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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

Who's In The Right?

By Ron Allen

In a recent legislative debate, the topic of abortion was revisited. Once more questions of morality of right and wrong were vigorously canvassed. One legislator, a professing Christian, and opposed to abortion on demand, was said by another lawmaker on the other side of the question, to be unqualified to participate in the debate on the ground that he was 'religious'; his religion made his views biased and untenable.

That such a thing could be said in public without generating a resounding backlash speaks volumes about a major re-ordering which has taken place in Western societies in the last one hundred years.

At the start of the twentieth century, it was taken for granted that right and wrong were categories based squarely on the existence of God. Today, in Europe, religion and morality are almost entirely divorced. In North America the self-same split is well under way. In some instances the sundering has gone further: Religion is not just discredited in the public domain, it is viewed as a threat to morality; and enemy of right and the cause of things that are wrong.

Among the factors contributing to this shift is the proliferation of scientific explanations of the world, its systems and processes. Socio-biologists believe they can now account for moral sensibility by appealing to mental mutations that have proved useful over long periods in a law of survival of the fittest.

In his "Evolutionary Naturalism," author Michael Ruse says that values of right and wrong are no more than adaptations; such as a better understanding of biology might incline us to go *against* morality. Our sense of obligation is an illusion which we might do well to be rid of if we can.

Ideas such as these increasingly reside in the minds of

writers, artists, movie-makers, law-makers, public officials, leading professionals and our next-door neighbors. More and more voices tell us that morality—right and wrong—are matters for private opinion only. If a congressman—a married one—thinks there is nothing wrong with sending lewd pictures of himself to women, then who is to say he is wrong?

But it is more complicated than that. In the brave new world where objective values are discredited, the public figure who thinks it is right to have his mistresses because it pleases him, believes it is wrong when he is outed in the press; wrong for him to be judged.

In the debate over abortion, it is argued that a woman's choice with regard to her pregnancy should not be called

wrong. What *is* wrong, however, is for persons to have a view of the embryo, informed by belief in a supreme life-giver. Now *that* is wrong, very wrong!

Examples such as the one just cited are not hard to find. It means this: Though a view of reality is coming into vogue that rules out ultimate categories of right and wrong, no one is prepared to live as if they truly believe this to be so. In fact it might be more correct to say that no one *can* live as if there is no final right or wrong. Existence is steeped

in and stamped with moral considerations.

A meeting of leaders of the world's wealthiest nations meets in Vancouver, Canada. During the summit, riots break out in the streets of the city. Stores are looted, cars are upended; there is fire-bombing and bloodshed. What is the mayhem all about? The hostility is being directed at the leaders of the developed world. People think those states are using their economic clout to maintain high standards of living at the expense of poorer countries and their populations. They believe the G8 are

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Five times in 1 Corinthians verse 9 Paul says he lives the way he does in order to win people. Win them to what? In one instance he says he aims to *save* some. Save from what? The unexpressed assumption is that people are in danger, at risk of terrible loss. Is this idea realistic in today’s world?


In our time, vastly expanded knowledge and technical expertise has given human beings untold power over nature. But this ascendancy is not matched by a corresponding mastery of the world within. We cannot rule ourselves. Despite our brilliance and our power, we experience interior futility and deficit. Despite incredible luxury in some quarters, millions starve. We have money for weapons but not enough for food. Obsessed with security, we remain incredibly insecure. Hell-bent on pleasure, we are bored senseless. Among rich and poor, millions of lives are in ruins because of these things.

Modern humanity is a long way from penitence, but even if the biblical concept of sin is dismissed, it is difficult to deny the need for some kind of salvation. Paul said that he lived in the manner he did in order to save as many as possible. Specifically he was referring to his policy of becoming all

things to all men; as far as possible adopting the customs and religious taboos of other cultures in order to realize the goal of their salvation.

Many think that the only way the gospel can be transmitted is for a preacher to preach it. Paul did some preaching, but he did much more; he chose a redemptive lifestyle. Instead of insisting on his own religious traditions, he set them aside when he was with people who did not share them, in order to facilitate fellowship.

In Judaism, which Paul championed before he met Jesus, the most highly developed idea of God was one to whom men and women could turn and find mercy. The onus was on humans to turn. But in the gospel, God turns to man. God takes the initiative and comes to be with man. God sets aside the prerogatives and freedoms of deity and submits to the limitations of human tradition and culture. He comes among the ignorant and squalid, seeking fellowship. He was not ashamed to call them his brothers.

Paul was liberated by Christ from long-entrenched patterns of devout and/or secular behavior, and was thereby enabled to mingle with people who were different, and share their lives with them. We have nought to lose for ourselves and much to gain for others, by being truly part of the human race. 

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perpetrators of unjust (unrighteous) policies. “It’s wrong,” they say.

A few months ago it was reported that the Chinese government was spying on its trading partners, hacking into our systems and stealing our secrets. We were incensed! “It not right,” we said. “These people ought to be held accountable to an ethical standard which we all know exists.”

It wasn’t long afterward that Edward Snowden let it out that the Chinese were not the only nation behaving so ‘unjustly.’ The interesting thing about the Snowden affair is that some think he has committed a terrible wrong while others think he has acted on high principle; that he is ‘in the right.’ But there

doesn’t seem to be anyone who believes that Snowden’s actions are morally neutral.

While a large percentage of people in our day have ceased to believe in an objective arbiter for right and wrong, they have not been able to stop themselves from acting as if right and wrong really do exist independently of human preference. Right and wrong are such universal intuitions that there is a remarkable level of agreement across cultures that some things are manifestly evil: suffering, child abuse, homicide; to name a few.

Some would argue that this is easily explained because all reasonable persons figure out what makes them feel safe, comfortable and happy, and what does not. Reason alone is →

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not sufficient. People might claim that common sense is all we have, but they continue to act as if there is a higher reference point for right and wrong, and everyone is supposed to know it is there.

In an episode of Seinfeld, a fire alarm sounds, and George, in a rush to save himself, knocks women and children out of his way. Later, some of them recognize George and point him out as the man who behaved so despicably. They turn on him and condemn him angrily. George tries to claim the moral high ground. He says that he is really 'in the right' because in knocking women and children off their feet, he was clearing a path for others to escape!

It was perfectly 'reasonable' for George to look to his own safety first. But this did not conform to an idea of right and wrong that others believed existed, and which they expected George to be aware of.

Everyone at some time or other seeks to hold someone else accountable to an objective standard of rightness. Even those who disallow the dogmatic assertions of religionists are quick to replace such with dogma of their own. Effectively they assert that it is *wrong* for anyone to promote a conception of objective right and wrong.

There is another aspect to this. Even when people agree that a particular course of action is right, they later sometimes change their minds and concede that what was done was wrong.

In my home country (Australia), successive governments removed children from the parents of indigenous families because they thought it was the right course of action for the children's sake. Fifty years later it has become clear that it was a terribly wrong thing to do. The harvest of sorrow has been abundant and terrible for those concerned. Even when humans set out to do right, they can in time be proved wrong. Even the community consensus is not an ultimate guide in matters of social justice.

Even though the quest to segregate religion from questions of right and wrong in the public domain is enjoying notable success, this has not stopped people thinking and talking about right and wrong. If there is a single theme dominating the public conversation these days it is this: Things are not right; things are not as they should be in our society; there's a lot that needs to be put right.

People want the world to be set right. Questions of justice and injustice are ubiquitous. But a problem has emerged since God was told that he wasn't needed anymore. If God does not exist, doing right loses its rationale, it loses its impetus. If we really want right to be important, we cannot at the same time hold that the universe is morally blank. Only if God exists can right exist in any ultimate sense. To say that people ought to behave in a certain way is unintelligible unless they are accountable to a supreme rightness.

If ever there was a time when we need an absolute benchmark for right, it is now. If we ever needed a final

criterion for correct thought and action, it is now. If we ever needed an ethical ultimatum that did not tower over us to make us frightened, daunted and discouraged, it is in this present day. If ever we needed a cosmic rightness to be our friend; to invite, inspire and help us—now is the time. The time is ripe to investigate once more the New Testament book of Romans, which in the 16th century changed history, lifting Europe out of the dark ages.

In his first chapter, Paul says he is not ashamed of the gospel because in it "*a righteousness from God has been revealed*" (Romans 1:17). The word *righteousness* had a long and rich usage in Israel's sacred writings. Righteousness is God's rightness, his rectitude. Righteousness is God acting in keeping with himself. God is righteous because he is always in the right. "*With him there is no variableness or shadow of turning*" (James 1:17).

Out of the conception of God as the center of paramount 'right-ness', comes the Hebrew understanding of righteousness in human experience. A party is only ever righteous in the context of the righteousness of God. Right and wrong in human affairs are matters that require settlement before God the righteous judge, who always does what is right. He will

never perjure himself by calling evil good or good evil. Someone judged righteous by God is, on that account, in the right—right with God.

God brings his righteousness to bear on the human situation. In the Old Testament, his actions on his people's behalf are said to be righteous acts. When evil prospers and the innocent suffer, God moves to put things right. Mankind experiences God's righteousness in his saving acts' his coming to help them. For this reason righteousness is closely associated with the idea of salvation. "*I am bringing my righteousness near; my salvation will not be delayed*" (Isaiah 46:13).

Ideas such as these lie behind Paul's pronouncement that 'a righteousness from God has been revealed.' This revealing has happened in Jesus Christ and continues to unfold in the preaching of the gospel; the

"gospel regarding his Son" (Romans 1:3). This gospel makes known God's rightness, God's self-consistency, his faithfulness to his own nature. God brings his rightness to bear on the world, on the human situation.

The rightness (righteousness) of God is God's action; what God does and what God provides. That idea is underlined when Paul says: "*...A righteousness that is by faith from first to last...*" (Romans 1:17).

This begs the question: If it is God's own righteousness in view, are we being told that when God acts, he acts by faith? Not at all! The text makes sense only if the faith is in human beings, and has regard to the righteousness *from God* (1:17). Therefore the righteousness revealed in the gospel is God's 'in the rightness' made available to men

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This gospel makes known God's rightness, God's self-consistency, his faithfulness to his own nature. God brings his rightness to bear on the world, on the human situation.

Great Need and Astonishing Reluctance

By Paul Tournier

Periodically in the church the prodigious news of free salvation becomes indistinct because of the very efforts the church makes exhorting men to obey, to be virtuous, and to do good works, so that little by little these appear to be the condition for salvation. Then the anxiety about damnation rises once more on the horizon. Periodically, also, the church is renewed by men who discover afresh the free gift of God and dry it out...

Such a one was Luther. Nothing illustrates better this periodic oscillation of outlook than the history of Protestantism. Luther, an impetuous man, driven to despair by the feeling of guilt, after vainly plunging into penances and mortifications, discovered afresh, in his turn, that salvation is not earned, but is a gift of God, free and offered in advance to the sinner, and that it is sufficient to accept it by faith. From his cry of relief, the Reformation was born, like an explosion, at a time when the church was insisting on works, merits and indulgences, all of which laid the cost of salvation upon men's own souls.

Thanks to God, in spite of schism, the Reformation profoundly influenced the Catholic church itself, and it is in its turn reformed in this respect. But as time passed, moral-ism, the religion of good works, gradually re-entered the heart of Protestantism. Now it reigns in the majority of churches that sprang from the Reformation . . .

We cannot hide from ourselves the fact that this tremendous affirmation of free salvation runs up against very strong resistances in each one of us. It is paradoxical because we yearn for it with all our heart—God offers it to us—and we are reluctant to accept it. Yet even with believers who proclaim it in their hymns, liturgies and missals, there are inward protests,

more or less unconscious, more or less avowed. For the affirmation offends our reason and our logical sense of justice.

It is not just. The people who have made the greatest and most sincere moral effort to be faithful to God in their conduct, are the very ones who have the greatest difficulty in admitting that God also generously gifts his grace to others who have deprived themselves of no whim or pleasure, whether in lying, cheating, or harming their fellow men!

-Paul Tournier: GUILT AND GRACE, pp. 194-196. 



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and women. It is the God-conferred privilege of being on a footing which is totally resonant with the rightness of the righteous judge.

Let it be understood: Righteousness in Romans 1:17 is a divine property. It is also a status of rightness with God which he assigns to human beings. That is why it is called *the gift of righteousness (Romans 5:17)*. It is God's work of making

people right with himself with a rightness which is not theirs, but his.

Righteousness therefore is not a human achievement. Righteousness for believers is only ever a blessing to be received. It is accessible by faith from beginning to end. It stands over against the good that people do, or intend to do but fail. It contrasts with best practice, best efforts, and the sincerest opinions about what is right and what is wrong; about who is right and who is wrong.

Rightness with God is by faith and not by human categories, it is open to everyone. Because it is God's own rightness, it is unto salvation. It means deliverance; deliverance from competing and conflicting human judgments. It is a safe-haven from prejudice in race, color, age, sex, politics and religion. It is a rightness that is essential, universal, beyond common sense and political correctness. It is a sovereign rightness, unsullied by ambition, greed, hubris and jealousy; a rightness not adulterated by well-meaning programs that turn out to be wrong. It is a righteousness that meets our need, fits our case; it's one we can live by, live with and live out of, and so become part of God's great work of setting things to rights in this hurting and aggrieved world. 