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Testing (*dokenazein*) is the key to all New Testament ethics . . . Certainty of moral judgment in the concrete sense is in the last analysis the one great fruit that the Holy Spirit, this factor in redemptive history, produces in the individual man.

Oscar Cullman

When all is said and done, morality becomes a way of protecting ourselves against the fact that salvation depends on God, and on Him alone. We establish norms (out of the Bible, to be sure) as a safeguard against God . . . . If only we could offer God an indisputable virtue, then we could put our minds at rest. God would not be able to condemn us. We would not be delivered into his hands, to *His* free decision.

Jacques Ellul

The point of departure for Christian ethics is not the reality of one's self, or the reality of the world, nor is it the reality of standards and values. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself to Jesus Christ. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Beyond Moral Reform

Bruce A. Ware

Revival. Here in North America, it seems like more people are praying for revival these days than has been done for quite some time. Studies on revival are streaming from Christian presses. Concerts of prayer urge us to beseech God earnestly for revival. Courses are being added to Bible college and seminary curricula on the history and characteristics of revivals.

All this interest in revival is wonderful, make no mistake about it. God has made it abundantly clear that He delights in consecrated lives who long to see Him bring about righteousness. It does make me wonder, though, what is motivating so much of this interest? That is, why the increased attention on revival, especially just *now*? I suggest that at least a good share of the interest is owing to this: Christian people are alarmed at the rate of moral decay all around them, they feel their own values and commitments threatened, they are frightened and dismayed at the seeming collapse of their world, and they want God desperately to turn this morally corrupt society around.

There is something very right in this motivation for wanting revival. Surely it is right for God's people to want to see His moral standards upheld. Christians should be alarmed at the flagrant disregard of His law. There are many occasions when we justifiably cry out with the psalmist, "O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God. Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed" (Ps. 139:19). And so the longing for moral reform, for God's purging of evil from the land, is good. But there is more needed. In itself, this motivation for revival captures only part of what must move God's people most deeply in the face of flagrant corruption. The longing for moral reform is not wrong; it's just deficient.

Psalm 143:11 states: "For the sake of Thy name, O Lord, revive me," (NASB). (Cf. Ps. 23:3; 25:11; 31:3; 79:9; Jer. 14:7.) Here is the primary motivator for revival, the one that shows

the other longing for moral reform to be properly secondary and subordinate. The most fundamental reason Christian people should long for revival is that they want more than anything else to see God's incomparable name and reputation exalted. They seek to see His worthiness and glory, His dignity, purity, truthfulness and righteousness honored and esteemed. They want the one true God, who alone possesses all that is good and right and beautiful, to be acknowledged for who He alone is: God! And therefore, at bottom, Christians should find moral corruption repulsive because such corruption possesses only God-dishonoring qualities. Furthermore, such perversion endeavors to display as good what is in actuality evil, thereby positing itself as a false and substitute god. In other words, the most grievous thing about moral decay is its idolatrous character; it pretends to offer the good that God alone can bestow, but gives instead what is in reality deviant and perverse.

In fact the history of sin is the history of God-dishonoring idolatry. From Genesis three onwards, sin and its moral corruption succeed only by supplanting the true glory of God for the false and pseudo glory of a rival deity. The Serpent achieved victory when he deceived the woman to think that goodness, beauty, truth, life and the fullest of human joy and blessing are found not *in* God but *apart from* God. Here, then, is the essence of sin: Independence from God that charts any other than God's course seeking to find the good and beautiful and true. The irony in all this is that sin has no positive quality within itself. It works to compel people toward its moral depravity only by convincing those it preys on that their God-given longing for what is good is found, not with, but away from, God. Moral corruption, then, as the manifestation of sin, is inherently God-dishonoring. It falsely pretends to provide goodness when, in fact, goodness abides in God alone. When what is good is sought apart from God, He is not honored. Furthermore,

when sin's deceptive lure succeeds in eliciting human adoration for its false and ruinous substitute, glory that should have been given to the God who alone possesses qualities worthy of adoration is given to an impostor. Hence, moral corruption at heart is idolatry.

So it is clear that our longing for moral reform per se must be subordinate to our longing for God's honor. The logical relationship here must not be missed. If we truly are longing for moral reform, we must recognize that the good moral quality we seek is based on the moral character of God. That is, if we want justice, righteousness, holiness, peace, kindness, and goodness to supplant corruption, licentiousness, violence, hatred, and perversion, it can only happen as the presence of God's own character pervades the lives of those within our society. As people bring to an end their pursuits of idolatrous moral perversions and bow before the true God whose moral beauty and excellence captured their minds and hearts, then and only then will authentic moral reform take place. But remember, the positive moral qualities grown in them exist only as derivative manifestations of the very presence of God. Therefore, our supreme longing must be for God's name to be exalted. We should carry on our prayers and evangelism with the goal that increasing numbers of people might come to see that God, His glorious character and the qualities of moral perfection found in Him intrinsically, are alone worthy of our highest esteem and honor.

So pray with all diligence for God to clean up the streets of our inner cities. Pray that our legislators will enact just laws, and that our judges will rule fairly. Pray that violence, pornography, promiscuity and abortion will diminish. But underlying all these prayers, pray that God will again be known as God, that all forms of idolatry will be abolished, and that His name alone will be honored and exalted. For Your name's sake, O Lord, bring revival to our land!

Author

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