

Wednesday February 27, 2013

A quick test for good and bad

By Jim Taylor

I think I may have discovered a fundamental law of the universe. Okay, maybe not the universe. But at least of human affairs.

And that law is – You Can't Legislate Good! Or goodness, if you prefer. You can only legislate against badness.

Think about it – our criminal and civil codes are all about things that you can't or shouldn't do to another person. You can't kill them. Hurt them. Cheat them. Oppress them. Conspire against them.

And we can enforce – more or less effectively – those prohibitions.

But you cannot pass laws that will make people be kind to each other. You can't make them love each other. You can't make them thoughtful, considerate, or sensitive.

You can pass laws that will tax part of everyone's income and turn the money over to a worthy cause – be that cause education, health care, or (as in Germany) the established churches. But you cannot write laws that will make people generous. As soon as the donation becomes mandatory, it ceases to be generosity.

You can penalize promiscuity; you cannot mandate morality.

Goodness, kindness, love – these are always voluntary.

St. Paul listed desirable attributes in his letters to the young Christian churches – none of them can be enforced.

Social climate

The closest thing to a command to be good comes from the Hebrew book of Leviticus, later quoted by Jesus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's like the variants of the Golden Rule, found in every religion and culture: "Treat others as you would want them to treat you."

Neither of those admonitions can be imposed. Not even by God, it would seem. The best they can do is create a climate in which people feel social pressure to conform to certain standards.

And even conformity may be mistaken. White South Africans conformed, for generations, by treating black people like cockroaches. Devout Hindus still maintain an equally punitive caste system. Some churches and religions apply a kind of gender apartheid to women.

Admittedly, my thesis has unclear edges. China bans additional children; the Vatican bans devices to restrict children. Some states prohibit abortion, even for forced sex; others use abortion to undo overly voluntary sex. Judaism prescribes genital mutilation for males; some other societies, for females.

Which way should one lean?

A handy (if not always conclusive) test

Because these standards are all imposed, my "law" would consider all them wrong.

I suspect that I have always rebelled against arbitrary rules and regulations. At times, when I worked in corporate environments, I admit that I did my best to subvert the petty procedures that sprout like mushrooms in the compost of bureaucracies.

I would love to live in a world that didn't require rules and regulations at all. Where each person was sufficiently concerned about each other person's welfare that we didn't need punitive laws to prevent us from harming each other.

Unfortunately, we don't live in that kind of world.

At least my principle gives me a quick test for distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad. If it can be legislated against, it's probably bad. If it can't be enforced, it's probably good.

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YOUR TURN

Several of you picked up on my line, in last week's column about software and hackers: "Someone gained access to e-mails between former presidents George W. and George H.W. Bush. There was no suggestion that any intelligence was threatened."

Lyle Phillips wrote, "I understand completely!"

Margaret Carr added a similar note: "The third line of your Soft Edges cracked me up. I don't know if you meant it as a joke or not but I did enjoyed it!"

And Cliff Boldt admitted, "This beautiful piece of subtlety missed me the first time I read it. Then a light went on."

But there were also substantive comments.

Jack Driedger mused, "There are times when one's conscience is bothering you when it should not be bothering you. I suppose that is because it has been misinformed or one has been brainwashed. Who or what is the ultimate authority that tells you when your conscience is mistaken?"

Christa Bedwin had some thoughts about security, whether for computers or homes: "My idea on security is that whether you lock your doors and never trust people, and are constantly vigilant for thieves, dangers, and swindlers, OR you trust everyone, have no locks on the house, and go around with gifts for others in your hands and sunshine in your heart, you'll get robbed just the same amount. In fact, I think the latter group experiences less crime than the former."

Ted Wilson reflected on the "installed software" that tends to govern our actions: "One of the most important units that parents like yours and mine gave to us is how to relate as spouses. It's one of the first and most continuous installations we get. When our oldest daughter first brought the young man who was to become our Son-in-law to visit, he was shocked at how my wife and I behaved towards each other. He didn't have the blessing of a functional relationship to grow up in. The first time he saw Barb and me having a disagreement, he took our daughter aside and asked 'Do they always fight like that?'

She answered 'Fight like what?'

When he explained she said 'That's not a fight! They're just sorting things out. When they're not talking it's a fight.' When he told her that his Mom and her husbands had never talked that way, she responded 'Hooooo. That's bad!' It has been one of the most difficult issues they have had to sort out in their relationship, successfully so I must add.

I am no longer surprised when I learn that people who have not been successful in their marital relationships are themselves the product of unsuccessful marriages. The Old Testament edict that 'The sins (shortcomings) of the fathers will be visited unto their children, even onto the 3rd and 4th generation' is, I believe, God giving us a warning and advice on how to live fruitful and happy lives as much as giving us a ticket to Heaven, perhaps more so.

Isabel Gibson recalled some family programming: "An old family friend used to say 'I don't care who did what!' when kids came hollering to her. 'You sit there and you sit there, until you can play nicely together.'

"Her adult daughter stopped dead in her tracks one day as she found herself saying this to warring children in her own playroom. I expect we've all had our OMG moments, when we heard our mother's/father's words coming out of our mouths, especially in dealing with children.

"Although much of what we are -- consciously and unconsciously -- is undoubtedly coded into us (as you point out), maybe humans are the only consciously self-coding, self-debugging entities around: learning, adapting, improving (we hope!). It's a big responsibility -- I learned to think like that at home. It's a big opportunity -- where did that notion come from?"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The third Sunday in Lent, Psalm 63:1-8. Some downtown churches are thriving; many are memorials to a former glory. Why do we maintain them, when they're so often empty? Because a few people still come there to seek sanctuary.

- 1 Crowds of people crush me.
They bump and bounce my mind;
they break my concentration.
I feel like nothing more than a means to an end,
merely a cog in the crunching machinery of a city.
I long for the gentle touch of loving fingers, the intimate whisper of acceptance.
- 2 So I have come looking for you, Lord, in your holy places.
- 3 In this dimmed light, in this hushed silence, I sense your presence.
- 4 I wish I could feel you as near me in the rabid frenzy of life in the urban core.
I want to reach out and touch you in the marketplace as well as the chancel.
- 5 Then I will not feel alone; you will be part of every thought and every breath.
- 6 I will know you at my desk and in my den, in my bed and in my bathtub.
- 7 Nothing will come between us.
- 8 And I will hold you close in the forest of my fears.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
