

MANIPULATING MORALITY

Perhaps it is our inquisitive nature, perhaps it is our adolescent love of a practical joke, but when a knot of people point and stare, everyone around looks in that direction.

Christians are not immune from this phenomenon, which we might call the “point-and-grab” technique of coercing attention. And it is used to great effect today. By getting enough people, as in the media, to point and stare, say, at a particular social problem or moral issue, you can dominate public discussion to the exclusion of other perhaps more urgent issues. Once mass attention is grabbed and held, the lone voice has little chance of being heard, even though what he has to say may be more important, vital, or true. Jesus, and the prophets before him, were drowned out by the point-and-grab tactic. Questions of eternal destiny were ignored when everyone’s attention had been grabbed by bread, circuses, and political independence (read the economy, entertainment, and safety).

More subtly, the point-and-grab method can be used to misdirect attention in an effort to change values and justify evil without actually addressing the moral issues or wrongs involved. By pointing to something intrinsically good, linking it with an evil to be excused, and then whipping up emotional fever for the good to such a degree that an aura of wholesomeness blunts our sense of

wrong, evil can be made to seem to disappear. Let me give you an example.

For some years now a Hallmark Hall of Fame made-for-TV movie, entitled “Caroline,” has enjoyed many reruns. The storyline goes like this. A look-alike appears at the door of a wealthy man, posing as the man’s daughter, Caroline, who had been killed fourteen years earlier in a plane crash. Well rehearsed, the con-artist explains that in fact she hadn’t got on the ill-fated plane, but had gone off to India instead to serve the poorest of the poor. Now she’s back, and what to her surprise, she stands to inherit the wealthy man’s mother’s considerable estate. She succeeds.

Now comes the misdirection, the point-and-grab technique to justify the wrong being done. The con-artist, we discover, isn’t defrauding the estate for personal gain, but to help the handicapped! The bulk of the story “points” to the aid Caroline gives to an apparently mentally handicapped child, saving the child from the rich ol’ meanies who are abusing her. Again she succeeds. And at the end of the story we learn that the fraudulently inherited wealth has gone to build a school for the handicapped.

The film ends with a paean of praise to the memory of the con-artist, now dead, because of the good she did in life—much better, of course, than those who were rightly entitled to the wealth would have done. We are meant to be so overwhelmed by the positive

emotional rush of her philanthropy, that what she did to get the money, deceive and swindle, was OK. Moral scruples vanish in a fog of compassion.

The perfection of this technique in the twentieth century was made possible by the media gaining ubiquitous access to our homes. It is being used to justify everything from promiscuity and abortion to greed and assisted suicide.

We are not being persuaded by overwhelming moral arguments that former evils are now good. What we get are crowds pointing to issues, like the rights of individuals to emotional support, compassion, and pleasure, contrasted with burdens like unnecessary suffering, unrelieved loneliness, or unwanted pregnancies, all magnified by the attendant emotional empathy these highly charged realities generate. If traditional moral standards are brought up at all, it’s to make them appear cold, unfeeling, and remote, responsible for denying people their deepest human needs. The normal emotional response we have to genuine good is tied by slight of hand to evil, in such a way that we feel the evil is all right.

Resistance to the tide of emotional misdirection, refusal to abandon traditional morality, always incurs the wrath of not only the manipulators but the manipulated. Anyone not swept along with the tide is “insensitive.” That is, of course, emotional

blackmail. Appropriate sensitivity is not loving others the way they want to be loved, but as God loves them, in spirit and in truth.

The force of the point-and-grab domination and misdirection in the current cultural debate on moral issues is to make us feel that all moral principles are relative, that what is wrong for some people isn't wrong for others. "Don't ram your Christian morality down my throat." But of course somebody's morality is always being forced on others, because anything we say morally is said in an absolute sense. "Logging is wrong," "Guns are bad," "Eating meat is cannibalism"

The truth is, only one morality exists, and its author is God. Since the dawn of time no one has added or subtracted from the moral truths built into the natural order of his world. The best we can do is to formulate them more or less better. Jesus' Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is an Old Testament rabbi's negative "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you," recast positively. But not even Jesus gave us a new law, let alone a new morality.

Behind the smoke screen of relativism is the intention to pick and choose your evils, to point at some wrongs, as for example sex outside of marriage or assisted suicide, and so smother them with borrowed emotions that you feel the evil doesn't matter any more. But do not be deceived, God is not mocked. Emotionally smothered evil does not disappear, it only makes the descent into

hell more slippery by distracting us from watching where we put our feet.

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