

Week 1: G vs. E - An Introduction to Good and Evil

Introduction

For weeks after the 2004 November elections, the media assured us that the key to the Republican victories and President Bush's reelection was the debate over "values." Many people insisted that George Bush won due to the support of those who hold "conservative values," "right wing values" or "Christian values." George Bush and his Republicans successfully painted themselves as those who were opposed to homosexual unions and the right to kill unborn children, so-called "family values." The left wing of the American political spectrum, especially the Democrats, soon countered that the right wing and conservative Christians weren't the only ones with "values." Weren't fighting against poverty and seeking peace also Christian values? Who was speaking up for those values?

Philadelphia's own Bill Cosby made national press by his denunciation of the attitude of many Americans towards children and family. The problems of many poor communities, he claimed, were due to a lack of respect and morality being instilled in children by their parents. Fathers were walking out on their families and the whole community was suffering as a result. Then Bill Cosby was charged with sexual assault. Just thinking about Bill Cosby and the issues surrounding him raises a host of "value" questions. Is poverty BAD? Is crime necessarily "evil"? If Cosby actually did what he's accused of, does that make all his other statements invalid? Are humans good people who do bad things? Is a human being who does a bad thing therefore completely bad? Can an evil person do something "good?"

The furor over the election is long past. The discussion of values and morality continues. So for the next four weeks, as we celebrate the Resurrection of God's Son from the dead, let's take some time to really think about good and evil. The more we understand good and evil, the more prepared we will be to think clearly about the issues of our day from a Christian perspective.

Religion is not Morality

The first thing we need to clear up is some simple definitions. Most Americans confuse two terms that make it very difficult to talk about values productively. We tend to think of "religion" and "morality" as being the same thing. People I visit who never attend public worship services also tell me they're very "religious." In other words, they give to charity, visit the sick, help out in the community, and work on public service projects. Therefore they consider themselves "religious." But consider how many mobsters you've seen in the movies who go to mass and get their babies baptized – would you call them "moral" people just because they go to church?

Morality and religion are not the same thing. Religion is "the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship." Morality is "concerned with goodness or badness of human character or behavior, or with the distinction between right or wrong" (Oxford Canadian Dictionary).

What's the difference between the two? What's in one definition that's missing from the other? Religion is about belief in a god or gods, and morality deals with human conduct. If you think of a cross, religion is the vertical part, dealing with our relationship with God. Morality deals with our relationships with each other. No one would accuse a Baptist who doesn't believe in infant baptism of being "immoral." We would disagree with their "religion." In the same way we shouldn't accuse someone who kills or steals of being "irreligious." If you are discussing things that are right and wrong for people to do in worship, you're talking religion. If you're talking about things people should and shouldn't do to teach other, you're usually talking about morality.

Theism is Not Christianity

"But pastor," you might be thinking, "God teaches us not to kill, doesn't he? You can't believe in God and steal from someone else!" This leads to the second set of definitions we need to get out of the way before we continue our discussion of good and evil. Most Americans not only confuse religion and morality, they also confuse belief in God with being a Christian. A Christian is a religious person who holds a certain set of beliefs about God. But that doesn't mean all people who are religious and believe in God are Christians. I know many people who are very moral – they act according to Christian "moral" principles toward other people. They even believe in God. But they are not, from the perspective of religion, "Christians."

Christianity, as we believe, teach and confess it, is a religion of *faith* before it is a moral teaching. When "we" ask someone if they're a Christian, we expect them to know and understand, for example, the Apostles' or Nicene Creed. When asked if they're a Christian, a Christian will respond something like, "Yes, I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, who was crucified, died and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins, and in one holy, Christian Church in which God daily and richly forgives *me* all *my* sins." Then, from *that* answer, we might *then* expect certain moral behaviors. But if you ask someone if they're a Christian and they answer, "Yah, I believe in God and I try and be a good person," you know they don't really understand Christianity, either because they haven't been taught it, or they quite possibly aren't Christian at all.

We call belief in God "theism" from the Greek word θεος (theos), which means "god." One who believes in god is a "theist." In fact, I would argue that almost every single American is a theist. But that does not make them a Christian. Christianity and theism are, from a religious perspective, completely different and not even very compatible. Theists, though they believe in god, do not really know who that god is and, in fact, would rather not really know who that god is. Some may see god as a distant figure uninvolved with the world. Others may see him or her as a mother or father figure, looking out for everyone's best interests. In contrast, Christianity is the religious belief that we know God in great detail, because he became a human being and will remain a human being until the end of time. Christianity is the belief that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God. That leaves very little wiggle room for us in talking about what God is like.

So we have four words we need to keep distinct. The first two are religion and morality. Religion is our relationship, if any, with the god or gods we believe in. Morality is the relationship we have with each other. Some religions teach morality, and some moral people believe in god and many are Christian. But the two are distinct things. In the same way Christianity and theism are not the same thing. All Christians are theists, because they believe in God. But not all theists are Christians, because they don't all believe that in Jesus we see the "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

So What About Good and Evil?

So what about good and evil? What about the question of things that are right and things that are wrong? Well, to really get the ball rolling, let me ask you a question:

A boy is playing in his fenced backyard. Suddenly a huge boulder rolls down a hillside and crushes him to death.

Q: Was this a good thing or an evil thing?

A: The boy's untimely death made it evil. But why would death make it evil? Isn't death a natural part of existence? Don't all things die? Is there an age after which death is "good" but before which death is "evil"? What is that age? Who told you the age?

The Existence of Good and Evil in the Conscience

Clearly, almost everyone has an inborn sense of things that are "good" and things that are not. This is an important piece of information on our journey into learning about "good" and "evil" – we may not be able to explain yet *why* we think something is good or bad, but most of us feel it in our gut. Well need to look into this further. But for now, let me ask another question:

Q: Who was responsible for the "evil"?

A1: The Government for not assessing an unsafe area.

A2: The parents for allowing the child to play in an unsafe area.

A3: The child for not seeing the boulder and running away.

A4: No one. This denies the philosophical idea that all effects have causes.

A5: God, for allowing this to happen.

A6: Satan or the Devil for making it happen.

Natural and Moral Evil

If you answered 1, 2 or 3, you have placed the death of the child in a realm known as *moral evil*. An intelligent human agent was passively (not like they pushed the rock!) responsible for the death of the child. You would probably blame the governments of southeast Asia for the death toll in December's Tsunami, for not having a proper warning system. In that case, you have a belief in what some people call *systemic moral evil* – you can't pinpoint the person responsible, but instead point at a system made up of multiple human beings that is responsible. *Systemic Moral Evil finds the fault for evil in the behavior of an institution or even a whole society.*

If you tended to blame the parents or the child (2 or 3), you are focus more on *individual moral evil*. You would tend to blame the victims of the Tsunami for not getting out of the way or “seeing the disaster coming.” *Individual Moral Evil finds the fault for evil in an individual’s behavior*.

If you answered 4, 5 or 6, you see the death of the child as a result of what we’ll call *natural evil*. Natural evil is not attributable to any human person or system. Some may attribute it to fate, to God, to the Devil, or to just a series of unfortunate events. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes are “Acts of God.” We recognize them as evil, but were not going to put anyone in prison or investigate any government agency for causing them. *Natural Evil results from something beyond any individual human, organization or society*.

Let’s try another question and see if we can decide whether it’s evil, and how we might look at it using the new terms we’ve learned. Let’s deal with a few really hot topics all at once!

Tom feels a sexual attraction to other men, and moves in with a boyfriend. One night, Tom’s brother Jake (who’s church has taught him homosexuality is morally wrong), breaks into their house, and shoots Tom dead. The government executes Jake for the murder, and shuts down the church for breaking “hate-speech” laws.

Q: What things in this story were good or evil, right or wrong?

A1: Tom’s homosexual relationship was evil (individual moral evil - action)

A2: Tom’s homosexual feelings were evil (individual moral evil – intent? natural evil?)

A3: Jake was evil to shoot him (individual moral evil – action)

A4: The church was wrong to teach Jake homosexuality was wrong (systemic moral evil)

A5: The church was at fault for not teaching Jake killing is wrong (systemic moral evil)

A6: The government was at fault for executing Jake (systemic moral evil)

A7: The government was wrong to shut down the church (systemic moral evil)

Applying Natural and Moral Evil

Alright – we’ve uncovered a few things I’d like to summarize. First of all, pretty much every one here agreed that Jake killing Tom was wrong or evil. If any one didn’t completely agree, then they believed very strongly that homosexual actions were morally evil.

Beyond that, things got a little hazy. Was Tom’s homosexual activity *moral evil*, or *natural evil*? What if someone, say a school or other adult, formed Tom into a person who had homosexual tendencies? Then you might also have some kind of *systemic evil* thrown into the mix. When we got to the issue of the government and the church, things got really complicated. What should the church have done, if anything? Maybe you believe they did everything right and Jake was responsible for his own actions. Maybe you believe in “hate-speech” laws and think the church probably crossed a line somewhere. Whatever you believe, you are probably basing you ideas on a couple of core “rights and wrongs” imbedded somewhere in your conscience. One is that killing is

generally wrong, and the other is that some forms of sexual activity are alright and others aren't.

Conclusion

What have we learned tonight? We've thrown quite a few things on the table. First of all we talked about the difference between religion (our beliefs about God) and morality (our beliefs about right and wrong behavior toward each other). We've pointed out that belief in God and being a Christian are not the same thing, which is something we're going to get back to in the next couple of weeks.

We've learned that we all have some sense that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. We haven't talked about *why* we have that sense or where it comes from. We've also not talked about and whether there's a more reliable way of determining what's right or wrong than our *sense* that something is right or wrong. We're going to get to those questions in the next two weeks.

We've talked about natural and moral evil. Natural evil is all the bad things that happen that we can't blame on any one person, organization, or society. Usually disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, and draughts are considered "natural evil." We asked the question, "Who is responsible, if anyone, for natural evil?" We're going to take up the question of natural evil next week. We'll look at some of the answers given in the past about why disasters happen. We'll also ask, if God is good and all powerful, why do evil natural disasters happen, especially to good people?

Moral evil, on the other hand, can come from one person's actions or inactions, or from the actions of a bunch of people acting together. We haven't talked about which actions or inactions are right or wrong, but we'll ask about that in two weeks. We'll ask whether there are some things that are always right or wrong, and how we find out which ones. We'll also look at the way non-Christian theists, atheists, and people who believe in evolution understand morality.

Hopefully you've been introduced to a new way of thinking about "right and wrong" that you haven't heard before. I also hope you know that we've asked more questions that we've answered, and that you'll come back in the next two weeks to hear some of the Christians answers.

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