

A RADIO INTERVIEW

with Todd Speidell, *Participatio* Editor, on a Christian radio station local to his home in Knoxville, TN, USA

Q: In your book *From Conduct to Character*, you make the comment that there are Western assumptions we bring to the table in discussions about ethics. What do you mean by that?

TS: When we in the West discuss moral issues, there are certain traditions that we don't necessarily know explicitly, but that implicitly affect the way we think about morality. These are traditions based on duty or consequences or virtue, which are really the three main traditions for us. There is also what I would consider a fourth and distinct tradition, which is based on God's covenantal commands to be who he created us to be as human creatures in the context of the world he's created. It's a world that is absolutely dependent on God for its existence, yet which he has granted a relative freedom and order of its own. When we look at moral matters in this way, in terms of being God's human creatures and ultimately his new creations in Christ, it casts a different light on these different ethical traditions in Western society.

Q: Can you give us an example of how thinking this way is different from the way we tend to think of things?

TS: Let me make a theoretical point first.

Q: Sure.

TS: Which is that these three different traditions are normally considered very different — like the difference between an ethic based on duty and an ethic based on consequences. For the first, an ethic of duty, you do what's intrinsically right or wrong; for the second, usually a utilitarian ethic, you look at what will produce or what you think will produce the best outcomes for society at large. Those seem like two different traditions, one that's intrinsically right or wrong, and the other measured extrinsically based on outcomes. But there's been a



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recent revival of an ethic of virtue, which bases ethical thinking not on these sorts of endless dilemmas that academics like to ponder: for example, if your family's out for a boat ride and you capsize and there aren't enough rations for everyone, what are you going to do? These kinds of silly, abstract, bizarre, extreme dilemmas that we don't face in our daily lives. The ethic of virtue folks say that ethics is not merely a matter of decision-making, but it's a consideration of who we are as persons. Now I think that's a helpful corrective, and I think that when you look at Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, that he, too, focuses on the heart, what comes from within, and who you are as a person, not simply behaviors. That was a big part of his problem with the Pharisees, since they were so focused on the outward. But with a perspective based on God and his filial obligations for us as his human creatures, those three usual options in Western society are really different ways of being human-centered — whether it is a question of what I shall do or what kind of person I am — the focus is on the self and not on God and what he expects of us. And that really is the original sin: autonomy, including moral autonomy, which is to say that we want to govern ourselves. An example in Scripture is that first decision of Adam and Eve that, contrary to God's concrete command not to eat of the tree, they considered it good for food. Not that they were doing something that was intrinsically wrong, but they were defying God's concrete command to them and for them, and thus violating their natures as human persons. I'll pause there and let you follow up as you like.

Q: What are the implications, then, if we view God and his commands as something that is objectively outside of ourselves, having a bearing on what we think of as right or wrong?

TS: Well, the implications are multifarious; there are all sorts of implications. From a Christian perspective it's a matter of listening to God and his commands in all of life. A contemporary but secondary example, I think, is posting the Ten Commandments in court houses. The Ten Commandments are the commandments of the God who has brought the people of Israel — who has brought us! — out of Egypt. The Ten Commandments start with, "I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," and that important preamble cannot be left behind! The commandments are the commands of the

God who has been there for us and who has set us free! So it's important for us to witness to that God who has liberated us from slavery, and not merely to uphold his commandments as if the commandments in and of themselves have some great, saving impact on society. That's one example of how we need to appreciate the biblical witness and history as truly objective — and it's an example of how Evangelicals need to be more evangelical!

Q: Then what should be the implications for God's commandments in contemporary American society, especially for evangelicals with a theological conscience?

TS: The implications are that when we obey the commandments, which we are required to do, that we are following the living God. One of the commandments — Thou shalt not commit adultery — is one of my favorite examples of the type of relativism that is pervasive in our society. One of the textbooks that I used to use in Ethics courses, and it was this kind of frustration that led me to write my own book, has pro and con essays on whether one ought to commit adultery. That's absurd. There ought to be some things — even a few things! — that all of us in common can say are absolutes. Adultery, rape, torture, and genocide: there ought to be a short list of moral absolutes that all of us can say are indisputable. They're not up for grabs, and we're not going to debate them. But simply because one doesn't commit adultery does not mean that one has followed what Jesus considered the spirit or deeper and personal meaning of the command. For example, take someone who lusts after someone else, but hasn't technically committed adultery: Jesus said that person has violated the spirit of the command.

Now that higher standard Jesus implements puts us all in a situation that's much tougher, because we not only want to be right regarding outward behavior, but also with respect to the inward, our hearts. But I think the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' life and ministry, and his teachings, just like the Ten Commandments, should not be abstracted from Jesus himself. The Sermon on the Mount is a call to follow Jesus, not simply a command to follow certain rules.

Q: As a follow up to that, which comes first, the outward or the inward?

TS: God comes first! We acknowledge God as the one who has created us, who has restored us to who we truly are in Christ, and who as the objective one

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outside of us and apart from us comes first. Now God restores us from within! Jesus came as a human. He took our humanity, our broken humanity, upon himself and healed it. And he gives it back to us through his Spirit, and we are to be who we are and are becoming in him. So in a sense there is a priority of the inward. But that's not based on us, whether our behavior or decisions or character, whether on our own efforts at repentance and renewal, but on the act of God breaking into our history, and restoring us to himself and to one another in Christ.

Q: What's a good example in society today if we take seriously and acknowledge that the inward is basic for the outward, in other words, what is inside of a person is influencing the behavior rather than the other way around?

TS: I think a good example of that is so-called "affirmative action," which from my perspective unintentionally rebuilds the dividing walls that Christ has broken down. In Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free: Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us. Affirmative actions sets up new forms of racial stereotyping — and ironically they are based on what is now called "diversity," but what I think is a kind of *uniformity*, where diversity is merely seen as the color of one's skin and membership as part of the group. So affirmative action looks at external things, but the Gospel is concerned about internal things. When Onesimus went back to his master, Philemon, he went back as a brother in the Lord. He went back as a slave — that is the external — but the internal had been so radically turned around that the external was profoundly shaken up to the point where both slave and master must have a new type of relationship based on God changing our very humanity from the inside out. Affirmative action looks primarily at external matters, at the color of our skin and not the content of our character, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ shakes us and transforms us and heals us from the inner depths of our humanity to and throughout all aspects of our lives.

Q: You mentioned earlier when you talked about absolutes, isn't that itself an acknowledgement of an objective God who stands over against us and an assumption that needs to be brought into this discussion?

TS: Yes it is. There's a deep interrelationship between God's own objectivity and the objectivity of morality. The moral order of the universe, no less than the

physical, is part of the order which God has created and sustains by his Word. In other words, God has endowed his creation not only with an objective physical order, but with a no less objective moral order. Just as we cannot in good reason deny the laws of the physical order, so we cannot in good conscience disobey the laws of the moral order. Morality is more than a convenient way of arranging our lives for the greatest possible good or happiness. It's as much a part of the created order as gravity or light. That's why it cannot be reduced to the subjective preferences of individuals or cultures. But we need to be careful not to absolutize the moral order, or even God's commands, over God himself! God himself is the absolute. Recurrent throughout the Old Testament is the central theme: "I am your God; you *shall* be my people. That *shall* is a command to us: We are to obey God. But it is also a promise: You *shall* be my people. God who makes us into new persons, into a new people, he is the absolute.

That doesn't mean things like adultery and divorce are merely relative. No. God has created this world in such a way that this could never be no matter how many would like to have it otherwise. We don't have a vote in that matter. But by focusing on God and his commands within the context of the good created order in which he has placed us, we may steer both away from legalism and libertinism. In the Bible the indicative always precedes *and* includes the imperative. "I am your God" (that's the indicative); "In Christ all things are reconciled" (again, the indicative); "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" (another indicative) — and the indicatives of grace always follow with God's commands and obligations for who we are as his chosen and redeemed people. The problem with legalism is that it tries to prioritize the imperative, so that we have the imperative without the indicative, the command without the promise, and we end up with legal relations rather than filial relations. The New Testament is very filial: focusing on the Father/Son relationship as the basis for our relationship with Christ.

Q: That was my follow-up question. What bearing does the Incarnation have on this?

TS: Everything. If you read the Old Testament, you see the story of the priority of God, the God who has created us, the God who put us in fellowship with himself and with one another, the God who has provided for us and liberated

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us. And the other side of that story is disobedient Israel looking after other gods, creating other idols. When we read that story, we need to read it with a mirror to ourselves to see our own disobedience. The New Testament is not a rejection of the Old Testament. Christ comes as the one true Israelite. He comes out of Israel as the true Israelite who brings God to us and reconciles us to God. He takes our humanity upon himself and heals it and gives it back to us that we may be whole. What's more, in Jesus Christ God has not only healed our humanity, but the whole created order. All things, visible and invisible, are reconciled and gathered up in Jesus Christ as their Head and Lord. All things are reconciled in Christ — the indicative. The imperative: We are to be who we are and are becoming in him and not reinsert disorder into the world by recreating dividing walls of hostility that he has torn down.

Q: Certainly we find ourselves — and I don't mean to politicize human matters — but is it possible to lay your paradigm over against governmental policies, some of the issues being discussed in society today, some of the things that we engage ourselves in regarding social and cultural issues?

TS: I think so. We always have to remember that the church is the church, and it needs to be the church, so it should not become another political institution or lobby group. Having said that, God has reconciled our world so that we do need to think and act politically and favor issues, items, and agendas that approximate our own theological convictions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany tried to balance a tension between thinking realistically about human nature on the one hand, never being naïve, and on the other hand thinking theologically of God's action in Christ and how we should thus live in society. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who followed the Sermon on the Mount quite literally — turn the other cheek — and he thought that there were specific implications for society. But he was also a realist. He knew that he could not sit back idly and naively while Jews were being killed in his name, because as a German citizen his friends and neighbors were being killed in his name. So we need to act responsibly in society. Often times there isn't a clear right or wrong, but we do the best to approximate our convictions, and Bonhoeffer thought we need to ask for forgiveness and we need to be careful not to justify whatever we choose to do. For example, with Bonhoeffer, he joined the conspiracy against Hitler's

life, but he never attempted to justify that action because in the real world you sometimes have to make compromises, and if you're simply utilitarian, one of the Western ethical traditions I mentioned, you can say, well, to kill one to save 6 million, that's an easy calculation. But for Bonhoeffer, who had his own version of a biblical pacifism, he took "Thou shalt not kill" quite seriously and literally, and yet he still felt a need to act responsibly. Now that was in a situation in which he was acting in response to violence and genocide. Preemptive war, as we've witnessed in recent years, is a whole other matter. There is rarely a unanimous opinion anywhere, including in the Christian church, but from pacifists to just war theorists alike, preemptive war is not an option. War is a last resort; it's in defense. Conservatives in particular should speak out against preemptive war based on our view of sinful human nature and its consequent view of the limits of government, both nationally or internationally.

Q: Is it possible for the church to confuse Christian social responsibility with mere political activity?

TS: Yes, you see that on the Right and on the Left where the church becomes just another political action group. It fixates on certain issues. I have convictions about a variety of issues, but I hope the church never becomes merely another social service agency, another political lobby group, because when it does that it has failed its own mission and it has ceased to heed our Lord for our own agendas. So that is a big concern: the church needs to balance a fine tension between quietism and activism.

Q: What's the key for Christians to think clearly about these issues?

TS: Reading through the biblical story, God has acted in our lives, God has spoken to us, God has restored us. Christ has both revealed God to us and reconciled us to God and to one another. I like to keep that paradigm in mind as I think about different issues — for example, abortion is a big issue. When I think about that profoundly personal matter from my own paradigm, I want to acknowledge God as the Creator of humanity, and Christ through his Spirit as the redeemer of humanity, so it's important to uphold the humanity of the unborn child. This is not just my unborn child: this is a child of God, especially over and against the view of abortion as a legal right, as a matter of personal

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convenience, or as a way of dealing with the so-called *unwanted child* — such horrible language!

Of course, there are extreme exceptions which should remain extreme, like the life of the mom. This is something we had to deal with in my family. It started before my wife was even pregnant. She was 35 at the time, and her doctor said when she became pregnant that she should consider prenatal testing to evaluate the status and health of the fetus. At the time the very testing that was being recommended had predictable outcomes that could maim or even kill the unborn child, and yet the tests were strongly recommended and almost forced upon us without discussion, and they really had no other purpose than to consider an abortion or a very weak rationale of “emotional preparedness” for a Down’s baby. As it turned out, at only 22 weeks my wife’s water broke, which is such a critical period because it was on the borderline time of viability for our unborn child. So we saw a doctor in an emergency situation, and practically the first words out of his mouth were to recommend an abortion, which we decided against.

Two weeks later, having fought against the odds of an imminent and extremely premature childbirth, with all of its possible outcomes and problems, our baby went into cardiac distress and the doctor recommended *against* an emergency C-section. Now an emergency C-section maximized the best chance of survival for our child, but it did raise certain health concerns for the mom because it’s still early enough in the pregnancy that there could be serious, even if remote, repercussions for the mom. So this doctor, and we’d been in conversation with him for a couple of weeks, inundated us with calculations and odds about problems, etc., and even during this critical time he continued with those kind of consequentiality calculations. Another doctor, a Roman Catholic woman, simply walked in and said, “This baby has a real chance.”

She cut through all of the calculating consequences, which again is a kind of implicit ethical tradition where you focus on the outcomes, what could happen, all the possible outcomes, etc. This other physician simply said, “This baby has a real chance.”

And then my wife had the emergency C-section, and we were fortunate and grateful to have a healthy girl, even though we were prepared for worse. There was no guarantee of what would happen, but in our society there are all sorts of implicit assumptions about ethical models that we operate with, but we were

fortunate to have a doctor who walked in and simply announced: "This baby has a real and clear chance."

Q: Is there anything else you want to add?

TS: I think I've said my basic point. I guess the main thing I wanted to focus on is just that the church's role in society is to announce and embody the reconciling presence and ministry of Christ. *He* has come to break down barriers: barriers between us and God *and* barriers between us and others, whether male and female, Jew and Gentile, or maybe even Democrat and Republican! Through his Spirit he calls us and enables us to be who we are and are becoming in him, so that we may live in union with Christ by his Spirit in gratitude to God our Father. And we need to do that in our daily lives, personal, social, and political. Christ has assumed and redeemed our humanity, and he graciously grants us the freedom and opportunity and responsibility to be his brothers and sisters in society. That's my paradigm, for what it's worth.