

Finding Common Moral Ground in An Age of Diversity & Conflict by David W. Gill www.davidwgill.org

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The Ethical Wilderness

The recent American presidential election was striking for many reasons. The one we will pay attention to is the polarization of the electorate, which was more intense and extreme than has been the case for decades. I am not referring to the “blue state/red state” division. The difference between numbers of voters for each party in all states (“blue” and “red”) was rarely more than five or ten percentage points. As some have said, what America has is a lot of *purple* states in various shades. It is only the winner-take-all electoral college system that provides the illusion of sharp geographical differences among red and blue states.

But from another perspective, a radical polarization was unmistakable: the passion and disagreement between Bush supporters and Bush opponents. This was no 5% difference but an almost unbridgeable chasm in language and opinion. It was almost impossible to find any common ground between partisans of one side or the other. Each side had its favorite news and opinion sources and declared alternate opinions to be lies or propaganda. Partisan rhetoric hailed the awesome greatness of one’s own side---and vilified the terrifying, damnable evil of the opposition. It was a little tough to have a very long or helpful conversation under these circumstances!

Exit polls asked voters if “moral values” played a role in their choices, and a large number of respondents said “yes.” (When exit pollsters did not actually use the phrase “moral values,” the phrase was not brought up by voters. We must be careful about how we interpret such opinion polls: the questions we pose have a great deal to do with what we get as answers).

Subsequent discussions of the election by media pundits and analysts tended to summarize the experience as follows: “moral values” meant opposition to abortion and to gay marriage; Republicans were seen as defenders of traditional marriage and of the life of the unborn and thus received the moral values votes. Democrats (“liberals”) sold out and didn’t care about these traditional moral values. Therefore, they lost. Certainly there is some truth in this sort of thinking but it is vastly oversimplified and even misleading.

The election is over but the subject of moral values begs for some continued attention. “Value” means “having worth.” Values are the things worth pursuing, worth standing up for, even worth fighting for. When we step back and remember the meaning of our words like this, we can see that “values” were and are at the heart of many of our disagreements and conflicts. Our public debate and conflict is not between one side that believes in moral values and another which doesn’t. The debate and conflict is rooted in *which* values one is committed to.

Values differences are rarely simple. Two individuals may both, equally, value the unborn as sacred persons made in the image and likeness of God. And yet they may disagree about the best strategy for actually saving and then nurturing those vulnerable little creatures of God. It is part of the bone-headedness of our time that the partisans involved in highly controversial matters (like abortion and public policy) are both unwilling and incapable of thought and discussion except as it is filtered through their rigid categories.

We are truly living in an ethical wilderness, increasingly divided, overheated, and dangerous. Is there any possible way forward? Can we find common moral ground on which to resolve peacefully and justly some of the controversial issues of our time?

It might be nice if we could each just “do our own thing” and leave others alone to do theirs. Too bad that we need to talk about common ground and coming together. But the world is “shrinking” in the sense that our lives intersect and overlap more and more. No one and no group is an isolated island. Population growth, ease of travel, and vastly increased communication channels inescapably link our lives together in a common web. What we do affects others. Our resources are shared along with the basic threats to our existence. Terrorism, economic opportunity and economic breakdown, ecological challenges . . . what shall we do?

If we don't find common moral ground, that is if we don't succeed in a shared search for what is good and right, then we'll harm and offend each other more and more. Then we'll resort to legal and political contests. And when that doesn't satisfy, we'll resort to violent conflict. And then we'll die. As Benjamin Franklin quipped at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” So we can't just ignore this challenge.

There are some reasons---and plenty of excuses---why we may have difficulty finding common moral ground. It is not hard to see why people just give up and avoid the whole thing.

- There are so many problems . . . where do we start?
- Our problems are often new and very complex, with no precedents for how to respond (e.g., stem cell research, outsourcing patient medical record-keeping).
- We are so busy, how will we find time for a serious effort?
- We don't all speak the same language, or share the same culture, religion, and life philosophy.

Three Unacceptable Ways to Seek Common Ground

But we don't really have that luxury. Wishing our ethical disagreements away won't work. Somehow we must choose a course of action, but there are three dead end paths we must avoid.

1. Try to force people to accept one position One popular response to ethical disagreement and conflict, over the course of human history, might be called “moral imperialism.” Whoever can acquire enough power tries to force everyone else to accept their position. Dictators do it---but so do electoral majorities sometimes. Repress dissent and force everyone to accept your position. There is something appealing about moral imperialism when it appears that good has triumphed and evil has been vanquished. After all, we don't want to permit slavery or racism to be practiced.

But the dangers and costs of moral imperialism far outweigh any presumed benefits. Forcing people to comply with your convictions at best results in a passive, apathetic acceptance. More often, it creates a seething anger and rebellion. Even if what you value is free, democratic elections and party politics, you can't force others to accept them. Force must be the last possible resort, used in the most restricted possible circumstances; even then, it will breed rebellion.

Furthermore, even the winners, whose moral agenda is imposed on the losers, will suffer from this strategy. Crushing opposition viewpoints and dissent actually weakens the victors as they now grow flabby (ethically, intellectually, spiritually, politically) without having to struggle to win allegiance. Struggle and debate can produce stronger, better minds and arguments. This was one of John Stuart Mill's arguments in his famous essay *On Liberty* (1859). Jacques Ellul's many books, such as *The Subversion of Christianity* (1984), show the treacherous impact of victory and power on even a great thing like the Christian faith.

In my view, all moral imperialists must be opposed. Neither the ACLU nor Focus on the Family, neither Republicans nor Democrats, neither atheists nor fundamentalists, neither secularists nor reconstructionists must be allowed to build an empire. Lord Acton's phrase is right on target: “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The best movements, ideas, and leaders are corrupted by power. So give it up, if you are thinking of trying to impose your value system on others. Trying to turn the USA into a “Christian nation” is just as misguided as trying to turn it into a “nation purged of all reference to God and Christian faith.”

2. Rely on science and reason A second dead end strategy is to continue to strive for agreement by way of science, reason, and logic alone. Of course, we need to employ science, reason, and logic along the way. But by themselves, they are devoid of moral guidance and by themselves that cannot serve as our common ground. This is essentially the Western experience of the past three centuries or so. We call it “Modernity.” The “Enlightenment project believed that human reason, science, and logic could be trusted to lead us to universal truths and compelling solutions to life’s problems. But it didn’t happen. Over the past forty years, or so, Modernity gave way to Post-modernity, an amorphous reaction united only by its cynicism and rejection of any program to push science, technology, and a revived modernity as the answer. Scientific reason and technological progress will not solve our most important human challenges.

3. Find the “lowest common denominator.” But a third strategy is not much better. Giving up on science and reason as the paths to truth and goodness, the post-modern default position is to live and let live, to find one’s own community of meaning, or at least one’s personal authenticity. When our lives intersect with those who are different (just about everyone, actually), we muddle toward a “lowest common denominator” position. We avoid conflict and are doubtful if not cynical about projects trying to draw together the larger community. One expression of this is the “naked public square” about which Richard John Neuhaus, Stephen Carter, and others have written. This refers to a political and public arena in which religion, worldview, culture, and deeply-held values are not supposed to be brought into the discussion for fear of offending others. But to adopt this strategy is really to bail out of the struggle. It is not healthy for individuals to leave much of their selves behind when coming into the public square; and it is not healthy for society to be guided only by what amount to “value-free skeletons” instead of “value-embedded, flesh-and-blood beings.”

A Better Way to Common Ground

There is a better way. These three strategies are all doomed to fail. Moral imperialists and authoritarians won’t do. Rationalists and experts can’t lead us to the answers we need. And the drop-outs and narcissists of post-modernity don’t have any help to give us. But for the reasons discussed earlier, we must not give up on trying to find common moral ground at home and abroad.

The better way, maybe the only way, is to bring all the stakeholders to the table in search of “highest potentially common denominator” solutions. “Stakeholder” refers to everyone affected by a given problem or question. All stakeholders need to be represented in a search for the richest possible shared approach to any challenge. The strategy must include the following:

- name/describe the problem and challenge we share;
- name/describe the goals and hopes we share . . . the kind of situation, on the far side after dealing with the problem, which we would personally like to live with and that we would like to leave to our children and grandchildren;
- listen to others carefully and respectfully with open (but not empty), critical (but not cynical) minds;
- bring your authentic, genuine self to the common table and share your best, wisest insights and most cherished values;
- help create and articulate the highest possible common denominator solution---one that encompasses the best insights and deepest values of the stakeholders---and adopt the strategies offering the best promise for reaching our shared goals.

The Two Levels of Morality

Some Christians (and others as well) may find my proposal for finding common moral ground hopelessly “compromised.” They will feel that I am proposing a sort of ethical “relativism” that just doesn’t sit well in the context of biblical faith. But the Bible itself actually teaches that there are two levels, or kinds, of ethics and morality. Both kinds are the invention of God. Morality and ethics, remember, are about right and wrong and good and bad.

The primary moral structure (Plan A, we could call it) invented and intended by God is rooted in the character and communication of God. God *is* good and right and he *demonstrates* as well as *declares*

what is good and right (and what is bad and wrong) to his people. In Jesus Christ, God has most fully and clearly brought this revelation into our world. My two volume introduction to Christian ethics, *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (InterVarsity Press, 2000) and *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), provides a full discussion of how the specific Christian moral identity is grounded in Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the church.

Plan A Christian ethics is distinctive and counter-cultural. The key word here, I need to point out, is not “absolutes.” Some Christians make a career out of calling for “moral absolutes.” Strange that Jesus and Scripture don’t use that term (more at home in philosophical debate than in Christian discipleship). It is a distracting and false dichotomy to pose the philosophical conflict of absolutism and relativism as the issue of all issues. No, the center of Christian ethics, the non-negotiable foundation, is the person, teaching, and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus-centered Christians are committed to a set of values and ethics that are often contradicted by the world, and by other religions.

One of the greatest problems of our era is that Christians are so often biblically-illiterate and ethically ignorant of their own faith tradition. Christians generally do not know the Ten Commandments even superficially. They do not know the Beatitudes or the ethical teaching of the Sages, Prophets, and Apostles. Worst of all, they do not know the ethical teaching and practices of Jesus. Jesus had a politics and an economics; he was not just a teacher regarding the inner life and after life.

Christians are called to live out---demonstrate---their values and to bear witness in word and deed to their Lord and his good news. Christians are to be “in” the world but “not of” the world. They are to be the “salt” of the earth and the “light” of the world---not just more undifferentiated earth (and not the masters of the world). When Christians go into the world of politics or business or any other domain without bringing anything specific and unique from their identity in relation to Jesus Christ, when Christians just add their enthusiastic “Amen” to one or another option in the world, they are betraying their Lord.

Let me give one example of the difference Jesus makes: the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) are Jesus’ account of the character traits of the community he is calling and preparing for mission in a difficult world. These eight character traits are a carefully designed account of what renders Christians as “salt” and “light” in the world, i.e., (to interpret the metaphors) the agents which will both prevent decay and promote growth and clarity of vision. Here, in careful order, one building on the other, is the account: “Blessed are

1. “the poor in spirit”: start by being humble, teachable, open, receptive, (no arrogance);
2. “those who mourn”: caring deeply and accepting responsibility (not blaming others);
3. “the meek”: the gentle and uncontrolling (no fretting, no “fix it” compulsions);
4. “those who hunger for righteousness”: passionately seeking God’s truth and justice (no papering over wrong/injustice; no allegiance to tribal or national spins on justice and righteousness);
5. “the merciful”: who add forgiveness and mercy (not vindictiveness) to justice;
6. “the pure in heart”: with integrity, an alignment and harmony of interior and exterior;
7. “the peacemakers”: seeking reconciliation, collaboration, wholeness, and community;
8. “those persecuted for righteousness”: with courage and persistence even when things are tough.

Now just imagine if people like this---or a Christian church like this---were to be fully present “in” the world. What if a humble, “poor in spirit” band of brothers and sisters, passionate about justice, tempered by mercy, accompanied by integrity, pressing toward peace and reconciliation, was at the diplomatic tables of our time? What if our corporate executive and board meetings were “salted” and “lighted” by some people shaped by *those* values rather than the values of Jack Welch, Donald Trump, Rupert Murdoch, Karl Rove, or Michael Moore? Not to berate the foregoing names, but Christians have another way that is rooted in Jesus Christ and we must *accept no substitutes*!

In the stories of creation of Genesis, this “Plan A” ethics of God’s words and deeds is exhibited in the statements that “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:4, etc.), “Everything that God made was very good” (1:31), and “The Lord God said ‘It is not good . . .’” (2:18). It’s all about being in personal

relationship with God and recognizing and participating in the goodness and rightness that God does and says.

But it is also in the creation stories that we encounter “Plan B” ethics for the first time. “The Lord God made the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:9). Adam and Eve were warned of the consequences of eating of this tree in disobedience to God. Nevertheless, what we must always remember is that it was God who created the “ethics tree” (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). This was Plan B but it really was about the possibility of knowing good and evil. (It is also important to remember that while Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, they were sent out not into the Devil’s world but into the good world created by God; a broken and wounded world, but fundamentally a good creation of God). Plan B ethics is also a topic in St. Paul’s writing: “When Gentiles, who do not possess the [Jewish, Old Testament] Law, do instinctively what the Law requires . . . They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness. . . .” (Romans 2:14-15).

The point is that there is, or can be, a legitimacy and value in the ethics of mind, heart, and conscience among those alienated and distanced from God. It’s not Plan A,---which would be to enter into reconciled relationship with God in Jesus Christ and follow in his radical, salty way of light. But Plan B also has value. The prophet Jeremiah, on behalf of God, once urged the Hebrew exiles to “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” (Jer 29:7). This city, by the way, was Babylon, not some nice 1950s style Republican suburb. The call was not to take over Babylon and force it to re-adopt the values and practices of Adam and Eve who originally settled the region! No, they were to accept their role as pilgrims, strangers, sojourners, the people of God in Babylon. They had a very distinctive identity, and yet they were called (neither to withdraw or to take over but) to do whatever they could to promote the welfare of the city.

So here is our challenge: *first*, to work hard at developing our own specific, unique, richly-textured moral identity as the people of Jesus Christ. This means building “Beatitudes-style” communities of character (humble, teachable, gentle, building peace on the basis of justice, mercy, and integrity, etc.). It means embracing and understanding God’s laws of love and principles of justice, righteousness, and freedom. It means that we disciples of Jesus make his views of work, justice, money, truthfulness, simplicity, health, and peace the centerpieces of our own life and work in the world. Just by *being* this different kind of person in the world, our Christian impact will be positive and (generally) welcome.

Second, we should bring that deep, thoughtful, authentic, Jesus-filled self to the pluralistic tables out in the marketplaces and neighborhoods of the world. If we truly come poor in spirit, gentle, and passionate for justice and peace, our contribution to the search for common ground and positive responses to the ethical diversity and conflict of our time will often be huge. But we do not come to this broader table of diversity to demand that everyone do it our way (Jesus’ “Plan A” way). We come to “salt” and “light” the table, not to take it over. We come in the confident hope that God’s Plan B goodness will emerge among us and our neighbors. We come asking to hear our neighbors, and even the strangers in our midst, testify to the “law written on their hearts” and to the knowledge of good and evil they get as they eat from God’s ethics tree. We are not any better, smarter, or more virtuous than anyone else. By God’s grace we have encountered Plan A in coming to know Jesus Christ. But we do not despise Plan B ethical research, either, for this is also a gift of God. We seek the welfare and peace of the Babylon in which we live because in its welfare and peace we find our own. That’s the way God planned it.