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A Spiritual Issue with the “Disappearance of Moral Knowledge”

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Abstract: Dallas Willard argues in his new, posthumously published book, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*, that due to various philosophical and institutional factors, we have lost a body of moral knowledge in the west. Here, I will consider one institution, the church, and a related, *spiritual* aspect to the loss of moral knowledge. Then I will explore what Christians can do about that particular aspect.

Dallas Willard’s new (and posthumously published) book, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (“DMK”), raises profound issues with which we must grapple. He argues, and in my opinion accurately, that in the West we have lost a body of publicly accessible moral *knowledge*. Willard traces how during the twentieth century moral philosophers made several disastrous moves that have helped lead us to this crisis. Yet, this disappearance is not just a philosophical story, for that would give too much power to those ideas. Nonetheless, ideas have consequences, and he shows how there has been an institutional factor in this loss, primarily in academic institutions and their related professions.¹

I think he is on target in this analysis, but there is another “institution” that I want to highlight, one that also has played a key role in this debacle. That “institution” is the church, and I think the disappearance of moral knowledge has a deeply spiritual aspect. Having been very influenced by the fact-value split, too many members of the church (as the body of Christ) in the West (and the USA in particular) think of morals as opinions or preferences, not as things we can *know*. But knowledge, as Willard reminds us, gives its “possessors” a certain authority (but not arrogance) to speak and act with credibility.²

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (Routledge, 2018), 24-44.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

Now, there is a long story about how the church in the West has been shaped by the fact-value split and other factors.³ In *Authentically Emergent: In Search of a Truly Progressive Christianity*, I discuss several shaping influences which have “naturalized” the church.⁴ Put differently, I think naturalism has deeply influenced the body of Christ (not to mention broader society) *in the sense that*, all too often, people regard God as *irrelevant, practically speaking, for our lives today*.⁵

One result is that, while many western Christians who hold to the Bible’s inspiration, authority, and even inerrancy do believe God can and still does miracles, often they do not *expect* Him to “show up” in His powerful presence. This reminds me of Dallas’s point, that today Christians don’t seem to think of Jesus as someone to whom they can go for knowledge – even though Scripture says in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and *knowledge* (Col 2:3).⁶ Many Christians don’t expect Him to speak into their lives, to lead and guide them with authority except from what Scripture explicitly states, or perhaps by giving guidance through “impressions,” or providential occurrences.

Yet, I think the biblical authors had vastly different expectations than we tend to do of Jesus’ “showing up” in our lives. Their expectations were shaped profoundly not merely because they were inspired as biblical authors; they also were living in Jesus’ fullness. Indeed, I think we can summarize the overarching theme of God’s purposes in Scripture as follows: *I will be your God, you will be My people, and I will dwell in your midst* (compare Rev 21:3). In the new birth, God has given us incredible provisions: a new heart, born of the Spirit; the mind of Christ, *and access to it* (1 Cor 2:11-16; notice the *first-person* kind of access); and His Spirit living in us, so that Christ is our life and we can live in His fullness (Eph 1:23, 3:14-4:13; 5:18). Put differently, we can live *now* in a *deep, intimate unity* of heart and mind with the Lord Himself, all in the life and power of the Spirit of Christ.

Moreover, the body of Christ is “the fullness of Him Who fills all in all [for in that body lives *the full measure of Him* Who makes everything complete, and Who fills everything everywhere with Himself]” (Eph 1:23, AMPC,

³ See, e.g., J. P. Moreland’s *Kingdom Triangle* (Zondervan, 2007). The fact-value split undergirds the pervasive belief in western culture that while religion and ethics give us *at best* inferior knowledge, or *just* opinions or preferences, science gives us knowledge of the facts of reality. That, of course, undermines the truth claims of Christianity.

⁴ In ch. 2 of *Authentically Emergent* (Cascade Books, 2018), I trace influences of factors such as nominalism, mechanical atomism, empiricism, common sense realism, rationalism, and the prestige of modern science upon evangelicals, resulting all too often in a deistic view of God.

⁵ Craig Gay has done excellent work on this theme; see his *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Eerdmans, 1998).

⁶ E.g., see *The Divine Conspiracy* (Zondervan, 2010), 91-95.

emphasis mine). In the body, Jesus is present now. Elsewhere in Ephesians, Paul teaches that Christians are to be filled through all their being “unto all the fullness of God – [may have the richest measure of the divine Presence, and become a body wholly filled and flooded with God Himself]!” (v. 19, AMPC). God doesn’t want us to have mere “head” knowledge of Him; He also wants us to *experience* His love, fullness, wisdom, power, and *presence*. Paul is not afraid of rich experiences of the Lord in the Christian life. Yet, they should be rooted in knowledge of Him in Scripture.⁷

It seems to me that if Jesus is living in all His fullness in His people, then Jesus will be doing what He did while on earth – e.g., speaking truth to us today in our contexts and showing His power through miracles, which demonstrate and signal the rule of His way. Moreover, we will *experience* the very One who is the perfect knower of moral goodness, and who is moral goodness itself.

In my scholarship, I have tried to take these implications seriously. I continually try to ask the Lord to speak into my research. I have experienced what I have come to recognize as His voice (though not audible), including in a suggestion that completely cleared up a conceptual confusion I encountered when analyzing a prominent philosopher’s epistemological views. Another time, I was prayerfully writing an essay that needed to address some confounding points with some naturalists’ views. Yet, while typing, twice I suddenly stopped, re-read what I had just written, and realized that the meaning of what I had typed was far more insightful than what I had had in mind.

If I am right about the “disappearance” of the fullness of Jesus’ presence and power from the midst of all too many of His people, it seems it must not be due to God’s design.⁸ Rather, it seems clear it would be due to a *moral* problem – i.e., sin on the behalf of God’s people of not living in all His fullness of Spirit and truth (i.e., fleshly living).

Now, Willard’s core suggestion for recovering moral knowledge is that we need to find clear examples of *the good person*, and that *we find the good in face-to-*

⁷ Paul continues this theme of the presence of Christ in and through His people in 4:13, where he discusses the spiritual gifts. I do not think this is incidental, for the gifts are part of God’s plan to manifest Christ in His people (compare 1 Cor 12:7), until they “pass away” (1 Cor 13:8-10). Since God’s plan is for Jesus to be present now in all His fullness through His people, we have to ask why that so often is just not happening.

⁸ Still, while the kingdom is present now, it is not yet fully realized. Nevertheless, from the many promises and expectations set in Scripture, that fact alone should not undermine our expectation that Jesus wants to manifest His fullness in and through His people now.

face relationships. Yet, if Jesus is not fully present in our midst, then people will tend to not experience the One who is the moral exemplar *par excellence*.⁹

So, it seems to me that the disappearance of moral knowledge has a deeply spiritual aspect. It is tied to the “disappearance” of Jesus’ presence and power in all His fullness in His people. It is therefore critically important that believers seek the Lord and repent of any attitudes and beliefs that undermine His dwelling in their midst in all His fullness. We desperately need Jesus in all His fullness to help address the crisis of the disappearance of moral knowledge.¹⁰

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⁹ Indeed, when people met Jesus on earth, they encountered His goodness, even if they suppressed that knowledge and rejected Him.

¹⁰ Many thanks to Joseph Gorra for helpful suggestions for earlier drafts of this essay.