

**How should the church respond to postmodern culture?**

A summary and Lutheran critique of David F. Wells' *Losing Our  
Virtue*

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What are the primary ethical challenges for the church in the moral climate of the western world? In "Losing Our Virtue," author David F. Wells summarizes his view of the changes of our western culture and the undercurrent of thought behind these changes. His purpose is to critique the approach of the social interaction of the Christians and the Church and offer suggestions for a proper Gospel proclamation. This paper will reflect on the opinion of Wells and provide examples of the ethical challenges represented in his opinion. In addition, this paper will parallel and contrast the theological ideology and language of Wells with the Lutheran view.

### **Ethical Challenges**

Wells argues that postmodern man has lost morality as his ethical guide. He is no longer a "moral being." His ethic is derived from his self-centered culture. For the Christian church to adopt the ideas and techniques of the worldly culture, the church too must lose its moral footing. It must abdicate itself of "evangelical conviction... the Biblical Word in its authoritative function... and of character." (3) Consequently, No difference between the ethics of the world and the church results.

Rather he argues the church must be critical of culture and the anthropology it presents. Wells believes there are striking parallels between our culture and the culture of Augustine's Roman world. Like Augustine's "City of God," the Church must present herself as a separate city from the world. Theology does not use the language of the world but exists externally from the world. Theology is not merely an academic enterprise but is the foundation of the Church. When the church eviscerates its doctrinal footing, its ability to make ethical decisions falters and ultimately becomes inconsistent with God's will. The church must not be ashamed of its doctrine. This doctrine gives the

church its ethical footing by which it may witness to a world without knowledge of the truth.

Scripture uses language unlike the world. It must be retained, especially where no equivalent term exists in our world culture. It must be defined where its meaning is distinct or nonexistent in the vocabulary of culture. "Today, our vocabulary is in crisis." (13) The shift from the language of virtue to values epitomizes the change in our understanding of ourselves. Classical thought considered morality in the context of community. Christian thought considers morality in light of God's image. Both the classical and the Christian view place morality externally to the individual. Individuals do not determine the virtue of their own actions, but the virtue is determined *extra nos*.

Rather the postmodern individual speaks of values instead of virtues. Individuals determine their own values. They do not necessarily derive their values from the world, their culture, or even the words of their God. They may lack a sense of what is holy in God's eyes. They may lack consideration of their neighbor. Ultimately, the language of values over virtues provides an escape from accountability to civilization or God and into relativism.

The free-market economy (capitalism) has changed ideas of work, society, polity. Modernity and technology have changed the way we interact, what we eat, where we live, and the cultures we encounter. Indeed, our cultures have shifted from being largely local to being global and unified. Technology shapes our perspective on human life, resulting in shifts of opinion of beginning and end of life issues. (25) Postmodern civilization builds itself without religious foundations but on the foundation of pleasure seeking. This civilization uses media to permeate its thought throughout all of life. This culture is more fascinated with the avant-garde than with the conventional.

Its ethical decisions are made without any standard. Can the same Scripture be the ethical norm in our context as it was in the Reformation context and for the Church throughout all time?

Wells argues that Scripture is transcendent. For both, the postmodern and Reformation context some similar challenges are at play. Sin is disconnected from unbelief and becomes simply bad feelings or socially determined bad actions. Man creates sin, and so man determines he can correct sin. Rather than rely on the grace of God at the cross of Christ, man makes his own righteousness whether by penance (Reformation) or by relativistic legalism or psychology (postmodern.) He can only accept these attempts at self-righteousness if he believes relief from sin can be found in himself. Sin is domesticated to accommodate the secular motive of self. This motive is the new secular spirit of tolerance.

The corruption of man is ubiquitous. The 18th century knew illegitimacy and divorce rates similar to our own. The difference is today our thought is autonomous. There is no consensual culture to inform our virtue. Rather government law and regulation replace virtue. The popular opinion then is not "what is virtuous" but "what is permissible." The postmodern man makes ethical decisions based on license. Freedom without absolute truth provides only understandings of illegality and license. This is a self-driven chaos of license which ultimately leads to no understanding of good and evil.

Without universally defined good and evil, all life loses its meaning. Morality is taught by majority opinion of the legal system. The language of "rights" and "choice" is introduced to fix the notion of license in law. Choice defies tradition or external responsibility. The self has been emptied of external truth and instead is filled by choice. It is no longer a social creature but an autonomous individual.

The world presents a conflict between independence and conformity. The church presents a harmony between the role of its many members as creatures under a Creator and the common nature of being made in the image of God. The church presents an egalitarianism. All people of all times are of equal value as creatures before God. All are equally sinful before the holiness of God. For example, to be called a Christian means one has a particular character and is part of a community known as the Church. There is distinction between her members, but they are never autonomous with distinct personalities.

Self-consciousness has overtaken any notion of sinful nature. Priest-like counselors care for this secular mantra of self. Advertising promises regeneration. Advertisers promise prosperity. Educated consumers making independent decisions cannot be moral beings. They may follow the masses in conformity or reject the masses in protest. In either case, they are acting as individuals. Without absolute reference for behavior, illogic and ill-reason triumph. Notions of society, culture, and morality are constraints to "personal liberation." (126) The self becomes the locus of all meaning and value.

The shift from the language of guilt to shame demonstrates the change in ethical decisions. Guilt is absolute and experienced when life is lived contrary to God's command. But shame is relative and is felt when we are not as we wish others to think we are. Guilt is absolute, but shame is relative. With the shift from guilt to shame, people are now more concerned with their appearance before others than before God. Wells gives a poignant example of the man who feels shame before others in his workplace when witnessing about Christ. (137) This is a false shame when doing the *right* thing. The man should be concerned about the guilt he might experience when not witnessing when God would have him do so.

Wells believes that the church cannot simply respond by 1) accommodating itself to the ideas and language of the postmodern culture and 2) simply proclaiming the Gospel with little consideration of whom man believes he is. Instead of accommodation, the Biblical perspective articulates what people already know. Natural law is written on the hearts of all men. There are absolutes. Natural knowledge and the concept of relative morality are at odds. This conflict is in reality the conflict of creation and sin. Wells returns to his Biblical definitions of guilt and shame. Scripture can reorient the cultural definitions of these terms to the classical theological definitions. (168) Shame becomes community oriented rather than self-oriented. (165) Guilt once again is articulated in relation to God and not simply worldly law. God's Word is required to articulate this reformation of definition. Scripture articulates a paradox in the minds of sinful man. Our sinful expectation of glory and exaltation is reversed by Scripture's message of suffering and humility as testified by Christ himself. The cultural understanding of honor is in paradox to Biblical honor.

This paradox presents the apologetic solution to the cultural paradox ignored or forgotten by the world. The crucial missing link in the Church's ability to preach the Gospel is defining sin within a postmodern context. Sin has been redefined in the world as either crime (legal) or disease (psychological) but neither is unbelief before God. (183) The postmodern world has lost the Biblical definition of sin because they have forgotten about God. Without God, there is not standard to judge what is sin or what is evil in the world. Self-absorption and conceit have disguised human nature as sinful man. (184) This loss trivializes the death and resurrection of Christ itself. An authentic life is not lived for Christ but is lived for oneself. Without God as creator, man ceases to be creature. Man have elevated ourselves from

creature to creator of our own destiny. Low self-esteem is not the problem, indeed quite the opposite. This self-deification is the Biblical essence of sin. It is the idolatry of the self and a violation of the greatest commandment. (189)

"The ally of faith is not culture but creation." (191) According to Wells, the church must use the moral contradiction of the teaching of culture versus the teaching of creation to renew man's recognition of sin. Even the greatest pagan spiritualist who argues for moral exploration will contradict himself and argue for some moral absolutes (i.e. murder.) Like Paul in Acts, the church can use this contradiction to teach a truthful anthropology. Where psychology has no language of sin, Biblical anthropology does. This tension between God's law and our nature is removed by either the diagnosis of sin as disease by psychology or the enthusiasm of prosperity religion. (200) The sinful man is not inherently good. Natural law shows us our sinfulness. We see our shortcomings in contrast to this law.

### **Lutheran ethical implications**

The language used by Wells in his text might be challenging to the Lutheran reader. When he speaks of "moral sense," Wells is referring to the doctrine of original sin. Other classical terms like justification, sanctification, eschatology, *simul justus et peccator*, *seelsorger*, catholic, and vocation are not used. Yet, Wells articulates these doctrines without naming them. The language of the text may appeal to the American Protestant more universally, but its themes are equally appropriate for the Eastern, Roman, or Lutheran reader. A Biblical ethic must be articulated by the Church not through accommodation to the postmodern ethic but in contrast to it.

Wells does suffer from a typical evangelical error, that is, a proper Law and Gospel distinction. First, the term "law" is notably absent. Instead, he may intend to use the term "gospel" to refer to the whole of Scripture when actually his intended usage is towards either Law or Gospel specifically.

Positively, he argues for a Biblical basis for morality in the classical term of virtue. He appeals to classical concepts of natural law, the holiness of God, and the image of God to provide the moral footing. This emphasis relies heavily on first article (Creed) themes of God and creation. Wells appropriately appeals to this article and its subject as providing the common ground to speak with the postmodern world. Man must be viewed as creature of a Creator. Unless he is a creature, he will not perceive himself as sinful over against the holiness of God. Sin must be related to God's holiness and not man's psyche.

But, where are the second and third article of the Creed? Its themes may be a stumbling block or barrier but no less so than natural law. (180) Wells argues that natural law provides the contradiction needed for a church apologetic to the postmodern context. He acknowledges though that the Church must fill the moral vacuum of the postmodern man. Yet, his primary appeal in the text is to holiness and righteousness of God, the first article of the Creed. He believes that this culture has lost a definition of sin which must be reclaimed. Unfortunately, there are only perfunctory acknowledgments of Christ and His cross (30, 200, et al). Wells sees self-righteousness as man's attempt to fill the moral vacuum. His answer does not provide emphasis on the preaching of Christ crucified and resurrected. It does not give emphasis to the life of the Church and the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, he almost entirely neglects how the Church and her bridegroom Christ go about reforming or restoring fallen man. Sacraments are nonexistent and so also the Holy

Spirit working through them. Any Lutheran ethic will not rely on purely pointing out sin and God's own holiness. It will put even greater emphasis on Christ's atoning work and his giving of himself in Word and Sacrament. Without these gifts, knowledge of sin only condemns and kills.

To Wells' credit, his neglect of Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramentology in the conversion of postmodern man is not intentional but only a limit in the scope of his work. He seeks to emphasize the common ground between the two kingdoms using natural law. If we suitably read our theology into the text, as Wells intends (6), the implications of Wells' thesis for the Lutheran ethical responses are numerous.

For example, Wells clearly desires the church's theology to remain independent of cultural mingling. Culture is given to respond with its own ethic. Postmodern culture, driven by self-deification, exorcizes itself of Biblical morality or ignores the natural law written on its heart. So this culture cannot speak of sin and can only provide self-chosen means of saving or regenerating oneself. The church and her doctrines of sin and salvation provide the remedy for this confusion. She must not be ashamed to proclaim both Law and Gospel correctly. Without this proclamation, man is left to make ethical decisions on his own and is doomed. Without a full ecclesiology and doctrine of sanctification, man will rely on his government or left-hand culture to answer his unanswered ethical dilemmas. Wells even suggests a reformation of virtue in the church will provide a reformation of civic virtue. (63-64) Clearly such a reformation can never be perfect and will not result by proclamation of God's holiness to unregenerate man but rather the entrance of re-born Christians entering the world and living the sanctified life. To live in the world but not of the world means that our language and "moral compass"

are not derived of the world that we live in but rather from the Biblical truth. (85)

Wells presents ethical implications for proper pastoral care. He boldly condemns the psychotherapy trade as being incompatible with Biblical soul-care. (110) Instead he emphasizes a proper distinction between guilt and shame. If these terms are properly defined, pastoral care is properly applied. If guilt is the result of the condemnation under the law of God, pastors apply to the guilty the words of Christ's death and resurrection that is, our justification and the recollection of our baptism. If shame results from unholy living before peers, pastors send the shameful back to the church where all are guilty but receive the sanctifying gifts of the Holy Spirit in Word and Lord's Supper. A Lutheran approach to ethics always emphasizes our justification as the origin of holy life and sanctification as the source of holy living. Without these free gifts, man will live in congruence with the world and not God.

As mentioned above, Wells articulates some useful classical doctrines without naming them explicitly. One such term is *simul justus et peccator*; man is both sinner and saint simultaneously. (197) When he speaks of the language of contradiction, he recalls Luther and this understanding of man. He suggests that church must not ignore this contradiction. She must not gloss over sin even in her midst. To do so requires a change in theology and a Biblical understanding of the fallen man. Lutherans highlight this tension. Wells argument for maintain the contradiction coincides with the Lutheran emphasis on daily return to the waters of our baptism. Without this conflict, reliance on holy living comes internally and not *extra nos*, from God. The Lutheran emphasis on Word and Sacrament disputes any notions of self-righteousness or self-remaking. Man does not cooperate with God but is given

all he needs by God as a free gift. Luther's "Bondage of the Will" rings true with the presentation of Wells. A life lived outside the bound of will of God is not freedom but bondage to sin.

### **Conclusion**

In his introduction, Wells sets out to provide an opinion of a churchly response and apologetic to the postmodern world. Wells relies on the reader to address each secular opinion in contrast with Biblical doctrine as he reads. Wells' purpose is to educate the reader on the postmodern culture and then allow the reader to provide Scriptural responses. In his concluding chapter "Faith of the Ages," Wells provides a negative example of the self-oriented culture being integrated into Church language and practice. His assessment of Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral is scathing and rings true. This example highlights one specific aspect of his assessment of culture and its negative effect on the Church. In the current Lutheran language and practice, there are many analogous effects of the self-oriented culture manipulating the Church. Lutherans can ascertain from Wells' text that the Church's doctrines of Two Kingdoms, justification, sanctification, its distinction of Law and Gospel, Creedal confession, sacramentology, and ecclesiology are all essential to providing the remedy for self-indulgent ailment of the postmodern culture. Accommodating our practice of Word and Sacrament ministry to worldly culture changes the very theology behind these gifts. To accommodate any of these gifts to the language or ideas of the culture would be to suck the very life-giving of Christ from them. May it not be so!

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