Passing on 'Values'

'Values' Language Doesn't Represent Christian Ethics!

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If I am hearing some Christians, politicians and others correctly, what we need in Australian society right now are 'values'. Apparently having 'values' is, in the memorable phrase of *1066 and All That*, 'a good thing'. And so, we need more of them. What's more, we need to push for 'shared values'. Even better than all this, I am told, are 'Christian values'. You all know what I am talking about. Or at least I am to *assume* you know what I am talking about. Certainly those who are calling for 'values' assume that you and I know what they are talking about… but I'll confess: *I have little idea what they're talking about at all*.

Sure, I think I get the main point: we want an ethical society. Or a more ethical society. We don't expect utopia, but we want to see some better quality of interaction in our society. Along with author Lynn Truss, we've had about enough of the 'new' rudeness, of palms thrust in our direction—'Talk to the hand!'—and the indifferent or even contemptuous 'yeah, whatever' uttered vaguely in our direction. We've certainly had enough of the decline in the quality of public discourse; and we're disturbed by decadence, voyeurism and violence passing as a 'lifestyle choice', let alone as shaping our TV or movie entertainment.

But I want to say—*and I'm by no means saying something original here!*—that calling for 'values' when one wants to encourage our society in a positive direction is, so to speak, a lame duck. In fact, while it seems to be a way to connect with contemporary lingo, with today's 'ethic-speak', it is actually part of the problem. In *Reinspiring the Corporation*, Mark Scott notes,

> 'The managerial literature is increasingly full of this elusive, chimeral term 'values'. Firms are exhorted to identify their core values, enshrine them on lists and emblazon them daily on screen-savers. The feeling at the back of even the most receptive senior manager's mind must be cynicism… The term 'values' is a hopeless simplification of a complex reality. Identifying values is an entirely inadequate way to describe the complexity of a moral framework'.

Despite its common usage and—I reluctantly admit—the seeming necessity *at times* to use 'values' language to communicate in the currency of our peers, it is important to recognise the serious limitations and problems associated with this language, particularly the *intrinsically subjective* nature of the language which undercuts the notion of authority in ethics.

In *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in An Age of Normal Nihilism*, philosopher James Edwards claims that nothing characterises the implicit nihilism of modern or postmodern life better than the language of 'values'. Our 'values' are actually 'self-devaluating values.' As theologian Stanley Hauerwas observes in his 'primer' in Christian ethics, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, how can the 'values' we choose have any real weight or authority when we realise that *we* have indeed

chosen them—*even if* we say we are 'committed' to them? What is to say that we shouldn't choose *not* to hold certain values at certain (convenient) times? What compels us to be committed to these 'values'? 'Self devaluating values'. No wonder critics see the archetype of the values-driven life as the modern shopping mall.

Furthermore, 'values' are what *somebody* values. And if I am to insist, in this subjectivist mode of speaking, that someone should share certain values, I cannot help but sound to the ears of our contemporaries as someone imposing my agenda, my will, my choices upon someone else. And that is the great unforgiveable sin of our time. It is a form of violence. Or, if I am to tone down the language or attempt to persuade someone else, my 'values' language becomes vapid. It lacks an edge. It fails to persuade. We can only evaluate in hindsight whether we have chosen 'shared values'. In the end, values talk does not promote moral discussion or moral change, it simply accedes to the status quo.

So what do we do then? How do we talk about ethics in our time? There's no easy way through this question, and no way around the inevitability of conflict: but, it seems to me, we must recover a public language of what is **good**, even of what is **right**, and even the language of **virtue** or perhaps **character**. We can value 'the good' only when we recognise goods in our world *apart from* our idiosyncratic choices or evaluations. And, unpopular as it may sound in our time—where we are all supposedly on a level playing field as egalitarian consumers—there may be those who have learned, who have been trained, to recognise what is good better than others. Recognising what is good may indeed be a skill; one which we can all develop, to be sure, but not a capacity we equally share, not a 'right to choose' that translates into ability to evaluate.

That brings us back to the question of moral authority that the language of 'values' undermines. Instead of commenting on our choices in public, we need rather to articulate the goods that we hold and why. "By what authority" do we claim this or that is good? As the next Federal election looms, I'll be switching off to competing voices among politicians and lobbyists telling me they hold—or others ought to hold—to certain 'values'; and I'll be waiting for an articulation of what is good and why.

Christian pastors and leaders can be helping their people find their way through the 'values' fog. But it won't be by switching from the fuzziness of 'values' to simplistic insistence that the Ten Commandments—or even the Sermon on the Mount—should be, and can easily be, translated into laws or an enforceable morality.

There's no way around the hard but rewarding work of paying attention time and again to the challenging, confronting stories of the Scriptures, especially those of Jesus and his followers; stories which can't reduced neatly into 'values' or even, for that matter, mere 'principles'.

These stories present the people of God with a vision of the good life under God—and invites the world to 'taste and see'. These stories are controversial and not straightforwardly acceptable to the wider world, not least because they are grounded in Jesus' claim of heaven *and earth* for God's Kingdom.

In the rough and tumble of public debate and discussion, we may commend the convictions that arise from these stories in a variety of ways—sometimes on the

basis of Christian examples past and present, sometimes by means of tried and tested helpfulness to the common good, and sometimes by supporting the ethical convictions that happen to overlap with others. But once we leave behind the story of Jesus in the hope of wider acceptance, we have already begun to undermine our own project of commending the kingdom. 'Values', it seems to me, do just that.

Rather than *passing on* 'my values' to someone else, I'll be '*passing'* on the notion of 'values' itself.