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The Dark Night in Denver — Groping for Answers



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The news hit the airwaves like a sudden onslaught, and the truth began to sink in. It has happened again. This time, 50 people shot while attending the midnight premier of the last in the Batman sequence, “The Dark Knight Rises.” According to press reports, a 24-year-old man burst into the crowded theater, wearing a gas mask and carrying an arsenal. After deploying what is believed to be tear gas, he opened fire with a shotgun, a rifle, and two handguns. At least 12 people are dead, and dozens are injured, many critically.



Over 100 police officers responded to the scene in Aurora, just a few miles from Columbine High School, where in 1999 two high school students killed 12 fellow students and one teacher in a rampage that also injured 21 other students. That school massacre became a milestone in the nation’s legacy of violence. Now, yet another Denver suburb joins that tragic list.

The inevitable media swarm focuses on the data first — the who, what, when, and where questions. Then they, along with the public at large, begin to ask the why question. That is always the hard one.

The same vexing but inescapable question comes every time a Columbine happens or an Anders Behring Breivik attempts to justify his mass homicide. How could such a thing happen? How could a human being do such a thing?

There is no easy answer to this question. The easy answers are never satisfying, and they are often based in the confused moral calculus of popular culture. We assume there must have been a political motivation, a psychiatric disturbance, a sociological pressure . . . anything that will offer a satisfying explanation that will assure us. Wave after wave of analysis is offered, and sometimes some horrifying clues emerge. But the moral madness of mass homicide can never be truly explained.

Christians are driven by instinct to think in biblical and theological terms. But, how should that instinct be guided?

The Reality of Human Evil

First, Christians know that the human heart is capable of great evil. Human history includes a catalog of human horrors. The twentieth century, described by historian Eric Hobsbawm as the century of “megadeath,” included a list of names such as Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, and Charles Manson. But those murderers did their killing from a distance, at least usually. Those who carry out the murders themselves are even more haunting to us. The young man arrested in this case, 24-year-old James Holmes, looks disarmingly normal.

The Fall released human moral evil into the cosmos, and every single human being is a sinner, tempted by a full range of sinfulness. When someone does something as seemingly unthinkable as this, we often question how anyone could do such a thing. The prophet Jeremiah spoke to this when he lamented, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick, who can understand it?” [Jeremiah 17:9]

Human beings are capable of unspeakable moral evil. We are shocked by such atrocities, but only because we have some distance from the last one. We cannot afford to be shocked when humans commit grotesque moral evil. It tells us the truth about unbridled human sin.

The Grace of Moral Restraint

Second, we must be thankful for restraints on moral evil. Christians must not underestimate the potential of any human being — ourselves included — to commit moral horror. We know ourselves to be sinners, and we know ourselves to be capable of sins we do not actually commit. Why do we not commit them?

God restrains human sinfulness. If the fullness of human sin was set loose, humanity would destroy itself. God restrains human evil by several means. First, he has created us in his image, and at least part of this image is what we call conscience. The moral conscience is a powerful restraint on human evil, and for this we must be exceedingly thankful. At the same time, the human conscience is also warped by the Fall and no longer fully trustworthy. We have developed the capacity to ignore the conscience, torture the conscience, and even misdirect the conscience by moral rationalization. Nevertheless, the restraint of the conscience is fundamental, and for that we must be very thankful.

God has also established institutions and orders that restrain human evil. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 13, God gave us the institution of government in order to restrain evil and to punish the evildoer. He has also given us the institution of marriage and the family and the larger order of society in order to restrain evil. We are surrounded by a complex of laws and statutes and social expectations and civic associations. All these function to restrain evil.

At the foundation of these restraints is the fear of God, which, even in an increasingly secular society, still retains a more powerful force than is often acknowledged.

Evil Answered at the Cross

Third, we must admit that there will be no fully satisfying answer to these questions in this life. Christians know that God is sovereign, and that nothing is outside of his control. We also know that he allows evil to exist, and human beings to commit moral atrocities. We cannot allow the sovereignty of God to be denied and evil allowed its independent existence. Nor can we deny the reality of evil and the horror of its threat to be lessened. We are reminded that evil can be answered only by a cross.

Theologian Henri Blocher explains this truth vividly in these words:

“Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. The maneuver is utterly unprecedented. No more complete victory could be imagined. God responds in the indirect way that is perfectly suited to the ambiguity of evil. He entraps the deceiver in his own wiles. Evil, like a judoist, takes advantage of the power of good, which it perverts; the Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent.”

We must grieve with those who grieve. We must pray for Gospel churches in the Denver area who will be called upon for urgent ministry. We must pray for our nation and communities. And we must pray that God will guard ourselves from evil — especially our own evil. And we must point to the cross. What other answer can we give?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/

Reference: Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Kregel, 2005).

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