

## Article: The Right Thing

One of many philosophical questions is, “What is the right thing to do?” This question is asked in every facet of life. Parents, teachers, employers and employees, young and old, men and women, are only a few of the many people who are faced with that dilemma every day. So often, the answer to that question flows through a myriad of philosophies based on one’s personal beliefs or cultural milieu.

The same philosophical question also infiltrates the lives of the redeemed. What does the answer to that question flow through for the children of God? Is it a philosophy based on personal experiences? Is it determined by cultural norms already in place, or as so often happens, an ever-changing view of what is right and wrong?

In my experience as a pastor, I find too often, the solution to this question falls more into the philosophy of utility. Utilitarianism was first expressed in the late eighteenth century by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. John Stuart Mill later refined it in the mid-nineteenth century. It became very popular and has since come to our shores. The basic elements of utility are as follows:

1. Envision a certain state of affairs in which all people are as happy and well off as can be.
2. Try to bring about that state of affairs insofar as that is possible.
3. Develop a course of conduct or action that would bring about, or promote, the greatest amount of happiness for all those who will be affected.

One cannot help but notice that all references to God or abstract moral rules written from heaven are absent. Right actions are those that produce the greatest possible balance between happiness over unhappiness, with personal happiness counted as equally important. The simple definition is this: “The end justifies the means used to achieve the desired end.” Since the desired end is happiness, then whatever is used to bring about that happiness is justified action or the answer to the question of what is the right thing to do.

While this approach may have some seductive elements to it, it is not the answer in the church for “the right thing.” In utility, the right thing is determined by the personal desires of the individual so he may achieve the greatest happiness. In further developments of utility, it included feelings as a judging factor for the right thing. I see this in young couples who choose to cohabitate over the commitment of marriage based on what brings them the most happiness and avoids unhappiness. If cohabitation achieves the goal of the couple’s happiness, then it is a justified means to that end—so says utility. It does not matter what the Word of God says. All that matters is my happiness. Utility can be used to justify any sin, any false doctrine preached from the pulpit, any pagan notion taught from the isle. In addition, it is used to ignore one’s vow in the ministry to let the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions guide and guard the church’s practice.

I do want to point out two things here. I am not saying that one cannot seek happiness. Plenty of texts in the Bible speak of being *happy*. Yet when the Bible does speak this way, being happy is more in tune with *blessed* as a state of being rather than an emotional state of euphoria. I also acknowledge that there are times in the church when utility can be useful in reaching decisions. Many decisions made by a congregation include utility. Questions concerning new roofs, lawn care, and the like include utility. To such questions there is no biblical injunction to guide them. That being said, when it comes to theological decisions of preaching, teaching, and practice, there is an already existing authority that governs “the right thing.”

The right thing in the church is the voice of God to His people. God speaks to the issue of marriage. He addresses life and the need to protect it. His Word is very clear that male and female are the only two genders He created and sustains. Our goal in the church is not happiness. Our goal in the church is faithfulness to His Word. What makes us happy changes from day to day. The Word of God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It does not change, and because it does not change, it is the governing factor for our lives in the kingdom. We live

under His rule because we have been brought into his righteousness.

When an infant is baptised, it is “blessed.” This is a holy state of affairs rather than an emotional experience. That child has been transformed from an enemy of God to His dearly beloved. In and with this grace, the child grows up under His rule with a heart of joy that relishes what God says and what He continues to do for him. The continuous outpouring of forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper is a great blessing. It may make a person emotionally happy or may not, but it certainly feeds them with Jesus’ body and blood, which has atoned for all sin. When the broken heart in confession falls before the holy Lord, the words of absolution may or may not evoke emotions of happiness, but those words definitely bestow a heavenly gift of forgiveness and life.

The life that receives these blessings is the life that has peace between God and man. It is a life that is filled with love for God and love for the neighbour. It is a life that is led by faith in Christ, whose death and resurrection is the right thing for us. Jesus already did the right thing. He baptised us into the right thing. He feeds us the right thing and speaks the right thing into our souls. The only place for the church to look for the answer to the right thing is to the crucified Christ and His holy Word. In Him is the right thing. He is the right thing. The gifts of heaven showered upon us are the right thing. That does not change.