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How CAN WE BRING ABOUT AN ETHICAL REVOLUTION?

BILL LOVE

Napoleon always advocated the sanctity of the home and the obligation of public worship — for others. Of himself he said, “I am not a man like other men. The laws of morality do not apply to me.” The Little General was neither the first nor the last of his kind: power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. The morning paper reminds us that the pleasures of command continue among the most seductive lures of the Devil. But what can we Christians do to be salt in this tasteless world gone mad for power? Can we avoid using our own power in ways hurtful to others and to ourselves? Or are we as ethically blind as the public figures we so easily revile?

Complexity Of The Problem

It has been said that we should look forward to the day when the love of power is replaced by the power of love. Certainly we should, but how do we get there from here? The older we get the more aware we become of the complexity of moral questions. When I was young it all seemed so simple, like an old “B” western where the good guys wore white hats and the bad guys wore black. But now that I’m grown I realize that every person owns both a white and black hat, and one or two very distinguished charcoal grey ones. Even more disturbing, I myself change hats from time to time.

How many of us choose to do evil? Most often our evil is good intention run amuck. A man gifted enough to win a Pulitzer Prize can easily neglect his family in the name of his work. The defender of the faith can lose control and run some tender soul through with a point of doctrine. An institution like the church or a Christian university founded for only the highest purposes may someday make human sacrifices to preserve the **status quo**.

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That evil is a perversion of the good is nothing new. Adam and Eve were spiritual beings able to commune with God. Because they were spiritual beings they were also able to commune with the Serpent. They did not disobey because they hated God; it was their very desire to “be like God” which the Serpent used to seduce them.

Our First Impulses Are Often Wrong

In trying to foster change our first impulses are all wrong. Anyone who has tried to help an alcoholic knows that our natural instincts are counterproductive. When it comes to our ethical problems we naturally shift into the problem-solving mode: analyze the problem, brainstorm for all possible solutions, list advantages and disadvantages of each, pick the best answer, find the resources, and set the process in motion. It’s true that we must apply our minds to the questions of ethics. But our analysis is not the **first** order of business. If we allow our own rational thinking to become the fountainhead of reform the waters become polluted at the source.

Many well-meaning Christians are going at it just that way today. We may feel far removed from the Social Gospel days of the old Liberals at the turn of the century. But, in fact, many who have never heard of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbush are re-inventing the Social Gospel. It seems ironic that conservative Christians who for generations have railed against the Social Gospel are today marshalling support for social change and using methods in ways reminiscent of the old-line Liberals.

We could stand to learn a few things from others who have been in this ethical reform business for years. Next door to our church in Houston is the Emerson Unitarian Church. It’s one of the largest and most vibrant churches of that tradition anywhere. Their founding minister, Dr. Frank Schulman, recently retired after twenty-five years. For all our theological differences, he and I have become good friends. He was in my office the last week of his tenure, reminiscing about his career. “In my first pastorate in New England I was involved in every do-gooder outfit in the

community, and was president of several," he said. "When that was over I looked back on it all and realized that I had had about as much impact on that community as dropping a rose petal into the Grand Canyon." Upon the occasion of Schulman's retirement a member of his congregation asked if his ministry had been a success. "I don't know," he answered. "Ask me again in ten years. I have given my life to the institution. We'll just have to see."

Please do not misunderstand. We are all called to apply our minds to analysis and action, and revolutions must always create and use institutions. Changes have to take some **form**. But our question is about the **source** of such a revolution. Upon examining them more closely we can see that institutions do not themselves have the answer. Then where does revolution begin?

God Is the Fountainhead

We know from experience that only God revolutionizes, whether it's individual lives or institutions or nations. And when it comes to revolutions, God's ways are not our ways. Actually, one searches the Scriptures in vain for the word, "ethics." Not that Christians are not called to ethical behavior. But if by "ethics" we mean that branch of philosophy which defines problems of morality, seeks solutions, proposes "changing the world so that individuals will be changed" — we are more indebted to the ancient Greeks than to the Hebrews.

God does things differently. He calls for himself a people, makes covenant with them, leads them personally, has a story with them. In that process he makes them his holy people for all the world to see.

So we must stifle our first reflex. We do not begin by analysis and action. If God is working we must first of all be passive, as quiet as a child on his father's lap hearing his favorite story. That's a good picture of the way we must begin with ethical reform. We are to be passive to hear the story. Michael Goldberg has said that, for Jews and Christians, "our story not only informs us, more importantly it **forms** us." Others like John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas have shown how Christian ethics grow out of the **story**, not from a philosophical search for truth. In short, we act the way we do because of who we are. We are who we are because of our story. So what is that story?

A moment's reflection reveals that we have been formed by many stories. Think what the stories of "George Washington and the Cherry Tree," "The Little Engine That Could," and "Horatio Alger" have meant to our society! "Star Wars," "Jonathan Livingston Seagull," and "Rambo" have had their impact. The biographies of Lee Iacocca, Ronald Reagan, and Donald Trump have fired the imagination of millions. The selfless stories of Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa challenge our self-centered pursuit of the "good life." It's true, stories not only inform us, they form us.

What Is The Story?

But none of these is God's revolutionary story which harnesses power for his glory and changes the familiar landscape of greed and self-interest. Our challenge is to hear **that** story again, to measure our lives by it, to let it be told again through us. So what is God's story?

"This is the beginning of the gospel of the Son of God" is how the gospel of Mark begins. Then Jesus came up from the waters of baptism to an announcement from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." We know immediately that this story is about the fairest Prince of them all, the Son of God! One who will be full of honor, authority and power. And, as he began his ministry he looked every inch of it! Jesus went into the desert to do hand-to-hand combat with Satan. At first, the Evil One did not appear hostile, he just wanted to show Jesus a few short-cuts to glory. But Jesus wasn't interested in short cuts, he would rather take the long way. Then he called disciples and they immediately got up from their jobs and followed him! He saw wretched souls tormented by demons, called the demons by name and cast them out! He stilled a tempest on Galilee, healed lepers, and even raised the dead! His power seemed unlimited. The title "Son Of God" was the only one that seemed to fit. He was obviously in full command.

How our candidates for office would crave such power. He was a campaign manager's dream: if he started this strong in the primaries, gained momentum in the convention, he would be a shoe-in come November. The only problem would be having the media on hand to catch his every move.

Jesus called them to walk with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. Following seemed logical, Messiah would have to be crowned in the city of David. He called the twelve to be disciples, or learners. Don't picture classrooms and desks, libraries and laboratories. He called them to "follow him on the way." They would take a trip together. There's no better way to get acquainted with someone than to take a trip with him or her. On the road we hear the other's story, and we see that person in a true light. On this road we hear the **lifestory** of God.

But no sooner were they on the road than Jesus began making dark predictions! He explained that he must go to Jerusalem, have conflict with the authorities, suffer, die and be raised. Peter pulled Jesus aside and "rebuked" him, thinking he had a demon. "Wait just a minute! There's no need for all that doomsday stuff! Suffering won't be necessary if you have twelve able-bodied men with you!" The other eleven no doubt added a hearty "Amen!" They all sensed that this was serious business, their candidate was in danger of losing his positive, optimistic attitude. This was no time to give up! But Jesus knew Peter was actually the one with a demon and "rebuked him." "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." Things got quiet after that. The disciples became full of questions. What was happening to their hero who

had shown such command? The one who had all authority and power?

Their candidate seemed to recover the next day. He took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain. A brilliant light shone around him, and Moses and Elijah appeared. Peter must have thought to himself: "This is as good as it gets! If we could just keep this going until the TV cameras get here!" "Lord," he said, "let's set up tents for the three of you!" He didn't know exactly what to say, but that never stopped Peter. A cloud hung low and Another's voice was heard: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was all over.

Jesus took them back down the mountain where they found the other nine debating about a demoniac they couldn't heal. This was a descent from the "sublime to the ridiculous." So far as Peter, James and John were concerned coming down from the mountain was the big mistake. But Jesus had come to serve. He exorcised the young man and the disciples started to perk up. Then Jesus said it again. "I'm going up to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and be raised again." No one said anything. Who wanted to get what Peter got the first time? They looked at one another in stunned confusion.

A few days later the disciples were lagging behind on the path. Jesus waited for them and said it again. This time he made it abundantly clear. "We are going to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him and kill him; and after three days he will rise." What else need be said? That should settle it, Jesus thought. Questions?

James and John raised their hands. "Yes," Jesus said, "What is it?" "After your inauguration can we be Chief of Staff and Secretary of State?" That's how much they had heard, even after Jesus had told them three times! So he explained that he had a baptism to endure and a cup to drink. They would one day have his baptism and drink his cup. Were they ready? They were sure of it; Jesus knew they were not. So he told them that as far as assigning places in the kingdom was concerned, Jesus himself did not have the prerogative. Someone else had arranged that.

The disciples were dumbfounded. Jesus tried to explain. "In my kingdom it won't be like that. The unbelieving Gentiles bark orders. Their 'big men' show their power by moving people around. You can tell who the greatest in their kingdom is: he's the one with the most servants. In my kingdom the greatest will be the greatest servant. For even the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus' twelve continued down the road in shock. As they were leaving the outskirts of Jericho they passed blind Bartimaeus. He called out. Jesus asked what he wanted. He didn't want power or

prestige, **he just wanted to see.** Jesus healed him because Bartimaeus desired clear vision above all else. The disciples might have used this incident to take a long look at their own ambitions. But they didn't get it.

Sure enough, when Jesus entered Jerusalem everything went wrong. He went to the temple where old Annas, the Godfather of Jerusalem, had a lucrative scam going. He not only had money-changing booths where worshippers had to change their money for a price, but he also sold the only sheep with the required mark of approval — for a handsome profit, of course.

Jesus started an **ethical** revolution. He overturned the tables, ran the merchants out and reclaimed his Father's house as a place for Gentiles to pray. Old Annas and his thugs were not happy when they heard. Even Jesus' own disciples would not follow him much farther down this road. They were coming to a parting of the ways.

And Jesus paid the price for starting a revolution. He was arrested, tried, forsaken, mocked, beaten, and spat upon. When the time came he couldn't even carry his own cross. The Son of God, the one full of power and authority now couldn't even carry his own cross! How embarrassing! How could God let this happen? Had the Creator planned all of this from before the beginning of the world only to forsake his son at the showdown?

Once Jesus was on the cross it was not over. The big men of Jerusalem had a little more fun with him. What a spectacle Jesus was! No one ever looked less like a king. One thing both Jesus' enemies and Jesus' disciples agreed on: no one wanted a low-profile, servant Messiah. "Save yourself!" his enemies taunted, "and come down from the cross. He saved others; he cannot save himself"

They were right, you know. Had he called on those legions of angels to rescue him the world's old ethic of power and prestige would have stood forever! But Jesus had announced God's ethical revolution: "Even the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This was **God's** revolution. Jesus made it happen by his perfect obedience. A Roman centurion, one who knew all about power and authority, saw something revolutionary in Jesus' death and said: "Surely, this was the Son of God!"

Something has happened to the title "Son of God" between the beginning of this story and now. The one full of authority had divested himself entirely and submitted to the power of Judas, the mob, Annas, Pilate, unnamed Roman soldiers, the Scribes and Pharisees! There was real scandal in the cross. Serving is one thing, getting crucified for serving is something else. If Rambo can defeat the whole Russian army single-handedly you would think the Son of God could take control of the situation! Or at least carry his own cross. Why did he have to take all that ridicule from his enemies, the desertion of his disciples, and the dark-

ness out of which came the cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Revolutionary Scandal

That is the ultimate scandal of the cross. It wasn't just an offense against good manners and aesthetic sensibilities. The greatest shock wasn't even the exposure of man's pride and God's wrath, as terrible as that was. The greatest offense was this earth-shattering news about God! Jews and Romans agreed on very little. But they were in agreement on one thing: God must be someone high and lifted up. He was full of power, wealth, knowledge, prestige and honor. All served him; he served no one. It was a comforting belief. After all, one must negotiate his values with his god. If one worships a god of power, wealth, knowledge, and prestige, who is always served — then he can sing lustily and with a clear conscience, "O To Be Like Thee..." and mean every word of it!

But what we do with **this** Son of God, the one who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many? The one who came in authority and died in weakness? What can we do with this God of the towel and basin? How can we worship this one who comes asking nothing but to serve? Who among us wants to accept powerlessness, obscurity, limited knowledge, a modest standard of living — even for the kingdom of God? To worship this God would change one's whole way of life! If it caught on it would revolutionize the world's ethics.

But the cross was not the last word. This story was not over. Jesus was raised. God was in it after all. He won over human pride and selfishness. God decisively defeated Satan and his lies! There had been no slip-ups, nothing was overlooked. Jesus did not win in spite of his cross but precisely in choosing the cross. Neither did the resurrection overturn the cross. Jesus' life and death of service were not canceled, his call to service was not reversed. We Christians are not allowed to seek the crown of glory and bypass the cross of obedience.

One who makes Jesus the hero of life will find this out. He who follows Jesus must stand back daily

and see his inflated pride nailed to the hard wood. She must learn not to yield to her ego's pitiful cries for rescue. The disciple dies more and more to ambition, pride, and self-reliance and comes alive to service and, yes, even suffering for others. Those who follow Jesus in the way will spend a lifetime learning to pray: "Not my will but thine be done."

Meanwhile, God uses his children to bring about an ethical revolution. Ministers who care more for faithfulness than for fame will make a lasting contribution. Teachers who follow Jesus will have students leave their classrooms remembering the instructor as well as the subject matter. The doctor comes to the day when life's greatest joy is introducing patients to the Great Physician. Because of Jesus lawyers care less and less for the game and more and more for justice and those who suffer. Business men and women will choose excellence in integrity and sanity in values. All of these will care more for service than for prestige and power, will not neglect family for fame and fortune, will tell the truth even when the career suffers. They live to glorify God and the crucified one.

Faith is an exciting adventure with God. All of us will get old, tired, impotent. But that will be okay. The revolution will be in progress. It will be working like salt, light, leaven. Another generation will have heard the story. They will have seen it lived before their eyes. If we are fortunate, you and I will be honored at a retirement dinner, hear those accolades and the applause. All of that will be pleasant, but we will know it's not the main thing.

Mark told us what the main thing is. He said his story was "the **beginning** of the gospel of the Son of God." By that he meant the revolution has been set in motion. None of us will write a fifth gospel. But each of us can let this story be told through us. We cannot change the world, but we know the one who can. To be "workers together with God" is honor enough.

*This sermon adapted from a speech by Bill Love delivered to The Christian Scholar's Conference, Pepperdine University, 1988.