

# Christian Ethics and Distance Education

Silas Sudarman<sup>1</sup>  
[silas.sudarman@sttbk.ac.id](mailto:silas.sudarman@sttbk.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>  
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Baptis Kalvari, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Ever since the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic as a worldwide crisis, the educational approach across the world has undergone a transformation. Both teachers and students are using an online method of teaching and learning. In applying this method, they experience a new challenge related to the moral and ethical aspects of online learning or distance education. This study aims to determine the application of Christian ethics in distance education. It uses a qualitative approach. The study suggests that incorporating Christian ethics, which are founded on the principles of God's teachings, should be integrated into distance education, as secular ethical principles are insufficient in establishing the value of absolute truth. Utilizing Christian ethical principles as a compass can serve as a reliable method for addressing moral and ethical inquiries. It has the potential to positively impact individuals who follow it. By embracing it as a solution, one can reduce or even conquer any challenges associated with ethical dilemmas.*

**Keywords:** *Christian Ethics, Moral, Distance Education, Learning.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

After the announcement of Covid-19 being a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, the educational systems in countries impacted by the virus underwent substantial modifications (Putri, 2021). The traditional in-person teaching and learning practices were halted due to the pandemic. Distance education becomes an alternative so that the learning process can still be carried out. New problems arise when distance learning is implemented nationally, especially in Indonesia. One of the challenges is the ethical issue in the online learning process. Of course, this is also related to countries that have been implementing face-to-face learning processes, including Indonesia. This distance education occurred suddenly without an in-depth study of the plan, but every country experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic was forced to carry out distance education. Based on these problems, it is necessary to examine the extent of morality related to ethics in distance education and how Christian ethics views it.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach because the problems discussed in the research only describe, outline, and illustrate Christian ethics in distance education. In this research, the researcher does not manipulate or give certain treatment to variables or design something that is expected to happen to variables, but all activities, circumstances, events, component aspects, or variables run as they are. The research instrument used as a data collection tool in this study is by means of literature and analyzing selected texts that have relevance to Christian ethics in distance education.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The word “ethics” comes from the Latin word *ethica*, which originally comes from the Greek word *ethos*. It means moral character, temperament, and customs. Morality comes from the Latin word *mos*, and it refers to moral character, behavioral habits and customs. Both having the same etymology, ethics, and morality both refer to norms of conduct that should be externalized into customs and traditions and internalized into moral character and virtues (Haiming, 2021). Singer says that ethics, also called moral philosophy, is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong (Singer, 2021). Haiming explains that although ethics and morality share a similar origin in their etymology, the two terms are used inconsistently and inappropriately in everyday contexts. According to Haiming, the Chinese understanding of ethics is related to factual laws that govern interpersonal relationships and the norms that guide them. Conversely, in Western culture, ethics only pertains to the norms governing interpersonal behavior. Therefore, it can be inferred that the factual laws of interpersonal behavior and the norms governing interpersonal behavior are distinct concepts that cannot be equated with ethics. For instance, the use of knives and forks during meals is a Western cultural norm, while many Indians prefer to eat with their fingers as part of their traditional cultural practice, which is unrelated to ethics.

Christian ethics is theology, seen as a means of determining which people, actions and attitudes receive God’s approval and which do not (Frame, 2008: 3-384). This definition shows that Christian ethics is God-centered and Bible-centered. This implies that one should collect and combine guidance from all sections of the Bible that are pertinent to a particular ethical issue, and then exercise good judgment in utilizing that guidance in diverse real-life scenarios. Grudem’s emphasis in systematic theology is on what God wants us to believe and know, whereas the emphasis in Christian ethics is on what God wants us to do and what attitude He wants us to have (Grudem, 2018). Theology focuses on ideas, whereas ethics focuses on situations in life. Theology tells how one should think while ethics tells how to live as a Christian.

Christian ethical principles are not centered on secular ethical theory because secular ethics is not subject to the moral authority of the Bible, but most people who think about ethics, both Christian and non-Christian, are impressed by teleological, deontological, and existential principles (Grudem, 2018). There are very different principles, such as the theological principle that good deeds maximize the happiness of living beings. That is, good deeds produce goodness. Christians highlight the notion that virtuous actions, done in the name of God, bring honor to Him, as the Bible teaches that what magnifies God also benefits His followers.

Non-Christians, such as Aristotle, also emphasize that doing good brings happiness. Christian ethics is goal-oriented, seeking God's glory and human happiness, while non-Christians only seek the happiness of themselves and others. Deontological principle: good action is a response to duty, even if it requires self-sacrifice. Secular thinkers, such as Plato and Kant, also recognized the importance of duty but had difficulty determining where it could be found and what exactly it was, whereas the existential principle is that good actions come from a good inner character. An individual of good character is not a hypocrite who performs benevolent acts solely for personal gratification; rather, their kindness stems from a genuinely virtuous heart. Scripture emphasizes that the only righteousness of value is the righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees cleaned the outside of the cup, just an outward act, but not the motive of the heart (Matthew 23:25), while non-Christian writers, such as Aristotle, also frequently emphasizes the importance of character, virtue, and inner truth, but how to show what virtue means. Grudem does not use this principle but replaces it with the ethical principle that virtue does not emphasize whether certain actions are right or wrong, but the moral character of the individual. In virtue ethics, the primary concern is how virtuous a person is because the Bible teaches that believers should strive to develop Christ-like character: Paul says that God has predestined believers "...to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29, NKJV), and "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1, NKJV) (Grudem, 2018).

In its simplest form, distance education refers to teaching and learning that takes place where there is a physical and geographical separation between teachers and learners in both time and place. Keegan defines distance education as a process where students are taught and learn while separated from the teacher (Keegan, 1996). Wedemeyer emphasizes more on self-learning in the learning process and puts forward the strategy of learning anytime and anywhere and taking responsibility for one's own learning (Wedemeyer, 1981). Holmberg emphasizes that students are the center of education and freedom (Holmberg, 1994: 47).

In distance education, some thought has been given to learner acceptance and retention. Reed and Sork say that in distance education, however, there is some evidence to suggest that admission criteria and admission systems should consider the demands on learners when participating in such learning and programs (Reed and Sork, 1990: 30-40). Cropley and Kahl assert that psychological factors, such as internal motivation or skills in self-regulation, self-evaluation, goal setting, and the like...become very important in distance education settings (Cropley and Kahl, 1983: 227-239). If this is true, distance educators should have obligations to determine that students possess the required traits and skills to increase the likelihood of their success. And if students as admissions are limited to possessing only the necessary traits and skills, what are the implications for the openness and accessibility so often hailed as advantages of programs offered in distance models? Institutions have an obligation to protect students from failure.

Any educational program needs to instill ethical values, including distance education, so ethical standards are needed. Keegan identified six key elements of distance education: 1) semi-permanent separation between teachers and students during the learning process, 2) the influence of educational organizations both in planning and preparing learning materials and in providing student support services, 3) the use of print, audio, video or computer media to bring teachers and students

together, 4) the provision of two-way communication so that students can benefit or, even initiate dialogue (this is what distinguishes it from the use of technology in education, 5) learners as individuals, not groups, 6) education as a form of industry (Keegan, 1990: 384-386). Ethical principles should guide professional behavior in daily practice as a consistent guide for decision-making. In distance learning, there are several principles that need to be considered. Farahani says there are four principles in distance learning, the first is the principle of commitment to students; the second principle is a commitment to the distance education system; the third is commitment to the profession and commitment as an educator professional; and the fourth principle is the ethical commitment of instructional designers in distance education systems (Farahani, 2012: 890-894).

Based on the above description, ethical principles in distance education are needed not only to instill ethical values but also to understand the impact of the distance learning process on learners and the quality of education. Therefore, Christian ethical principles in distance education are applied in the learning process.

First, embedding Christian values. Distance education has supported many learning activities in providing opportunities for students to improve the quality of learning and develop their learning styles according to their needs, but it is still necessary to instill Christian values in every activity organized by educational institutions. Holmberg, B. (74) says that distance education promotes students' freedom of choice and independence (Holmberg, 1985). Distance education is in dire need of moral ethics that become the standard foundation in the distance learning process because it opens up enormous opportunities that did not exist before, in various ways that can strengthen their faith in the social context in which students live. Rogers & Howell concluded that distance education or learning provides great potential to help achieve the mission of the institution. Ultimately, it is the student who makes the decision (Rogers, 2004). If there is no attention from each institution, then it is conceivable that students will make their own decisions about values according to the truth they have. Of course, related to this, it is very necessary to instill values that can be the right foundation when students make decisions for themselves. Campbell also mentions that the values given are opinions that are very relative and subjective or quite objective from the truth, even universally done with reason and justified on the basis of exceeding personal interests or benefits (Campbell, 2010: 203-221). Actually, absolute truth does not mean that all actions are relative, there is no right or wrong. Soltis criticizes the teaching principles of professional conduct as if they were arbitrary or subjective (Soltis, 1986: 2-4). If one wants to develop true values in teaching, then one must discard relativism and try to articulate teaching ethics and let individuals determine right and wrong for themselves based on their interpreted subjective situations. It cannot be denied that individual interpretations of ethics vary widely and are very complex, although it is necessary to identify ethical principles that are important in distance education.

When all secular moral ethical principles cannot determine absolute truth values, it is necessary to return to biblical principles that have absolute authority and truth. Grudem disagrees with the principle of ethical relativism because of his view that no one is morally right or morally wrong, only likes one thing and dislikes another, and expresses his emotions in ethical language. This view is heavily influenced by Joseph Fletcher, known for his book *Situation Ethics* (Soltis, 2018). The Bible teaches absolute right and wrong, but Christian ethics rejects ethical relativism. There are six characteristics in inculcating Christian ethics, namely: 1)

Christian ethics must be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture which gives ethical principles to be observed because Scripture has greater power and authority than human words. 2) Clarity in the explanation of ethical teachings, meaning that the Bible is the only source of absolute moral standards for human beings, and must be taught by the Bible. Subject to Scripture, it is right to consider subjective perceptions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. 3) Application to life, meaning that ethics is an application to life, to explain how God wants people to live according to His Will. 4) Evangelistic focus, Christian ethics is not built on the tradition of liberal theology, meaning those who deny the absolute truth and internal consistency of the Bible, or deny the authority of the Bible. 5) The hope for the unity of the church in terms of ethics, Jesus is still working to perfect His church so that before Him it shines brightly without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it may be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27), and He has given the gift of equipping the church “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;” (Ephesians 4:13, NKJV), and finally, the need for understanding ethics because there is still much confusion and ignorance in teaching understandable ethics (Soltis, 2018).

In distance education, one of the things that needs to be considered is etiquette in communication. Of course, this relates to politeness in communication during the distance learning process. When online learners actively participate in class discussions and engage in a dynamic exchange of ideas, the discussion mediated through computerized applications then becomes a forum of various thought processes, opinions, and communication styles. Then it will lead to a lot of disruptive behavior and incivility, either through posted comments, discussion rebuttals, or e-mails that can occur at any time (Mintu-Wimsatt, Kernek & Lozada, 2010: 264). Therefore, etiquette is necessary in online lessons, otherwise online interactions may be damaged so that students hesitate to participate in subsequent discussions for fear of being belittled for their comments or further attacks (Hunt, 2009: 19). To avoid unpleasant situations, it is highly recommended that instructors include in the syllabus an outline detailing their etiquette expectations (Hunt, 2010: 266).

Second, purity of speech. The Bible says that God created man “in His image” (Genesis 1:27), meaning that He made man to be like Him and also represent Him on earth (Grudem, 1994: 442-450). This implies that a believer’s entire life “reveals” something about the Creator, even when he utters certain words. This is why God wants believers to emulate His moral character in their lives. Using words that may offend others when interacting at a distance or online learning, should also be a concern for every instructor. Some students may take it as a joke, but when it offends others in a discussion forum, it is not ethically justified. Such words are what Paul had in mind when he spoke: “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks” (Ephesians 5:4, NKJV); “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29). Paul encourages “all believers including learners as believers”, who are engaged in any activity, that they should conduct themselves in a manner characterized by “not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the

doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (Titus 2:10). This, of course, includes speaking in any and all circumstances.

Paul also urges not only the purity of speech but also of thought: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8). Therefore, words that have the connotation of offending others or belittling people, perhaps even cursing others, are not allowed in Christian ethics, so every word must be mutually constructive of each other.

Third, telling the truth or a lie. The definition of lying refers not only to all types of deception including oral and written statements but also actions intended to mislead or deceive others. Grudem defines lying as asserting in speech or writing something that is believed to be false (Grudem, 2018). He mentions that there are some actions that are not related to the definition of lying, namely: 1) Silence. This says nothing, so silence is not an affirmation of anything; note Jesus’ silence in Matthew 26:63; 2) Nonverbal actions. An example of this would be leaving the house lights on when going out on the weekend. Then someone there concludes that there is someone in the house; 3) Rumors. This is not a true affirmation if properly understood; 4) Hyperbole. Hyperbolic statements are not meant to be taken literally; they use something that cannot possibly be exaggerated for rhetorical effect; 5) Unintentional lies. Lying is wrong because God has repeatedly said that, also lying fails to emulate the character of God who never lies because He cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18).

The challenge of moral ethics in distance learning is the immoral behavior of students as learners and educators in the use of information technology in institutions. These moral challenges are new actions that require new codes of ethics, such as copying software and hacking, or other immoral actions such as plagiarism and privacy violations that are easy to commit and very difficult to control. There are six types of immoral behavior that are the subject of general discussion (Brey, 2006: 91-102).

### **Digital plagiarism**

Plagiarism has always existed in education; it is academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is very easily committed by students by cutting and pasting information obtained from the internet or other information media to create a text or paper that looks like the original work. This is increasingly difficult to address due to the unavailability of documentation in traditional sources.

### **Copyright infringement and software theft**

Unauthorized copying of copyrighted media in the form of texts, music, and movies has spread in the community. This also happens among students. According to Cohen and Cornwell (2-5), software piracy behavior by students is seen as ethically and normatively acceptable behavior (Cohen, 1989: 2-5). Current student behavior seems to be in line with the development of the information age, where the internet increasingly serves as the most important source of information. Hinman (31-35) argues that the structure of the Internet is particularly damaging to the idea of private intellectual property on the web. First, drag and drop technology, as well as cut and paste, makes it very easy to record significant chunks of text without having to record the source from which they were taken (saving an entire web page, on the other hand, will usually save the URL automatically as well). Second, it seems that permission to copy is structurally built into Web technologies in at least two ways.

First, as mentioned above when opening a site, the browser automatically copies the viewed page to the local machine before it can view it. Second, the structure of hyperlinks makes it possible to include a direct reference (the page itself) to the web page itself (Hinman, 2002: 31-35).

With the new understanding of accessing and using and collecting abundant information in cyberspace, it will be increasingly difficult to find adequate moral ethics because traditional laws relating to intellectual property are increasingly unclear, as Hinman (31-35) argues that the original concept no longer makes a distinction between original and copy. Indeed, the concept of “original” tends to lose most of its meaning. The Internet has changed the moral outlook of academics, intensified some traditional issues such as plagiarism, and opened up some new uncharted territories where originals and copies stand in a new relationship to each other (Hinman, 2002: 31-35).

Of all the explanations for all the difficulties in determining an adequate moral ethic, this can only be answered by the Christian ethic, the biblical view that forbids stealing, “thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19; Leviticus 19:11). Stealing is an affront to God (Proverbs 30:9) and was one of the injustices that led to the destruction of the temple by God (Jeremiah 7:9). In fact, one who steals out of want is under full punishment even if man forgives him (Proverbs 30:9; 6:30 - 31). Feet and hands participate in the guilt of the thief (Leviticus 5:1). The same moral condemnation appears in the New Testament. Theft is included in the list of sins that have no place in the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10) or that no Christian should commit (1 Peter 4:15). It is behavior that grieves the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:28, 30).

The Bible provides a pattern of moral reasoning that focuses on behavior and character, which comes from the character of God as the creator of the universe and its contents. Grudem says that the ultimate basis of Christian ethics is the moral character of God. For two reasons, the first is that God’s character is good (Grudem, 2018). When the Bible speaks of God’s moral character, it speaks of a “good” God. “You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes.” (Psalm 119:68). “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4, NKJV). Much of the Bible emphasizes that God’s moral character is good. He is a good God and is also loving, just, merciful, faithful, honest, and holy. Second, God approves of creatures according to His moral character. The Bible shows that God desires and approves of moral beings who conform to His moral character. If God is loving, just, merciful, faithful, honest, holy, and so on, then He also wants believers to act in ways that are loving, just, merciful, faithful, honest, holy, and so on.

The juridical view of theft favors civil rather than criminal justice, although the excessive fees charged may be criminal in nature. Stealing and slaughtering a sheep that did not belong to him required fivefold compensation (2 Samuel 12:6). Stolen animals found alive required double compensation (Exodus 22:4). A thief caught stealing paid double (Exodus 22:7); if he fled, the guard had to swear innocence before the Lord (Exodus 22:10-11). Disputed ownership of stolen property was decided by God, with the guilty paying double (Exodus 22:9).

### **3.1 Hacking**

Hacking is breaking into a computer system for unauthorized purposes, which may or may not be malicious. Hacking allows one to snoop on one’s personal



computer through remote access, intentionally modify or destroy files to which one is not granted access, release computer viruses, steal passwords, and other unauthorized activities or files, and reveal personal information. Whether done intentionally or unintentionally, hacking is clearly morally problematic.

### **3.2 Inappropriate use of computer resources**

Misuse of resources for improper purposes, for example, using institutional accounts for things that have nothing to do with institutional interests or are not in accordance with institutional policies.

### **3.3 Harassment and hate speech**

Electronic messaging can include WhatsApp, Email, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Communication over the web can be used to send threatening, obscene, inflammatory or harassing messages. This includes discriminatory messages, which are used to disparage individuals or groups based on gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, age or disability. Such messages are generally unacceptable in an academic environment as educators seek to ensure that the classroom serves as a safe environment and does not pose a threat to students or faculty.

### **3.4 Violation of privacy and confidentiality of information**

Generally, privacy is considered an individual right, and every country has privacy protection laws. Nowadays, almost all institutions have policies to regulate electronic grade transfer which is considered to be very privacy sensitive. In many (conventional) institutions, policies are limited to student privacy policies in protecting student records from being accessed by unauthorized third parties. However, institutions experience many obstacles in securing information or records in electronic form, including online teaching when the learning process is not monitored by unauthorized parties such as administrators, or public networks. Therefore, an ethical moral policy is needed so that the privacy security of students and hackers can be overcome, including software to detect plagiarism.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

With the principles of Christian ethics rooted in biblical truth, it is certain that behavioral problems arising from distance education related to technological advances can at least be overcome, although this is largely determined by how these values are understood and lived in each individual. Christian ethics are rules or guidelines that are expected to be carried out and used by users so that they have a positive impact, and can provide good direction. The obstacles that have been the subject of general discussion are expected to be minimized and even overcome.

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