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Recovering a Worldview of Moral Clarity

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We must honestly face the fact that this post-Christian morality is deeply rooted in a subtle form of atheism. Though most Americans habitually claim a belief in God, and even some form of Christian identity, Americans order their lives as if God does not exist. Otherwise, we would be required to care what God thinks, obey what God commands, and submit to His authority—or fear and face the consequences. It seems that millions of Americans claim to believe in a god they do not fear.

There is precious little fear of God evident in modern life. Biblical morality is dismissed as antiquarian, repressive, and intolerant. Of course, the only way to be understood as contemporary, progressive, and tolerant in this culture is to forfeit any claim to know what is right or wrong.

Simon Blackburn, professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge, celebrates the death of God as the source of human liberation. The disappearance of God, he says, is by no means a threat to ethics. “It is a necessary clearing of the ground, on the way to revealing ethics for what it really is.” What it really is, according to Blackburn, is a negotiated morality and a human search for meaning. What ethics is not, he would explain, is a studied consideration of what the Creator expects of His creatures.

Without God, Blackburn instructs, we must make our own laws. This argument is the central thesis of the modern moral revolt. With Friedrich Nietzsche, modern philosophy declared that God is dead. Since God does not exist, morality is nothing more than a human construction. Since morality is our own construction, we can deconstruct and reconstruct a morality more to our liking. We are our own judges, our own umpires, and our own gods.

This explains the deep roots of today’s moral rebellion. There is very little moral consensus on the most important ethical issues of the day. Americans are divided over issues as basic as the sanctity of human life, the basic structure of sexual morality, and the integrity of the family. Issues of fierce political debate range from abortion to homosexuality, euthanasia, embryo research, genetic therapies, and a host of new moral quandaries. Confusion is the order of the day.

Nothing can be taken for granted. The moral revolutionaries have made great gains in the political sphere, in the schools, and in the courts. The media elite is largely committed to their cause, and the selfish individualism of our culture makes the nation a fertile ground for moral revolution.

As the late Christopher Lasch noted, “The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation . . . but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” That is, people want a feel-good morality that affirms them as basically good, excuses their immoral acts as “indiscretions,” and confirms their basic assumption that right and wrong are mere matters of opinion.

This basic shift in the moral foundation of the society explains why a moral recovery will not be easily or quickly accomplished. The moral revolution has been underway for decades now, and most living Americans have been drinking deeply from the poisoned wells of secular moral reasoning. No God, no fear, no judgment—no problem.

In the midst of this moral confusion, our Christian task is to recover a biblical moral grounding, to live like redeemed people, and to help a fragmenting society pick up the pieces.

The first task is biblical recovery. Too many Christians live out of the world's moral wisdom, rather than the wisdom of God as revealed in the Scriptures. The Bible presents us with a moral framework embedded in the Gospel, and directs our lives to an obedience that glorifies God and leads to true human happiness.

Second, we must live before the watching world like redeemed people, demonstrating the joyful and liberating freedom of living under God's rule by grace. Our churches must be seen as communities of believers growing in grace—living out the moral authenticity of the Christian life.

Third, we must help a fragmenting and hurting society to pick up the pieces. Love of neighbor compels us to seek the good of others, even when they will not seek it for themselves. Christians are sinners saved by grace. By grace, we can help others to find moral sanity on the other side of confusion and rebellion.

The same-sex marriage issue presents the Church with a challenge of monumental significance. We must rebuild and sustain a moral context and an entire worldview in which a defense of marriage makes sense—a world in which same-sex marriage would be literally unthinkable.

Our task is the Scriptural recovery of ethical courage and moral clarity. This is no small task in a world that doesn't even know the difference between good and evil. Then again, we don't get to choose our own battles.

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