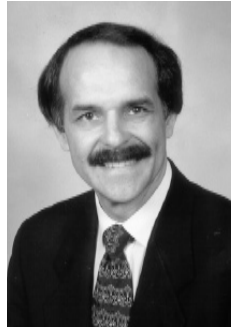


Being Good at What We Do — or, Being Good

by Dennis Hollinger, Ph.D.

The recent scandals in the corporate world remind us that there is a difference between being good at what we do, and being good. Enron, Adelphia, WorldCom, Global Crossing, Arthur Andersen, and others certainly had competent CEOs, executives, managers, and accountants. Most were no doubt quite good at what they did. But, the growing evidence shows a crisis in ethics and moral character. Technical competence is one thing; moral trustworthiness is quite another.



Dennis Hollinger

Throughout much of human history it was assumed that leadership and moral character went hand in hand. Of course there were continual failures in various spheres of leadership, and thus the current malaise is nothing new. Due to human sin, leaders in government, business, education, science, and even the church have often failed to steward their power with integrity, justice, and care for human beings. What has perhaps changed is that today the norms for morality seem up for grabs. Ask anyone on the street what ethical goodness is all about and you will get a myriad of conflicting answers. So while we have developed managerial and technical sophistication in carrying out our work, as a culture we are in a blur about morality and ethics. We are good at what we do, but are we good?

The Ultimate Source of Moral Goodness

In the Bible, moral goodness does not reside within human nature, but rather is rooted in the nature and actions of our Creator. While God created a very good world, even that created goodness is not self-defined—although we do get a glimpse of God’s moral designs through his creation, even in its fallen state. We only know goodness in the fullest sense when we look beyond our own nature and actions to the God who made us and offers redemption in Jesus Christ. Thus, in the Bible righteousness is not attained by human

moral efforts, but it comes through God’s own initiative, rooted in his own being and actions. To put it simply, we become good through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, appropriating his work on our behalf through faith and commitment to him as Savior and Lord. Theologians sometimes speak of a forensic righteousness, meaning that God declares us to be righteous through Christ’s work on the cross. We are justified before a holy God, not because of our own actions and character, but because we accept God’s provision for goodness.

But the biblical story doesn’t stop there. Moral goodness is never just a forensic, declared righteousness. God’s own goodness comes to transform our character and moral actions by his grace and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit who comes to reside within us.

Paul put it this way in Ephesians 2: “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (vs. 8-9). Though salvation and moral goodness do not come from our own best efforts, the very next verse reminds us that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (v. 10). Paul then goes on to give an example of ethical action that ought to be demonstrated as a result of God’s justifying grace, as he deals with one of the significant social ethic issues facing Christians in the first century—the racial and ethnic divide between Jews and Gentiles. Being good by virtue of God’s initiating grace and empowerment means reconciliation between “both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it” (v. 16). Justification overflows into moral goodness, personal and social.

The Moral Life

Being good in the moral life through God’s work means two things: moral character and moral actions. Both are integral to each other. Throughout much of the modern world, the focus of philosophers and theologians was on moral actions and the decisions we

must make in the complex world in which we live. Moral character was hardly on the radar screen. In recent years there has been a recovery of character or virtue ethics, an emphasis that goes way back in history to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and certainly to the Bible. Unfortunately, some recent advocates of character/virtue ethics play down the need for an ethic of decision making. Both, I believe, are needed.

Character ethics refers to the more inward side of the ethical life. It embodies those habits and virtues that come to form the core of who we are. Embedded character then flows almost spontaneously into the tough ethical decisions we must make. Character ethics is well reflected in the statement by philosopher Iris Murdoch, “At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.” Had the corporate leaders involved in recent scandals had deep moral character, they would have been more prone to choose the right path when faced with enticements to fudge the numbers or pad their pockets. Character ethics in the Christian perspective is rooted in the biblical idea of the heart, the core inner self that reflects who we really are, for as Jesus put it, “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good” (Luke 6:45).

But the moral life is not only about character. It is also about wise and good decisions. Sometimes those decisions are straightforward and without difficulty in their discernment and course of action. At other times decisions are complex, and we are not always immediately clear as to the right, just, and good path. In politics, business, education, the sciences, the arts, and spheres of everyday living, we are often faced with dilemmas that embody multiple ethical principles, competing moral responsibilities, or situations the Bible does not clearly address.

While moral character is certainly important for predisposing us in a certain direction in these tough decisions, we need more. We need to develop, through broad biblical directions, a Christian worldview and solid thinking, the ability to discern the good, wise, and just. In other words, we have to learn to make the right choices through reflection on the dilemmas themselves, and through discernment from the foundations of our biblical faith. It is important to realize that the great crisis at Enron, Adelphia, WorldCom, Global Crossing, and Arthur Andersen is far more than just lack of knowledge in business ethics. Most likely the culprits in the scandals have had such seminars and courses. The fundamental issue is the need for a clear foundation on which to build.

Facing a Secular, Pluralistic World

If being good in character and action is ultimately the work of God, what do we do in a world that is largely characterized by unbelief? What can we expect from those who lack a moral foundation rooted in God? How do we operate in a secular, pluralistic society?

Obviously one answer is to share with our fellow humans the good news of Christ in whom true and ultimate goodness is found. The gospel is the most solid foundation for ethics, and we have a responsibility to share it with others. Therein is true knowledge of the good and supernatural empowerment to put it into practice.

But the Bible is also clear that human beings apart from Christ do have some natural moral knowledge and sensitivity. Romans 1 teaches that “ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse” (v. 20). The very next chapter then speaks of Gentiles, who had not received the law of God, doing instinctively what the law requires, showing “that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness” (2:16).

It is this kind of natural law embedded in human hearts that engenders the moral outrage that we have seen in the midst of the corporate scandals. It is this conscience of the heart that often leads people who do not acknowledge Christ to nonetheless evidence forms of natural love, justice, and goodness. Thus, even when people do not operate from a Christian worldview foundation, we can still appeal to their consciences and natural understandings. Though the ultimate foundational depth of moral goodness, righteousness, and justice may be absent from their lives, there remains a sense of moral obligations and character.

We must acknowledge, however, that the task becomes increasingly difficult in a world where that natural understanding and proclivity is questioned and denigrated. In a culture in which the very notions of goodness and truth are maligned, the natural law appeal becomes much more tenuous. As the Bible acknowledges, humans can reject even the natural perceptions of God and harden their minds and consciences to the moral good. Today we see plenty of that hardening, and the moral relativism and rejection of the very notion of truth add to the challenge.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the recent corporate scandals can remind all human beings of what should be clear to anyone—

namely, that there is a difference between being good at what we do, and being good. Out of the current moral failure comes the opportunity to remind our friends and colleagues of the true source of moral good, the living God of the universe, who makes us good through Jesus Christ. In a world where most struggle for any clear moral foundation, God presents before us an opportune moment. For the Christian worldview with its story of creation, fall, and redemption affords the most adequate story for making sense of the Enrons of this world, and doing something about it.

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