

Against Christianity
Peter J. Leithart
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Week 4: Chapter 4
“Against Ethics”

Most of us don't think in terms of “ethics,” but we all live ethical lives and participate in ethical structures whenever we make moral decisions, obey the law, strive to be virtuous, or observe social norms and behaviors. At heart, ethics is about how we order our lives together. In this chapter, Leithart situates the topic of Christian social and moral behavior within the context of ancient Roman and contemporary democratic ethics to show how the Church offers a very different conception of virtue and far more comprehensive paradigm for ethics. But without the shared communal expressions of language, myth and ritual the Church's gospel degenerates into “an anti-culture,” or what Leithart has been referring to as “Christianity.”

Opening Question:

What are some common settings in which people today often speak about ethics?

Study Questions:

1. In this chapter, Leithart discusses how ethics is spoken and thought about in the early Church, in ancient Rome, and in modern American liberalism. Spend some time discussing the features of these three approaches to social behavior and governance. What love or priority orders how they do ethics?
2. Leithart states that the Church's “ethos was to be embodied in the structures that gave shape to the Church's living-together.” What are these structures and how does Leithart relate them to liberalism, to Judaism, and to ancient Rome?
3. Leithart begins the chapter by saying that the gospel is about the “transformation of hearts and lives,” including social and political life. Here Leithart takes issue with the often painful tension Christians experience between grace and works, or truth and effects. But regardless of how we feel, Leithart argues, without transformation there is no message, no witness, and no Church. Can you think of some other common separations within “Christianity” and within modernity that might impede Christians from being transformed?
4. Many Christians are interested in cultural change and renewal. In section 20, Leithart draws from the work of sociologist Philip Rieff, observing that “cultural change is a change in law” and that “changes in law are bound up with changes in priesthood.” What does he mean by this and how might it change the way we approach our particular cultural contexts?