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When Morals are Reduced to Values

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The late Allan Bloom, whose 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* became a runaway bestseller, wrote perceptively that the contemporary talk of “values” is what is left when society accepts the notion that there is no genuine right or wrong. Moral issues are reduced to matters of personal preference and conviction. My “values” may not match your “values,” but we all must respect each other’s convictions equally in matters of common concern.

The situation prompted one observer to comment that when he hears talk of “values,” he reaches for his nearest discount catalogue. It is about as useful as anything else if all moral absolutes are discarded.

The postmodern philosophers have undermined the very concept of morality, arguing that all moral systems are merely relics of the repressive past, put in place by oppressive forces. Since all truth—including moral claims—is socially constructed, postmodern humans are free to “deconstruct” these moral codes and find “values” within.

The loss of the nation’s moral center has been long in coming. The late Fredrick Moore Vinson, a former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, declared before 1950 that “Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes.” Coming from one who was then America’s foremost jurist, the statement was a dark prophecy of things to come.

No thinking person can ignore the massive and seemingly insoluble moral debates that plague our society and frame national debate. When the most basic issues of life, sexuality, family, marriage, and moral responsibility are up for grabs, the nation has reached a testing point of unprecedented proportions. Given the confusion, only the most radical relativist can celebrate our current state of moral affairs.

The shift from morals to values in the church is a sign of the Christian abdication of moral leadership. When the church joins in the affirmation that all moral issues are matters of purely individual concern, the salt has lost its savor. The reduction of morality to values was a hallmark of the 1980s, when progressivist educators pushed this agenda in the public schools. Throughout the educational world, “values clarification” exercises became the order of the day, with children and teenagers encouraged to invent their own individualistic systems of morality and to “develop” their own values. Since these are individually determined, no one can be right and no one can be wrong.

That generation of young people is now of voting age, and we can see the moral damage inflicted by those who instructed students to look only within themselves for a system of values, and to doubt or defy traditional morality. A generation raised in the incubator of moral relativism is groping for enduring truth in the moral wilderness.

Where does this lead? A set of sex education materials produced a few years ago by a major mainline Protestant denomination urged parents to respect the values of their young children, and to accept the fact that these may differ from their own. The material prepared for adolescents offers suggestions for dealing with parents whose values may seem too

restrictive or outdated. The curriculum insulted and rejected the moral convictions of parents and urged teenagers to understand that their parents might well be hampered by hang-ups about sex.

When all talk is of values, it is obviously of little real moral value. This is a moral language and logic we cannot just adopt as our own. The morality revealed in the Bible is not a matter of mere personal values, but is the authoritative instruction for the moral life as defined by our Creator. Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles did not instruct God's people to look within for a moral code that makes sense to us, but to follow the explicit moral commandments revealed in God's Word. "There is a way which seems right to a man," instructed Solomon, "but its end is the way of death." [Prov. 14:12] So much for values clarification.

Though American Christians participate in a democratic society and a pluralistic culture, they do not serve that society well by receding into the moral background. The answer cannot be found in an assumption of secular norms or in the shared conviction that no common moral convictions are possible. We cannot accept the reduction of morality to values, though we do understand that a true system of morality produces real values, and puts value on that which is right, righteous, and just.

Where is the church in the midst of this moral and spiritual confusion? Will the church lead the way back to the moral high ground, or will we leave a secular society groping for values without Christian moral witness? The most urgent moral issues we face are really spiritual issues—the refusal to accept God's definition of marriage, the refusal to defend the dignity of human life, the rejection of the Creator's right to define our own existence. The Church cannot hide from these battles. Christians must respond with a note of clear, uncompromised, and unambiguous moral conviction.

The word "sin" has been ruled out of bounds for civilized debate. Once God is removed from the cultural equation, sin no longer makes sense. Human beings may offend each other, or even assault each other—but sin only makes sense against the revealed background of God's perfect holiness. Christians cannot hesitate to identify the problems of our times as sin, but we must wonder how popular culture can live without the category.

If sin is defined in this debate as a mere violation of individual values, the word has lost its biblical meaning. Sin has meaning only when seen in the blinding light of a Holy God, against whom all have sinned. The church has been afforded an opportunity it must not squander. The gospel itself calls for moral witness. The church must be on the front lines of the moral crisis with a boldness to speak the truth in love—the only genuine value.

