance the mission of the library within the institution and the constituents it serves. In libraries, lifelong learning is a core element for all employees and is formalized through staff development.

Professional development and training opportunities should be encouraged within the bounds of budget and time constraints. Technology training is ongoing for employees to keep their skills current. Training opportunities should also include ethical guidelines. The Texas Library Association surveyed its members about their awareness and agreement with the ALA code of ethics and the types of ethical dilemmas encountered in libraries. Kathy Hoffman (2005) reported the results and concluded "the survey represents the first step in the association's efforts to study its members' views and knowledge of professional ethics" (p.200). However, having a code and knowing its principles are not enough. The ALA Committee on Professional Ethics provides scripts of skits to "raise ethical questions that affect librarians and their customers, and provide an opportunity for librarians and library advocates to discuss these issues" (ALA, Office, para. 2). Training with case studies or scenarios allows the participants to address situations before the event occurs. The ALA code's eighth principle for continuous improvement matches biblical aspirations to maturity.

Conclusion

Professional librarians following the ALA code of ethics integrate Christian moral values in the workplace as stated in Matthew 7:12 "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets," and in Luke 6:31, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." These values include fairness, impartiality, respect and service. Roy Patterson in his article "Connecting ethics to action" (2006) states "ethics, the guidelines a society or institution creates to direct actions of its members, are

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synonymous with morals but different from virtues, the ideals towards which one aims one's life" (p.2). Ethical decisions are based on upbringing, societal influence, and religious beliefs blended with professional principles. The word, ethics, is not in the Bible, but there are principles, virtues and guidelines to live ethically.

The Pepperdine University Code of Ethics serves as an example of blending legal and professional obligations with religious beliefs. The university's code concludes, "we are called to something greater and nobler than mere compliance with the law or a written code of ethics. We are called to 'live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received..., bearing one another in love' (Ephesians 4:1-2)" (Pepperdine 2007, para. 15). This paper presents the librarians code of ethics as a specific document presenting God-honoring principles. The professional activities and ethical decisions in libraries exhibit Christian teachings. †

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