

Reformation
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Everyone loves justice in a crisis. The Los Angeles riots offered to TV viewers an opportunity to vent their fury at injustice no matter which side they took on the trial.

For some, massive looting and arson were hailed as a long-overdue response to an unjust distribution of money and political power. For their law-and-order neighbors, the justice called for was putting the rioting hoodlums in jail.

Even for those caught in the middle—who saw that the riot began as a response to a real evil, but saw in the raiding of liquor stores more of a party than a protest—there was a grand opportunity to pontificate, perhaps more so. They could condemn injustice on both sides.

For pastors, the very real question was whether to preach to the protesters from Romans 13 on obeying the governing authorities, or to preach to the oppressors from Amos on God's hatred of solemn assemblies when justice is neglected by the powerful.

Within a month, the issue of justice had receded for all but those who really lived in the crisis. Perhaps it is unrealistic to think that everyone who viewed the crisis on television bore responsibility to clean it up. Many of us had never been to the communities burning down on our TV screens, or had any contact with their inhabitants. Perhaps we are not made guilty by our failure to redress every evil we see on television. But if guilt cannot travel over the airwaves, self-righteousness can. How can we be so indignant without planning to act on what we see?

Righteousness and Truth As Entertainment

Righteousness and truth are very closely related. In the Old Testament, the prophets tell us that the people who forsake one also forsake the other (e.g., Isa. 59:14-15). To be righteous, one must be properly related to the true order of things. Anything which severs us from truth is likely to sever us from righteousness.

Amidst all the cries for social justice, the attack on truth which undermines the possibility of justice goes unnoticed. Today's philosophers tell us that truth is whatever helps an individual to function in his or her own tribe. My guess is that the word "tribe" is supposed to make us picture a council of wise elders who have the best interests of society, and yes, of course, the environment, in mind—in contrast to our individualistic society where self-interest and environment rape prevail. If they had used the word "society" instead of "tribe," perhaps we would be more likely to remember that under Soviet Communism and National Socialism, truth was redefined to mean whatever was helpful to society, meaning the state!

Think carefully before you surrender to this theory of truth that promotes itself as less arrogant (since it portrays us as limited, knowing only the "truth" of our own society) and more socially conscious (since "tribal" function is so important to it) than theories that teach that there is one truth for all people. Not only will absolute truth be at stake, but true social justice cannot survive in its absence.

The philosophers who want you to see your own limitations in this matter of discerning absolute truth and justice will be a media elite. In today's culture of infotainment, the celebrity newscaster can already be seen as the medicine man of the 1990s. He or she engages us in a communal trance where we see our political totem animals (an elephant or a donkey) fight our battles for us. None of us truly participates. (It is best for the tribe that power be in the hands of the few.) But there is emotional release.

Even those who do not sanction this method of determining truth will tell us that most of us do function this way. Media critics tell us that much of our conception of reality is affected by the predominant medium in our lives. Today, for most of us, that medium is television. Television, unlike print before it, presents us with information upon which we

are not expected to act.

Setting aside the question of whether or not what is presented is true we have to ask ourselves what has happened to the connection between righteousness and truth when we receive our knowledge of the world from a medium that presents us with a world in which we are not active. Either television presents us with truth which we must act upon to be righteous, or the world it presents is not the truth.

Entering the Tribal Dream Under the Totem of the Lamb?

Many Christians have come to feel that their commitment to Christ seems a little unreal. Evangelical Christianity is to them a lifestyle, not a life. It affects the type of entertainment they consume—their music, their romance novels, their wall-hangings—but they fear that their faith has not made an impact on the real world. They have seen that their style of faith is, as Os Guinness calls it, "privately engaging but publicly irrelevant." They wish to pursue righteousness.

This is a valid concern. The question is, what ought to be done about it? For many, the answer is obvious: activism. To affect the real world, they need to join a protest or a political action committee. They need to write letters. They need to get on television and compete with the celebrities for their chance to speak out. We cannot let the news cameras show us outnumbered by gay rights or abortion-on-demand protesters.

But wait. The desire to return to righteousness is godly, but what kind of truth is at its foundation? If we fear that our faith is powerless in the real world, our first desire is to make it active in the real world. But we need to figure out what the real world is.

The televised world is certainly not the real world. True, much of the news is filmed on location, but the camera also

creates its own location. If a television camera arrives, a small protest becomes larger than it really is. The whole nation sees it. It has become “real” for a lot more people. On TV, a crowd is an event.

Much of the more private action of two individuals sitting in a restaurant discussing the world as God sees it never makes it into televised reality. Because it is not shown on television, the art of persuasion is disappearing from tribal consciousness. How many other skills needed to maintain a just society will be lost for the same reason? Many of us see the danger of being seduced by the values of television, but have we escaped the danger of using methods in fighting them that are themselves a product of a TV culture? Or in undermining the relationship between righteousness and truth for the long term?

Before joining a cause we ought to take another look at the world around us—the world immediately around us. What are our talents? What injustice needs redressing on our own doorstep? What might we be able to accomplish because of our gifts and training that another Christian could not? These should be some of our first questions. Taking in a pregnant girl whose boyfriend left her may not capture the headlines in the pro-life struggle in the culture, but *it is reality*. Taking an unskilled and unemployed worker and giving him or her training and an income may not attract the camera and the lights, but *it is true and righteous*. If we ignore these issues to join the televised protests for the sake of being covered, we have succumbed to a merely tribal view of truth. We are trying to bring Christ into the collective trance. And yet, Christ did not come to save the TV world, but the real one.

Informed Involvement

Informed involvement in the world takes a lot of effort. Those who are already activists know about sacrifice and

will welcome it. I am an optimist concerning this. While I do believe in the law of inertia—that it is difficult to get someone who is not moving to move—I do not think that it is difficult to get those already in motion to follow a better course. We see this all the time. People who start with shrill activities quickly find out how much they don’t know, and begin to study. My only wish is that they could be directed to this sooner and more effectively.

Not only causes, but activists themselves are harmed by going into action without being informed. While Randall Terry may be able to distinguish civil righteousness from the righteousness that comes to us freely from Christ, not all of the leadership of Operation Rescue does. I heard one of the leaders in the Boston area speaking of getting arrested in terms which a Catholic priest would reserve for penance! Being jailed was presented as a means to revival, a means of grace, a way to make up for pat complacency. What does this have to do with conscience? Have those who decided not to join this movement forfeited their salvation? This type of teaching does not in itself harm the pro-life cause; but what does it do to activists, or to those who chose to be active in other spheres?

I also wonder what this type of teaching does to other less prominent paths to justice. At one point in the pro-life movement, for example, some of those involved in Operation Rescue were reported to have spoken disdainfully of protesters from other pro-life organizations such as the Christian Action Council, which opposes blockade action. The opposition to civil disobedience was said to be a cover-up for a fear of being jailed. The more demonstrative act of sacrifice was automatically assumed to be the more righteous.

When righteousness is spoken of in these terms, many Christians will miss their real callings in order to follow the most sacrificial route available to them. They will do this

without asking whether their talents and training might be God's call into another field. They will do this without asking whether the sacrifice they make is even helpful to the cause in which they are active. Sacrifice by itself is not a sure gauge of righteousness. Paul tells us that we might even deliver our bodies to be burned and achieve nothing by it (1 Cor. 13:3). We need to guard against letting sacrifice, which is only valuable as a means to a higher end, become an end in itself.

Looking back at history, we can see that even our most moral ancestors were often blind to social issues of which even the most obtuse of us are aware today. In all likelihood, we are blind to some social problems as well. It just might be that some brave individuals have kept themselves from involvement in some of the best-known causes of the day to pursue other areas of justice of which most of us are not conscious. If from our pulpits we are told that every serious Christian must be involved in protesting, say, nude Marxist bowling alleys, what is to become of the moral pioneer who is pursuing justice on a new front? This individual will miss out on the moral support that he or she so desperately needs.

Before pursuing righteousness, we must know the truth. We will never know all that there is to know, and we must not use the pursuit of truth as an excuse not to act. We cannot afford to neglect truth, however, and we must not allow our Christian circles to become places where the pursuit of truth is portrayed as a threat to the tribe. While in the short run this might get more people onto the streets, in the long run the pursuit of righteousness will itself be harmed.

Luther set forth the matter in a paradoxical format. He said that the Christian is free of obligation to all, and is yet the servant of all. This same paradox is found in the relationship of righteousness and truth. Even as we are all bound together in the cause of righteousness, when it comes to

truth we must maintain a healthy individualism. For us Christians, of course, there are doctrines to which we must all hold, but when it comes to serving the world, we must not be lorded over by those of our brethren who tell us that every serious Christian must serve Christ by doing thus-and-so. We must bring our Christian faith to bear on the world as only we are able to see it. Our individualism in pursuing our callings does not drive us apart from each other, however, for we are all pursuing justice. It is in the interest of the tribe that we not be bound to the myopia of the tribe.

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For Further Reading:

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death—Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). This book explains the effect of television on the culture at large, especially in terms of politics, religion and education. See a review of this title in this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

John Warwick Montgomery, *The Law Above the Law* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1975). Montgomery argues that law must have a basis in a transcendent truth.

David Wells, "The Obsolescence of the Atonement" in *The Gospel in the Modern World*, Martyn Eden and David Wells, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 49-65. In this essay David Wells gives a case study in how modernity has made a biblical doctrine difficult for those in our culture to understand.