

Morality Matters in an Immoral World

Stephen Anderson

The modern church suffers regularly from a lack of balance in ministry coupled with an unqualified realignment of its purpose. The purpose of the church is not, nor has it ever been, to create cultural change. Our commission comes from Christ in Matthew 28; to make disciples of those from every nation, baptize them, and teach them to observe everything Christ commanded. It is with an interest in the fulfillment of this commissioned call that I find it prudent to consider; does fighting against the unredeemed over abortion, homosexual marriage, gender-confusion, legalization of recreational drug use, or simply declaring that morality matters, at an institutional and governmental level, have a rightful place in the exercise of my faith?

The only true solution to the moral depravity that plagues our generation is without a doubt the eternal solution, which is personal and individually received. So, how, and why, should the church stand against moral depravity in our culture that devalues human life, undermines the sanctity of marriage, and attacks the very fabric of our faith? Why fight for morality amongst the immoral? Why not forego the moral arguments institutionally for the evangelistic ones individually? If the solution is found in Christ, why would we, presumably, waste time fighting against immorality instead of fighting for gospel issues? Do we want to win a battle, or win the war? These are questions that are rising in the minds of those who are watching the unraveling of morality in our generation, a generation which is the product of a largely nominal 'American Christianity'.

Let's not fail to consider the experiences of the people of God over the millennia in working diligently to promote and preserve biblical moral standards in the broader culture. Much of this influence has been the product of the very close historic operation of the government and the church. Let's face it, from Constantine through to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the government and the church walked largely hand-in-hand, and in much of the world, this is still the case.

Legislating a moral standard does not produce heart change, which is why you hear so frequently, "You cannot legislate morality." That popular statement represents a confusion between morality and righteousness. I confidently believe that you cannot legislate righteousness, but all laws represent a standard of morality, even if it's not a biblical standard. Encouraging appropriate behaviors through legislative pronouncement is part of the purpose of human government. It is God's use of sinful men to restrain sinful men and reward good, but dictating behavior is not equitable to the practice of righteousness. True righteousness is so much more than just doing the right and prescribed thing.

As is the case in every standard of behavior, worship, and faith; God weighs the heart. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts." Proverbs 21:2 NASB. This is the difference between morality and righteousness. Righteous living is a possibility and expectation that exists only for believers. This is because Christians possess the righteousness of Christ applied to our account and operate with a new heart, new

desires, and new motivations. Each of these is the product of the regenerative work of God and the sanctifying work of the Spirit conforming the believer to the image of Christ our Savior. Moral living on the other hand is the best an unbeliever can ever expect to achieve, but moral living is still the standard their God-given conscience demands.

Christianity and National Influence:

There is a growing divide between the church and the state as well as between biblical and nominal Christianity. The influence the church once held over society is being lost and replaced by secular humanism and a form of pseudo-morality measured in diversity and equity that has filled the vacuum created by the exodus of a Godly influence.

How many of us have either said, or heard said, “America has abandoned her Christian heritage.” In truth, what has been abandoned is a familiarity with, and acceptance of, standards of conduct which are the result of a Christian influence. America is not today, nor has it ever truly been exclusively a nation of Christians. It is, and has been from its origin, a nation formulated by Christian principle and practice that has, by God’s grace, given us the America we love and long for.

Still, the question is being asked more regularly, “Is the influence the church once had on American culture really as ideal as it was once presumed to be?” “Should we bemoan the decline of Christian influence that has not produced gospel transformation?” The abandonment of morality in our generation is really a microcosm of well-documented national experiences. It has been seen over and over from the days of Noah to today. When moral standards are held without a redeemed heart, eventually any sense of morality fades and sin reigns. This reality has raised what I believe is a reasonable question, “Should the promotion and preservation of moral standards, by the church in general and believers specifically, within an unredeemed populace, really be a priority for the church?” Let me state briefly, I believe the answer to that question is, yes.

Why Fight For Morality:

Consider these examples from Scripture:

Herod & John the Baptist:

Matthew 14 tells us of the conflict between Herod and John the Baptist, and of John’s eventual execution. Herod was engaged in an adulterous relationship with his brother’s wife. More than that he was a practitioner of such grotesque immorality that he would announce publicly his pleasure over the seductive dance of his own niece. John is described in Matthew 14 as a prophet beloved by the people, so much so that Herod feared them when his anger was stirred against John. This status amongst the people is probably what allowed the meeting between Herod and John. Instead of John kowtowing to Herod, he announces that what Herod was doing with Phillip’s wife was unlawful and immoral, further confirming the notion that laws are representative of a moral standard. This pronouncement led to John’s arrest, with no indication that it had any effect on Herod.

Beyond that, the vitriol from Herodias over being included in a public announcement of immorality resulted in the loss of John's head.

John was presented with an opportunity to stand before Herod, and instead of looking at it as an opportunity to advance his position amongst the people, pad his resume by becoming a friend or advisor, or simply resign himself to the fact that unrepentant sinners constantly engage in sin, he identified Herod's immorality and though Matthew does not record it, I think it consistent, with what we know about John the Baptist, to assume that he would have also called him to repentance. What other purpose is there in identifying immorality?

David & Nathan:

2 Samuel 12 Records for us the interaction between the prophet Nathan and King David. King David has behaved adulterously and murderously. Nathan stands before the king and tells him a story about a rich man with many flocks and herds who steals the beloved ewe lamb from a poor neighbor and feeds it to his guest. David responds in disgust pronouncing the wrong for what it was and describing what he felt was necessary restitution. Nathan, as he had purposed to do in telling David this story, immediately identifies David as the wrongdoer and details his pattern of sin. David responds appropriately and repentantly.

Both David and Herod were God ordained governmental authorities (Romans 13) who were called to a moral standard. The comparison between these two men's responses is worthy of consideration. One of them, Herod, was an unbeliever, and the other, David, a man after God's own heart. The response of the unbeliever is exactly as we might expect; anger over being publicly embarrassed, resentment for being told he was wrong, and continued immorality. The response of the believer is also what we would expect; repentance. Both the believer and the unbeliever were called to a moral standard because the eternal unchanging moral standard of our eternal unchanging God applies to all men and is the standard against which unbelievers will one day be judged (Romans 2:6-8).

Romans 13 establishes for us that God's ordained system of human governance has clearly designed expectations. These expectations dictate that governments and governors should not be a terror to good and that they should stand against and punish evil. With these established expectations and the examples of both John and Nathan, I believe it reasonable to conclude that there is a place for believers to call the world, including governments and governors, to honor, uphold, and observe moral standards.

God has given every man a conscience not only as a matter of revelation, but for the purpose of establishing in their hearts right and wrong (Romans 2:14-15). Since we can acknowledge the purpose of the conscience in every man, should we not also engage every man with the eternal moral standard of their Creator, written already upon their hearts. Even if an unbeliever responds as we might expect (Example: Herod & John the Baptist) it does not alleviate any responsibility we have to call the world around us to a moral standard consistent with the eternal moral standard of God. It is after this identification of sin that we are privileged and expected to call the unredeemed to repentant faith in Christ.

For the Benefit of the Believers:

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Jeremiah 29:7 ESV. As Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon he informed them they would be there for multiple generations. As a result of the expected length of their time in a foreign nation they were to do all they could to establish themselves so that their numbers would not diminish. Jeremiah’s instruction was to pray for the welfare of their city. He explained that in the prosperity experienced in Babylon, as a result of their prayerful efforts, they too would be blessed.

No doubt, the good of a community, city, or nation, as God has defined good, would demand a moral aspect. In fact, any prayer that would exclude the moral concerns for their society would be a prayer entirely inconsistent with their call to pray for the welfare of their host nation.

When depravity reigns and morality falls, nations fall. This is as much a historic reality as it is a biblical expectation. When human life is devalued, the sanctity of God-ordained institutions, like marriage, the church, and government, are attacked, and when men establish their own standards, excluding God from the equation, failure is immanent. Romans 1 explicitly details God’s response to man’s unrestrained pursuit of sin. God’s giving of men over to the consequence of their sin is in itself a punishment for their sin. The fall of a nation may well represent the well-deserved punishment for that nation’s persistence in low moral standards.

The defense of God’s eternal moral standard in the public theatre is about more than defending God or good. It is also about the good of the believer, which is ultimately good for the glory of God. It is undeniably to the benefit of believers, as well as the church as a whole, if the culture around us, even if it remains predominantly unredeemed, is a culture with moral standards consistent with the eternal moral standards of our Creator and Sustainer. The good we may experience from high moral standards in society should never be the end goal, or even a satisfactory end. The only satisfactory end in defending God’s eternal moral standard would be an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel message and see the transforming work of God on people’s hearts. The question I posed earlier in this article, “Why argue against immorality instead of for gospel issues?”, is answered here. Every issue is a gospel issue, because there is no part of our lives and experience that the gospel does not touch or effect.

The relation of the church, the family, and the believer to moral issues in our society is one of paramount importance. It may be a bit cliché to announce that it’s more important today than it ever has been, but the climate of the church, the temperament of the American family, and the attitude of the believer all indicate that the questions, not only of moral absolutes, but also of the influence of Christianity upon social moral standards, need to be addressed.

The defense of a Biblical moral standards will affect how we approach our neighbors and friends, our employment and associations, our government and politics, as well as our families and churches. Quite simply, morality matters.