

A 'Nation of Chasms'

Recently on National Public Radio, a group of people was interviewed about proposed restrictions on gun ownership. After listening to their widely divergent and essentially irreconcilable views, one participant observed that we live in a "nation of chasms."

This poignant description offers a profound insight into our times: The general honor our country long has given to certain values no longer exists. We no longer speak a common moral language. The categories and assumptions in which conservative evangelicals and Catholics speak increasingly are unintelligible to the rest of society. The things people of traditional faith take for granted about ethics, conduct and family seem like relics from a distant and uncherished past to those who celebrate substantially unrestricted personal autonomy.

Our social morality is being reduced to something like this: (1) As to God, believe, if you must, in some kind of deity, one whose character is defined and whose demands are determined by what each individual wishes; and (2) be nice, never be mean and support anything endorsed either by the editorial writers of the *New York Times* or Madonna. For many "nones" and post-Christian "Christians," these tenets summarize all of the non-theistic law and prophets.

That's at least part of the reason why the controversy over sexual matters—whether natural marriage or same-sex unions or what historically has been called promiscuity (now viewed as healthy and normal sexual experimentation)—creates such enormous social friction. Sexual intimacy is, for some, about as significant as choosing a beverage for lunch. It is justified by pleasure and biology and has no lasting effect on either body or soul as long as the appropriate cautions are taken. Read the chapter headings in Jessica Valenti's *Full*

Frontal Feminism or browse any edition of *Seventeen* and this perspective becomes very clear.

To such persons, meeting Christians who apply the Bible's teachings about sex and marriage is like shaking hands with an alien. And for Christians who live in a biblical moral universe, the casualness about, and openness to, sexual relations apart from heterosexual marriage are so obviously wrong that even a cursory conversation about sex with an unthinking secularist can be hard.

All of us share "the law written on the heart" (Romans 2:14). We react with common revulsion to acts of profound evil, such as the attacks of 9/11. We rejoice with common emotion when we see a clip of a child being rescued, hear the story of a stray cat that finds its way home, and read about the unexpected win of an underdog team in the big game.

Such reactions are spontaneous, unrehearsed and natural. They are also insufficient as the moral foundation of a free, just and well-ordered society.

It is one thing to be horrified by an act of murder. It is something altogether different to have one's moral sense so confused or so dulled that such things as the ever-earlier sexualization of children in popular culture, the public celebration of homosexuality, obscenity and pornography as normative elements of daily life, and cohabitation as a routine activity are accepted as a matter of course.

And with the soft but persistent dulling of our moral sense comes a growing callousness even to gross evil. We are, in our time, exchanging a commitment to truth for the chameleon-like emotion of mere sentiment, of subjective and relentlessly changeable feeling. In his landmark book *Idols for Destruction*, Herbert Schlossberg writes:

"The callousness of sentimentalism is beyond dispute. There is no incongruity in weeping over the beauty of a flower or a

Mozart concerto in between tours of duty in the torture chamber. The sentimentality of some of the most vicious members of the Nazi hierarchy is almost legendary. Solzhenitsyn noticed that same thing in the Soviet concentration camps. In 1984, the state music department programs a machine to write sentimental songs that it uses as an anodyne, so that the masses will be less able to understand what is being done to them" (p. 168).

This is why debates about morality soon devolve into fits of petulance by the left and mystified silence by the right: Suggesting that right and wrong have fixed meanings and enduring authority and produce predictable, inevitable consequences is, to the secularist, nothing less than heartless. Thus, while it's all fine and good that our common morality has not deescalated to the point that public executions or racial genocide are countenanced, what does it say about us that we tacitly endorse the notions that:

- the unborn child has no value apart from his or her mother's choice;
- that multiple "family" arrangements should be affirmed and celebrated, regardless of their effects on children or the intricate complexities they impose on the law; and
- that religious liberty and conscientious belief are matters of intellectual affirmation only, not lived-out conviction?

There is little, if any, common ground between those who disavow moral absolutes as knowable and practicable and those who do. This is why Christians have to be so very careful not to assume that those with whom we disagree define even the simplest elements of morality as do we.

Kevin DeYoung, a brilliant young pastor and writer in Michigan, puts this argument in the context of homosexual "marriage" and notes:

“Given the assumptions and patterns of thinking our culture has embraced in the last fifty years, the case for **gay marriage** is relatively easy to make and the case against it makes increasingly little sense. ... We need to go back several steps in each argument. We’ll never get a hearing on [homosexuality], or a dozen others issues, unless we trace out the assumptions behind the assumptions behind the arguments behind the conclusions.”

Where do **evangelicals** go from here? Some ideas will be forthcoming in next week’s column, but the most central of them is true whatever the culture or era: Jesus is Lord and Savior. He has risen from the dead, and is the conqueror of death and sin. He offers abundant and eternal life to all who will trust in Him and Him alone, for their salvation.

This is the believing church’s key proclamation, in season and out. It is also our hope and confidence, our source of joy and resilience whatever society looks like. Whatever is taking place around us, our confident assurance is that Jesus saves and is guiding history to His ends. Let’s keep these truths at the forefront of our hearts and minds, this Easter and always.

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