

Back To What Basics?

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Every right-thinking person must applaud the thought of encouraging a return to basics. The fear in many hearts today is that somehow civilisation itself has taken a wrong turning. This concern is not confined to a few evangelical people but is very widespread. Sin is all very well so long as society can control it. So at least the unbelieving world might think. But today sin has got out of hand. It is a monster ready to devour, not the unborn child or the very elderly only, but even the very institutions which make life possible and liveable. A return to basics seems to be needed now as never before in living memory.

It is therefore to be welcomed unreservedly that world leaders should be starting to talk in terms of a return to basic values and basic standards. We believe as a matter of common charity that when leaders speak in this way they have a wish to implement what they say and are not using mere slogans for political advantage. The problem, however, appears to be that no one is quite sure any more how the term 'basics' should be defined and spelt out. The disease which afflicts us is a good deal deeper than our leaders thought. Our tacit assumption as a society that all men have a 'right' to believe what they want to believe has left us in the uneasy position in which every man has become his own island and therefore can mint the meaning of words to suit his own tastes.

The real problem starts with this conundrum: How do we get back out of our smog of moral relativism into the fresh air of moral absolutes? To alter the figure of speech, the first step to saving the game is to stop the goal posts from being continually moved about at will all over the pitch.

The sad fact however is that the unbeliever cannot welcome a serious return to those much-talked-of basics which will really solve the problems of this hour. What he wants is to recover a breathing space from the present upsurge of crime and collapse so that he may enjoy his sins as he once did before the rude wave of permissiveness swept across his civilisation. The basics which are envisaged are in fact not basics at all but only sins of a more refined nature. We do not detect any signs that the cry to return to basics is accompanied by a hatred of sin as such or motivated by a desire to return to God.

But would it not be a blessing to return to that state of things which we knew in the 'fifties, when at least there was outward respectability and decency? Is it not a good thought that society might be brought back to an outward conformity with moral laws even if the love of God were missing? There is in all of us probably a wistful desire that this might be brought about. But it is surely a dream which cannot receive much encouragement from the Bible. At least, we mean that the Bible views decency without the love of God as a much more serious evil than we are apt to think.

What we as Christians need to recall and what the world may not care to remember is that today's state of society is a direct consequence of yesterday's abandonment of moral law and yesterday's contempt of gospel preaching. A nation may have morality without religion for a time but it cannot have it for long. When God is forsaken there may be space for repentance but when this is scorned even the common blessings of life will be withdrawn. Lose God today and we must lose all else a little later.

We rejected a century ago the standards and the basics which our fore-fathers believed in. After that we enjoyed a period of social cohesion in spite of, and perhaps partly because of, two world wars. But it could only be a matter of time before our national rejection of the Bible would result in anarchy and spiritual chaos. By the nineteen-sixties this was happening with a vengeance. The full effects of our earlier revolt from evangelical belief began to be felt then with the force of a hurricane. At the time, of course, we were being told that we had 'never had it so good'. But those who were reading their Bibles could see clearly enough that it was only a matter of time before the illusion of a material paradise would give place to the realities of spiritual bankruptcy and moral ruin.

If the summons to return back to basics is to have meaning, it must involve a return to something which made our lands the once-great places that they were. What may we suppose that to have been?

The answer is simple, say some. What we need is not a repressive Victorian religion but just to get back to neighbourliness and mutual respect. But wait a minute. We cannot have both that and also a philosophy in which everyone has a 'right' to express his personality exactly as he wants. If what we want is mutual respect then we shall have to agree first on the limits of my liberty and other people's. Further, we shall have to achieve a mentality among men in which each begins to treat his neighbour as he would have them treat him. More difficult still, we shall need not only to educate the population to understand this ethic but also we shall need to persuade them that it is the only life worth living.

For sinners to dismiss the Bible as old-fashioned and worthless and yet for them to aim at making a society where there is mutual respect is as futile as for the wolf to bark for the moon. The chapter of Scripture where this futile picture is most clearly presented is the passage in which the rich man in hell looks up

despairingly from his torment and envies Lazarus his comforts in paradise. It just is not achievable for society to shut out God and yet to retain his gracious blessings. Either men must begin to get them by wanting him, or they must be prepared to do without them because they cannot bring themselves to love him. To have the cake and the penny is just not an option.

The crying pity from the worldly man's point of view is that God, unfortunately, exists. Worse still, he is a God of infinite holiness, who makes demands upon his creatures. If only men were in the position in which they could forever wish God away into non-existence and make a brave new world of their own, they might then have a comfortable 'morality' without God. In such a Utopia men might be free to enjoy unlawful pleasures without the inconvenience of having to account to their Creator or even to their own consciences for them.

But such a thing can never be. Whether men like it or not, they are created with a consciousness of being responsible for their actions. Though we dig deep as hell we cannot escape from the fact that we have a moral nature. Though we climb up to the stars we cannot leave behind us that instinctive knowledge of God with which we were born. Though we educate generation after generation in the false view that we are the products of evolution and not the creatures of God, there is still a cry arising from deep down in the human heart which craves to know what our life on this planet is all about. Is there a Someone who is out there? Is there a Friend to whom I might turn, who really understands how I feel? When I am weeping and in pain, can he sympathise and will he pity?

In a strange kind of way it is a comfort and a reassurance to see that the societies in which we live today are riddled with problems and with criminality. If man could live peacefully and contentedly in the sort of world which society has created it would be far more terrible. But the high incidence of violence and cruelty — fearful and deplorable as these things are in themselves — bears witness to the fact that man craves something which modern life is not able to give. Augustine put it in these immortal words: 'Thou [O God] hast made us for thyself and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in thee'.

Another theologian expressed the same thought in this way. Place a cow in clover and it is content. Place a man in a material paradise and he is content only for a short time. Then comes that strange thing which we call boredom. Man is made for something vastly more than for material things. He has a heart shaped like a wineglass and will not rest satisfied till his almighty Creator pours in the wine of his love and grace. Something deep in man screams when he is told that he is only a higher animal. Every pore of his body cries out that he is made in a more noble mould.

To ask a man to live by a moral code and not also to tell him that he is God's workmanship is chilling to him. It gives him a duty without a context and without motivation. 'Back to basics' must begin with a narration to man that he is an

immortal soul soon to appear before the tribunal of his Judge; that he is fallen, lost and ruined; that he is under the wrath and curse of God and must eternally perish if he is not brought to repentance in this present life.

The most basic of all basics is the information that we are born on the broad road to destruction and have no hope if not delivered by a higher hand than our own. Before the good news of the gospel, men need to have set clearly before them both the good news that we are created by God in his image and also the bad news that this image is tarnished and blurred.

But then it must also be proclaimed to my poor, anguished heart that a Saviour has been provided. He is moreover just such a Saviour as I could most desire and long for, one who is both very God and fully man. God the Father has loved this world and given his Son to be my sin-bearer. Jesus Christ has loved me and died for me. I may be pardoned all my guilt at once, now and in this life. I may come back to a Heavenly Father's home. I may know peace and hope, love and fellowship with the great and ever-blessed God my Creator.

Here is the ravishing news that my aching heart craves. Not that I must keep some abstract code of morality for society's convenience; but that I, a saved sinner, must do a Heavenly Father's holy will out of gratitude that he has loved me and sent his Son to die in my place on the Cross. These are the basics which a man must be told if he is to be treated as a man and not as a moral machine. These are the fundamentals that we are to teach in our modern society if men are to live like men and not like beasts.

Did we a moment ago dare to use the word 'fundamentals'? Surely we do not seriously mean to bring back the old 'Fundamentalism'? The reply we give is a resounding Yes if, by that term, we mean the old view that the gospel of Jesus is the only cure for this sin-sick world. Hate it who will, the gospel alters people for good and lifts society up as nothing else can do. John Wesley had plenty of experience of what he was saying when he silenced his critics with the words: 'Our people die well'. He might just as easily have said that Christian converts live well. Both are true. Those who believe the basics of the gospel are better at both living and dying. All other people, whatever may be the outward appearance as they go about their lives and then lie at last on their deathbeds, fail that final and ultimate test catastrophically.

The basics we urge men to go back to then are these: first, Belief in a loving, saving Redeemer Jesus Christ. Millions have found him to be the food of their souls. Why should only our proud age make itself strange to his saving power? Then we urge society to go back to a belief in the Bible. Before we turn to scoff at this thought let us recall that our forefathers treasured this old Book more dearly than life. They thumbed it out of existence, such was their diligent reading of it. They wept over its sublime message. They gave their bodies to be burnt in fire that they might keep its commandments and enjoy in a better world its promises.

Have the people of our generation some superior wisdom that we today can deride a Book which other ages found to be the elixir of life?

If it is back to basics we are to go, let these be our basics and nothing less. Let there be given hours of radio and television time in all our nations to the furthering of this message. Let Christ be raised aloft by every preacher and let sinners in every home hear the joyful news that God offers free pardon to every penitent. Happy the nation that tries it and thrice happy the sinner who believes!

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