

WORDS WITHOUT MEANING

By Peter Bocchino

Some time ago, the cover story on *Time* magazine read, “What ever happened to ethics? . . . America searches for its moral bearings,” (*Time*, May 25, 1987). The primary article, “Looking to Its Roots,” captured the opinions of some of the finest legal, political and academic minds of our nation in trying to address the contemporary problems in ethics. These thinkers isolated the root cause of the problem with ethics in America as the “protective obsession with self and image.” I believe that they correctly identified the root cause of this enigma. But, if obsession with self and image impairs our ethical decision making process, what then is the solution?

Imagine living in a country that found itself in a frantic condition suffering from political, social and economic oppression. Imagine the people looking for a leader who would save them from the utter hopelessness that penetrated their souls as they watched crime and violence take on astronomical proportions within their cities. This kind of country is not hard to imagine because it describes the current state of affairs in our nation. Now imagine that one day a leader appears and he begins to speak of the way things ought to be, the way they were originally intended to be, but were twisted into the current predicament by the presence of evil within the human heart. Imagine him standing in front of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., and saying,

You have heard it was said, “You are free to chart your own moral destiny and you are accountable only to yourself.” But I tell you that you are first of all accountable to God. You have heard it was said, “Every society makes its own laws to govern its people and we must not intervene in the affairs of other nations.” But I tell you that every society is accountable to a higher moral authority not established by any form of government. You have heard it was said, “Belief in God and the supernatural is archaic and every reference to it in the public arena ought to be eliminated.” But I say unto you, if you forget your true identity as a nation, you will destroy yourselves and drift along in the darkness like a wandering star.

In this, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivered a powerful message isolating the root cause of Israel’s political, social and economic problems. They had lost sight of the original meaning of the laws God had given to them which established the ethical principles for how people ought to treat one another. The people had the Scriptures interpreted for them over and over again until the original Scriptures lost their meaning and the rules and traditions of human leaders became more authoritative than the Scriptures themselves. Jesus went back to the fundamentals and explained the original meaning of the Scriptures, in particular the commandments of God. Israel’s leaders had extracted the relational dimension out of God’s commandments and made them into a set of rules, an end in themselves, devoid of any relational context. By doing so, it became easier to keep human laws and regulations than to develop an attitude of self-sacrifice in loving one’s neighbor as oneself. In essence, these leaders lowered the divine standard, which was impossible to keep without God, to a human level, in order for them to keep their autonomy and the appearance of morality.

When an astute lawyer confronted Jesus and asked him to give his judicial opinion about which was the greatest law that regulated religious and social disputes, Jesus profoundly consolidated the ten commandments into two exceptional laws that anchored all the rest. Jesus responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love you neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). Imagine a nation whose people actually lived out this belief. People who lived their lives under a

higher moral authority and who took care of other people with the same kind of passion by which they took care of themselves.

Jesus knew that the answer to any aberrant behavior would never be the direct result of human legislation alone. He isolated the locus of deviant behavior, such as murder and sexual promiscuity, as being caused by selfish attitudes securely fastened by evil desires deep within the human heart. An attitude of hate and lust would destroy a relationship even if it never resulted in its logical outworking of violence and infidelity. Jesus put the relational dimension back into the commandments of God, and in doing so, raised the standard back to its original position. The people were amazed at the teachings of Jesus and how he was able to speak with such authority. Jesus knew his topic and isolated the source of the political, social and economic downfall of Israel as spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus breathed life back into those ancient documents as he explained them in their original context. The people of Israel realized that they needed to go back to the simply profound truths upon which the nation of Israel was established and start living by what they presumably believed.

The people of the United States are in a similar situation today. The founding documents of our great nation have been interpreted and reinterpreted to the point where they are devoid of context and have lost their original meaning. In the discipline of logic it is understood that a word must have a limited meaning. This law of logic is called the *law of identity*. If a word could take on any meaning at any time for any reason, it would lose its significance. I call this violation of logic *the identity crisis*, the use of *words without meaning*. The loss of the meaning of words that describe life, will ultimately lead to the loss of the meaning of life as a whole (nihilism). The unqualified use of words--devoid of context--will utterly confuse, if not destroy us.

An important example of this tragic state of affairs was documented in an essay entitled, "Nihilism and the End of Law," by law professor Phillip Johnson. Professor Johnson noted how Senator Biden once differentiated between good and bad natural law. Johnson commented:

According to Senator Biden's article, good natural law is subservient to the Constitution . . . Good natural law does not dictate a moral code to be imposed upon individuals . . . Good natural law is not a static set of "timeless truths" (P. Johnson, "Nihilism and the End of Law," *First Things*, March 1993, p. 19).

Herein lies the logical dilemma for the moral relativist. The "timeless truths" to which the senator referred to are what we call the timeless, objective standard of right and wrong against which moral behavior and legal standards can be measured. The dilemma is articulated by Professor Johnson in the following way:

Anyone who says there is such a standard seems to be denying that we are morally autonomous beings who have every right to set our own standards. On the other hand, anyone who denies that there is a higher law seems to embrace nihilism, and therefore to leave the powerless unprotected from the whims of whoever controls the law-making apparatus. Either alternative is unacceptable. The safest course is to be impenetrably vague or *confusing on the subject* (p. 19, emphasis added).

There have been times in history when we have found ourselves left with the responsibility to hold other nations accountable to some higher moral authority. But at the same time, we do not want to acknowledge publicly the existence of this higher moral authority because to do so would be a self-indictment. I often wonder if the senator, and others who prescribe to his view of natural law, would change the definition of the phrase *natural law* if it were put into the international context. For

example, what would this phrase mean in the context of China? How does one adjudicate between a statesman in China who believes that natural law is subservient to his constitution and a statesman in the United States who makes the same claim for the U.S. Constitution? There are many striking examples from history that illustrate this dilemma.

One of the most recent examples is the trial of an East German border guard after the elimination of the wall dividing East and West Berlin. When border guard Ingo Heinrich was put on trial for killing a man who was attempting to gain his freedom by escaping to West Berlin, *Time* magazine reported:

Heinrich was just following orders. "Shoot to kill" was the command for dealing with people who tried to escape across the border, and in the eyes of Heinrich's supervisors *his actions were not only legal but commendable*. Three years later, Heinrich, 27, lives in the same Berlin, but a different government holds sway and new laws prevail. Now he is, retroactively, a felon. . . . He was convicted of manslaughter . . . specifically, the trial judge said, for following the laws of his country rather than asserting his conscience. Said Judge Theodor Seidel: "*Not everything that is legal is right.*"

The principle that an individual may be bound by a higher moral authority, beyond what the statutes provide, was established in West Germany decades ago, during trials of former Nazi leaders. . . . The idea that a legal act can be made a crime retrospectively is alien to the laws of many countries, including the U.S. (J. Jackson and K. Stanchina, "The Price of Obedience," Time, February 3, 1992, p. 23, emphasis added).

However, without the timeless, objective standard of right and wrong against which moral behavior and legal standards can be measured, it is illegal to prosecute a person under *ex post facto* laws. It is also a philosophical blunder to condemn that society as being depraved. C. S. Lewis clarified this thought in the following manner:

If your moral ideas can be truer, and those of the Nazis less true, there must be something--some Real Morality--for them to be true about. . . . If the Rule of Decent Behavior meant simply "whatever each nation happens to approve," there would be ***no sense in saying that any one nation had ever been more correct in its approval than any other; no sense in saying that the world could ever grow morally better or morally worse***" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 25, emphasis added).

According to Lewis, to believe that natural law is subservient to a constitution, is to believe in nonsense. However, where do we get this "Real Morality." Where are these laws that rise above the human level? Surely such laws cannot proceed from humanity itself, because humans are self-centered and develop laws which reflect their own interests. So one would have to have a legislator who is able to behold all the passions of humanity without being subject to them. Also, this legislator would have to be able to look across time in order to provide laws that would be suitable for all people through all ages.

In a commencement speech at Duke University, Ted Koppel forthrightly pointed to what he considered the "moral compass that points in the same direction, regardless of fashion or trend." Commenting on the moral climate of a nation bombarded by the television image, he said,

In the place of Truth we have discovered facts; for moral absolutes we have substituted moral ambiguity. We now communicate with everyone and say absolutely nothing. We have reconstructed the Tower of Babel and it is a television antenna. A thousand voices producing a

daily parody of democracy in which everyone's opinion is afforded equal weight, regardless of substance or merit. Indeed, it can even be argued that opinions of real weight tend to sink with barely a trace in television's ocean of banalities.

Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form Truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions, they are the Ten Commandments. . . .

The sheer brilliance of the Ten Commandments is that they codify, in a handful of words, acceptable human behavior. Not just for then, or now, but for all time. Language evolves, power shifts from nation to nation and messages are transmitted with the speed of light. Man erases one frontier after another; and yet we and our behavior--and the Commandments which govern that behavior--remain the same (Koppel, "Commencement Speech," Duke University, May, 10, 1987).

If there is no divine author of this kind of "Real Morality," then the only laws and morals that can be arrived at are the ones that each society produces. They will, therefore, be limited to the perspective of each society. But as Professor Johnson noted, "Either alternative is unacceptable. The safest course is to be impenetrably vague or confusing on the subject."

We need not wonder why the youth of America are morally confused when we hear leaders of this nation promote moral ambiguity. In obvious contrast to contemporary leadership, our founding fathers were judicious politicians because they were clear and penetrating thinkers. They understood the axiomatic truths of life and their ultimate justification in the divine lawgiver, God. To their way of thinking, God was the basis for life and law. God was the basis for freedom and justice. Therefore, God was the basis for moral absolutes. They clearly articulated what they believed to be axiomatic truths:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men.

This article opened with what some of the finest legal, political and academic minds of our nation have determined as the cause of the collapse of private and public morality, "the protective obsession with self and image." What was their solution to this predicament?

Interestingly, and perhaps reassuringly, some of the most thoughtful ethicists feel that the elements for an enduring moral consensus are right at hand--in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, with their combination of Locke's natural rights and Calvin's ultimate right. "It's all there, it's all written down," says Colgate Philosopher Huntington Terrell. "We don't have to be converted. It's what we have in common." Terrell calls for a move "forward to the fundamentals," in which people put their lives where their mouths have been: in line with the country's founding principles (Ezra Bowen, "Looking to Its Roots," p. 29).

Engraved on the east wall of the U.S. Supreme Court, under the inscription, "The Power of Government," one can find the basis for judicial law: The Ten Commandments. It is the "natural law" spoken of in the New Testament (Romans 2:14-15), the law written on the hearts and consciences of all people, the law of God. There is another inscription in Washington, D.C. worth pondering. It is

located on the northeast wall of the Jefferson Memorial. Thomas Jefferson reminded us not to forget our highest conviction. He said,

God, who gave us life, gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation remain secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.

We ought to take heed of this warning! Unless, of course, the terms God, life, liberty and justice are merely *words without meaning*.