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# Dismantling the Myths: The Connection between Faith and Morality

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# GETTING STARTED

setting the stage

Go into the street  
and give one man a  
lecture on morality  
and another a  
shilling, and see  
which will respect  
you most.

—Samuel Johnson

## Who Changed the Price Tags?

Let's suppose you make an afternoon run to your favorite discount store, let's say Wal-Mart. Everything in the parking lot looks normal when you arrive. You enter the double doors; a friendly orange-bibbed sales associate greets you and gives you a cart and a flyer with today's specials on it. You head down the aisles to get the items on your list. You purchase a box of Tootsie Pops, a bottle of shampoo, an answering machine, and a 5.2 gigahertz cordless telephone.

You proceed to the checkout line. Line 3 has 1 person in it; line 4 has 17 people in it. You unfortunately get in line 3. I say unfortunately because all 17 patrons check out of line 4 and go home while you patiently wait for 42 price checks for the one man in front of you. When you finally check out, your bill comes to \$165. That seems normal. You write a check and proceed to your car. As you toss your biodegradable sack in the passenger seat and get ready to stuff the receipt in your pocket, you glance at it for a second and notice something very strange.

The answering machine cost \$3; the cordless telephone cost \$2; the bottle of shampoo cost \$30; the box of Tootsie Pops checked out at \$129. You say, "Something strange is going on." You get your sack and head back into the store, past the greeting associate who puts a pink sticker on your sack. You proceed to the Service Desk line where 14 people wait in front of you with carts full of items. Sometime later that afternoon, you reach the counter and show your receipt and sack of goods. They have no idea what's going on but promise you they'll look into it. You return the \$129 box of Tootsie Pops and the \$30 bottle of shampoo and keep the answering machine and telephone!

A few days later you receive a call from the Wal-Mart manager. It seems some computer students from the local college slipped into the store overnight, hacked their way into the computer system, and switched all the prices on the store's database. Nobody was the wiser for it, because on the surface *everything looked normal*.

Probably for you today, life seems normal—at least as normal as it gets. You may have read the newspaper or watched the television news this morning. No special reports said anything about the most seismic revolution in the history of western civilization. But, it's happening. Slowly, quietly, it's happening.

The wars fought throughout history in nations all over the world have been well-documented. Most of them have been bloody. The revolution I

reference has been bloodless and silent. This revolution is taking place right under our noses. Most of us are beginning to suspect something is wrong, but we're not quite sure just what it is. We simply know that somebody somewhere has silently accessed the database and changed the price tags on almost everything in our cultures. It's not just in western cultures, either; we're seeing a worldwide phenomenon.

I'll be honest with you. I didn't read about this revolution in a textbook. I stumbled onto it completely by accident in my classroom at the university where I teach. I began the first edition of this book with the story of the young lady who challenged me on her entertainment choices. She confessed that she consumed everything that came out of Hollywood, but that what she watched was her business and that—thankfully—it had no effect on her. That began my study then.

But, I stumbled onto *this* revolution the day I walked back to my office from class with the awareness that somebody had switched the price tags in these Christian students' world. I had to find out who. It all came about during our discussion of alternate moral lifestyles. In previous years' class discussions on the subject, students had been very articulate and animated in their opinions. The corporate blood pressure of the entire class rose as they worked through the issues and what they felt God planned to do about it. They had descriptive and detailed opinions.

On this particular day, when I opened the class discussion, nobody said a word. I continued to prompt the class, and a student finally said, "I do not choose that lifestyle for myself. But, I do not feel I can sit in judgment on those who do. I believe in the philosophy, 'Live and let live.' And, I believe that people have to find their own way and follow their own personal convictions." WOW! My heart nearly stopped. Somebody switched the price tags for these kids.

So, think for a few minutes about this revolution and how we Christians can respond to it. In order to understand why people do what they do, we have to understand what people think. Because, invariably, we always live what we believe.

## **Been There, Done That**

In recent years I have given my ethics students a questionnaire regarding their entertainment choices. I use this method to get a reading on their

thinking processes regarding ethical decision-making. The majority of them have been raised in Christian homes and have attended church regularly throughout their lives. Most have made a commitment to serve Christ. Yet class after class, year after year yields the same results. Most of my students entertain themselves with a steady diet of whatever is being offered to them on television, at the video store, and at the movie theater. Most of my friends report that they do the same thing: turn on the television or check out a video with little thought of its moral content. Like army privates going through the mess line at mealtime, most of us hold up our tray and let secular media slop just about anything onto it. No thought, no reflection—just consume whatever is on the tray. Furthermore, my students and friends will argue until their last breath that their entertainment choices have no effect on their lives. They see it as just mindless diversion to numb the boredom.

The advertising industry knows of this boredom and has used it to their advantage. In one particular advertisement, four teenagers are standing around trying to decide on an activity to break their boredom. The unseen announcer cuts into the commercial with a list of exotic suggestions to exhilarate their senses. He suggests climbing the Swiss Alps, skydiving, sailing the seven seas, exploring the Amazon jungle, and a host of other thrilling experiences. Their blank, unimpressed stares anticipate their reply: “Been there, done that.” Of course, the announcer knows something they have not done: tried his new product. Clever gimmick, all-too-realistic scene. This generation has experienced so much that the mundane events of daily life bore them.

If I thought for a minute that my current students are out in left field compared to their peers at state schools or in the workforce or in the local church, their views might not concern me. But they’re not. They’re right on target, clearly articulating what most of us think and do.

Unfortunately, more than entertainment concerns me. Life calls for dozens of moral choices in a variety of areas each day. This constant exercise requires us to have a clear understanding of the issue and a personal philosophy of life that keeps our choices consistent with our spiritual convictions. Helping us make connections between our faith and morality—that’s the goal of this book. It is harder than it sounds, and it requires more conscious awareness and determination than ever before.

## Hook Me Up

I am writing the book for everyone who walks into this strange new world every day and wonders how to make sense of what is happening to us. In the first edition of *Dismantling the Myths* I took the time to segment the population based on age and the social, economic, and political events that affected each generation of readers. I'm not doing that this time because the information age affects all generations in common ways. The information age is no respecter of persons. Information in our world doubles at an alarming rate. If you don't believe me, google any question on the Internet and see how many million hits you get. Humanity once calculated the accumulation of information in terms of centuries, then decades. We now calculate it in terms of months.

All of us, regardless of age, live with the sights and sounds of the entire world coming at us every day of our lives. We connect ourselves to more media devices than any generation before us. I'm afraid to start naming them all because the list is virtually endless with various combinations. We used to supply our homes with radios, televisions, newspapers, telephones, CD players, and computers. Then we went mobile and started carrying different electronic devices with us, providing each of these services. Now, we can carry one small device that multitasks as a telephone, scheduler, television, video player, iPod, photo album, computer, e-mail, electronic data storage, and Internet browser. How can they get so many high-tech devices in such a small case?

We're the most connected generation in history.

- Eighty-four percent of all adults own a DVD player, compared to only 18 percent in 2000. (2005)
- Three out of every 10 Americans own a laptop or notebook computer (30%). (2005)
- One in 7 Americans have a palmtop, pocket computer, or PDA (15%). (2005)
- Research shows that one-half (52%) of Americans now own a digital camera. (2005)
- One out of 11 adults (9%) owns a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) service. (2005)
- Seventy-two percent of adults—including 75 percent of born-again adults—were using a cell phone in October 2005. (58% and 59% respectively for 2000)

- Two-thirds of households (67%) have Internet access at their home, compared with 50 percent in 2000. The percentage is the same among born-again Christian households. (2005)
- One-third of all households claim to have a home theater system (33%). (2005)<sup>1</sup>

For one small service fee, we can remain connected to the world of information 24/7. A current television advertisement images it well. In the ad, a man begins watching the morning news in his bedroom while he gets dressed; he switches to a video screen on the refrigerator while he eats breakfast; then he watches the news on his telephone screen while riding the train to work. He finishes up the news report on his computer screen in his office. He changed locations four times and never missed a single news item. Now that's connectedness!

I'm always amused as I sit at the airport and watch people passing the time. A businessman prepares his video presentation on his laptop computer. A businesswoman checks her e-mail on her handheld Internet device. An executive checks his schedule on his electronic day planner. A family of four sit together silently, each listening to his or her own iPod. A young mother watches a cartoon with her child on a small DVD player. A family man talks on his cell phone to his wife and children at home. So many different people; so many information devices!

If you think you must reside in a highly developed nation of the world to sport one of these devices, you're wrong. I recently attended a gathering of university officials from around the globe. Some came from the richest nations in the world, others from the poorest nations on earth. They all had something in common: information connection. How interesting to watch average people from every continent and time zone in the world checking their e-mail, listening to their iPod, and talking on cell phones with global capabilities. I've traveled to some of the most remote spots in the world. I sometimes fly into a capital city then ride for hours over rough dirt roads. I never cease to be amazed at what I see upon arriving at a remote location: satellite dishes atop buildings and iPod earbuds in pedestrians' ears!

Make no mistake; we're a connected generation living in a connected world. And that has a profound impact on the way we make connections between faith and morality. I'll explain later.

## Our Times Influence Us

As much as we'd all like to think we're rugged individualists, most of us aren't. As much as we'd hope to blaze our own trail, most of us don't. As much as we'd like to say we march to the beat of a different drummer, most of us can't. As much as we might hate to admit it, our times influence us. Looking through old family albums offers an insight into this thought. I am sure that neither my grandparents, my parents, my wife and I, nor our son match every characteristic offered for each of our particular generations. Yet each of us in our own way is influenced by features of the dominant culture of our generation. Pictures of my grandparents when they were in their 20s clearly identify them as citizens of the 1930s. My parents at that same age looked like citizens of the 1950s. My wife and I *unfortunately* looked like the 1970s when we got married. Our son looks contemporary in his recent pictures.

How does that happen? A combination of hair and clothing styles, accessories like glasses and hats, and background cars and landmarks create the setting. I used to laugh at old pictures of my granddad and comment on how I would not be caught dead wearing clothing styles like his. What a nightmare the first time our teenage son rushed excitedly into the house from a shopping outing with his peers! He showed us his purchase of the "hottest new clothes." Why the nightmare? You guessed it: he looked exactly like my granddad in those old pictures. If fashion trends hold true to form, I'll have my revenge, however. Someday he'll see his children dress in my parents' fashions or, better yet, Sue's and my old fashions. I can't wait!

What am I saying? While none of us buys into every characteristic of a particular generation. We tend to look, sound, and live like our contemporaries. Our times influence us.

## Citizens of the Information Age

We live during the days of a great revolution. We're the first wave of citizens of the information age. Consequently, we grew up with the sights and sounds of the entire world coming at us every day of our lives. We are children of the television, the radio, the eight-track tape, the cassette tape, the compact disk, the MP3, Wi-Fi, the computer revolution, and now the global networking of the Internet. We watched with the rest of the world as Pope John XXIII was laid to rest and John F. Kennedy was shot. Men launched into space. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pounded his shoe on the table of

the United Nations screaming, “We will bury you!” The Soviet Union tried to move missiles within 90 miles of United States soil. The Beatles from England invaded our nations and our personal lives with their music. Inflation slipped into our economy, and we began to accumulate a national debt. The Vietnam War escalated. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, followed by United States presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy. Hippies advocated free love and mind expansion through the use of illegal drugs. Men walked on the moon (an event that my grandmother to her dying day vowed was staged in Hollywood). Richard Nixon resigned from the American presidency as a result of the Watergate scandal.

What does this have to do with describing early days of the information age? This new age brought us messages of the threat of nuclear destruction, political and social upheaval, distrust of national leaders and the entire political system, economic uncertainty, and more sights, sounds, statistics, and news bites than they could possibly assimilate into our worldview. We had information overload of the worst sort: nothing short of a social, political, economic, cultural, and personal explosion of sometimes contradictory information, creating a dissonance in our minds with which we could not adequately cope. Before we graduated from college, something had gone horribly wrong with the “better and brighter” future our parents had promised us. James Bell says, with all of this new information, our world quickly “evolved from a safe, perfect, and beautiful world to a frightening, flawed, and ugly one.”<sup>22</sup> But life moved on, so we took the broken pieces of this shattered worldview and made a new one—one very different from that of our parents.

Daniel Yankelovich, contemporary sociologist who has done extensive research on American workers, does an excellent job of characterizing this shift of worldview in his book *New Rules*. He says our parents lived by what he calls a giving/getting compact. Here is his summary of that worldview:

I give hard work, loyalty and steadfastness. I swallow my frustrations and suppress my impulse to do what I would enjoy, and do what is expected of me instead. I do not put myself first; I put the needs of others ahead of my own. I give a lot, but what I get in return is worth it. I receive an ever-growing standard of living, and a family life with a devoted spouse and decent kids. Our children will take care of us in our old age if we really need it, which thank goodness we will not. I have a nice home, a good job, the respect of my friends and neighbors; a sense of

accomplishment at having made something of my life. Last but not least, as an American I am proud to be a citizen of the finest country in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, our parents worked at jobs they often found unfulfilling to earn a good paycheck so they could meet their obligation to their family and be productive members of society. They did it without question and with a sense of pride in both their work ethic and their country.

Yankelovich contends that most of us did not grow up to adopt our parents' ethic of self-denial or duty. Rather, because of all we had been through, we opted for an ethic of self-fulfillment. You might characterize our entire life journey as a search for self-satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> We have a duty, all right—a duty to self. This search for self-fulfillment brought about what is known as the “me” generation. The social and cultural upheaval marked us for a lifetime and, for a multitude of reasons, turned us inward. All these influences blended together to create a dilemma of life with which we have been plagued.

The way this dilemma translates into ethical decision-making will be considered in chapter 2.

## Endless New Options

We're in a new generation for television. Now we have high-definition, giant-screen, wide-screen, color, Dolby surround sound stereo, cable, satellite dish, TiVo or DVD recorder, pay-per-view, and a computer interface. When I was growing up, our television antenna received three channels when properly adjusted and the weather agreed. Now antennas bring us 20 to 50 channels through the air, with cable or satellite dish reception adding another 200 to 500. Media prophets predict this is only the tip of the iceberg for soon-coming options.

Along with television have come the personal computer revolution and its connection to the World Wide Web. Today with a few keystrokes from the privacy of our bedroom, we can access information located in any major library or Web site in the world.

A spin-off of the computer revolution has been the video game explosion. First came the big black-and-white Ping-Pong games at isolated public locations. Then came video arcades at the mall with more sights and sounds than the human mind could comprehend. But why live at the arcade? Why not bring it all home and hook it up on the family television? Although early

graphics were not impressive, the latest models have high-definition pictures. And that's only the beginning of the technology. Now the industry is moving rapidly into virtual reality, which puts the consumer in the center of the action. This generation has certainly not lacked in the area of visual stimulation. The television, computer, and video game have profoundly shaped us.

More recently our information gadgets have brought us details about the fall of Communism almost worldwide; the Persian Gulf War; the savings and loan scandal; the spiraling of the national debt out of control into the trillions of dollars; the stock market slumps and crashes; the moral failure of major television evangelists; the AIDS epidemic; corporate restructuring; acts of terrorism at home and abroad; violent gangs; and drive-by shootings. We're now living with more political, economic, and cultural uncertainty than ever before. A better and brighter future has not become a reality. Social analysts often comment that, economically speaking, we are the first generation in American history to not have hope of having it better than our parents. The runaway train of consumerism has slowed dramatically.

But culture, economics, and politics are not the whole picture. There is a personal side to this picture as well. William Mahedy was a military chaplain during the Vietnam War. He now serves as a college chaplain and counselor. While there was little difference between the student population of his college days and the students he ministered to through the early 1980s, very shortly he began to notice a change. The next generation of students seemed troubled, more traumatized than before. In fact, they began to exhibit many of the same characteristics of soldiers injured in the Vietnam War. He calls it posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition resulting from the stresses of war (combat, torture, rape, violence, death, and so on).<sup>5</sup>

What have these young people experienced to cause them to have posttraumatic stress disorder? Pick up a newspaper or newsmagazine, and you will see: sexual abuse; racial tensions and riots; a skyrocketing divorce rate, bringing about the disintegration of the family; uninvolved or disinterested parents; absentee fathers or mothers; latchkey kids; AIDS; drive-by shootings; random acts of violence; rape; abductions; and a host of other contributors. Mahedy contends that it is stressful just living under current social conditions: "The present social disorder is so great that simply being young today is a stressor for a huge segment of the twentysomething generation."<sup>6</sup>

## The Road Ahead

I have divided this book into four sections:

1. The current moral climate: chapter 2
2. How most people in our society think and how the culture war affects us: chapters 3 and 4
3. What we believe and what the Bible says about making moral choices: chapters 5 and 6
4. Strategies for lining up our personal and community lives with our faith and relating properly to our world: chapters 7, 8, and 9

Several books have been written on this general subject. So why add another to the collection? This book is different for a variety of reasons.

1. This book is written *from a positive perspective*. So many books on this subject reflect an attitude of doom and gloom. They are often written by people at the end of their careers, looking back with remorse over how society is decaying and longing for a return to “the good old days.” Other books are written with a spirit of sensationalism, for the purpose of selling books. This book will give you strategies to help solve the problem rather than simply to lament a hopeless situation.

2. This book is written *for the average reader*. Many of the books on the market are written in a scholarly writing style, with a scholarly vocabulary, addressed to a scholarly audience. The content is excellent, but it is difficult to decipher. This book is written in a readable writing style. It is not intended as a scholarly commentary on culture and society, but as a helpful tool for the average college student or adult. The content has been edited to keep it short and to the point.

3. This book is written *to you*. Almost all the books on the market are written to an older generation *about* the social and cultural crisis of today. They speak of boomers and Xers as though we are in the other room and cannot hear what is being said. No one seems to be focusing their attention on those of us caught in the middle of the moral battle who are looking for answers.

4. This book is written *for practical application*. Rather than just document the situation and make the point that we are in the biggest moral struggle of our nation’s history, this work goes on to give practical, step-by-step suggestions of ways to be victorious in our daily lifestyle choices and help stem the tide of moral decay. When you finish reading this book, you

will have handles on things you can do to be more consistent in your Christian lifestyle choices.

5. This book is *interactive with the reader*. It is easy in this fast-paced world to read a book quickly, taking information into our heads without applying it to our thinking or lifestyle. Research indicates that readers prefer a book divided into manageable pieces with opportunity to interact. This book is divided into many sections and filled with opportunities for you to pause and think about what you have just read. If you will stop and incorporate the information into your thinking and life, it will become yours. So each time you come to *Think About It*, stop and think about it. It will be well worth your time. The last three strategy chapters offer helpful exercises for you to apply to your life.

## Ethical Choices on the Road of Life

When I think of making wise ethical choices, I am reminded of an experience my family and I had while teaching summer school at a Christian college in Switzerland. When Sue and I completed our classes, the college president lent us a school car for sightseeing. One of our trips took us to Salzburg, Austria, home of Wolfgang Mozart and the setting for *The Sound of Music*. In order to get there, we had to go through the Arlburg Tunnel. I have been through numerous tunnels in my travels, short ones in which I could always get to the other side fairly quickly or see the other side when I entered.

Not the Arlburg. Oh no. It was 8.7 miles straight through the mountain. I thought we would die in a mighty, thunderous collapse of concrete and steel before we ever saw sunlight again. Rescuers would never recover our bodies. However, we made it through safely. Once we reached the other side, I promised myself I would never do that again! We would just have to take another route on our return trip to Switzerland.

So on our way back, I convinced my family that it would be fun to go *over* the mountain this time! They compliantly agreed to my uninformed plan, and up we went. We soon discovered the reason we could not see the top of the mountain from its base: it was in the clouds! After about 50 switchback turns, *we* were in the clouds too. We were also all by ourselves up there, since everybody with sense went through the tunnel. We soon traded the warm spring air for snow and slick pavement. A few days earlier I had

worried about the mountain falling in on me. Now we were about to slide right off the top! But the trip proved to be worth the effort. The scenery was breathtakingly beautiful; words cannot capture the sights we saw that day. (The sights from just below the cloud line, that is. Above it we couldn't even see as far as our hood ornament!) It was truly a rare experience of our European vacation.

I have since thought about that mountain trek when compared to the moral choices we make every day. Our trip over Arlburg Mountain took a lot of extra effort, and we went by ourselves. But I'm glad we did it. Philosophers and writers for thousands of years have talked about seeking a less-traveled road in making wise moral choices. As Robert Frost put it, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference."<sup>7</sup>

Genesis 13 gives us a clear illustration of the two types of moral choices. Here we see Abraham and his nephew Lot parting ways and separating their livestock because their hired hands could not get along. Abraham allowed Lot to make the first choice for grazing land; the elder Abraham should have made the first choice, but he gave preference to his nephew. Lot selected the lowland of the Jordan plain, because it appeared more fertile. Abraham took the leftover area of Canaan, an area strongly resembling a desert! It sounds like a purely agricultural decision, right? But the Bible makes much more of the two choices than that. Lot's lowland became symbolic of self-seeking pleasure, because of its proximity to the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities God later destroyed. Abraham's choice became symbolic of a person seeking to please God, because of Abraham's exemplary spiritual life. In fact, God made another promise to bless Abraham right after he expressed his willingness to take the leftover land (Gen. 13:14-17).

We're still making everyday choices like Abraham's and Lot's. We cannot always follow the examples of our peers or our neighbors. We cannot always accept what our society or popular culture offers us. We cannot look to see where the crowd goes. We cannot search out "greener pastures." As in the choice of Abraham, God is calling us to the less-traveled road.

What do these metaphors tell us about the road less traveled? They tell us it is often difficult

- to live counter to our culture
- to refuse to compromise our standards

- to live different from our friends
- to say no when friends invite us to participate in questionable acts
- to stand alone
- to be identified with the minority position
- to resist the temptation to conform
- to control our desires and say no to inappropriate expressions of natural appetites
- to be called names by those who don't have the courage to join us
- to take the name of Christ and identify with His cause

## Killing Us Softly

If you have been around the Christian community for very long, you have probably heard all of this before. So why bring it up again? Because, we are living in a new day with culture influencing our Christian community. Culture is *killing us softly*. By that, I mean we can be so lulled to sleep by culture and desensitized to its powerful influence that we begin thinking and acting in ways that betray our religious beliefs without realizing what is happening to us.

I admit that the early chapters of this book may paint a dark picture. But it is not a hopeless cause. This book brims with hope. We Christians must inform ourselves of the current situation and join the timeless battle for the hearts and minds of people. We must awaken to what is happening all around us so we can do something about it.

We sometimes complain about our society going through tough times morally; that's nothing new. Christians have *always* had to fight on the side of good and righteousness in a hostile and alien environment. Before we joined the battle, many other Christians fought it for almost 2,000 years, and before them the Hebrew people of the Old Testament championed the cause for thousands of years. It has been a constant and sometimes heated battle. Often in history Christians have shined most brightly when they were fighting the hardest for truth and righteousness. We can learn lessons from the struggle of our ancestors and can employ some of their tactics today to maintain our piety and identity as we change our world for the better.

In one of my adult classes, I give an assignment in which students read the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, a book written nearly 3,000 years ago, and then write an analysis. I urge them to look for principles for daily

living. Sometimes they grumble about the assignment, asking, “How could something written 3,000 years ago possibly speak to my situation today?” When they return to class the next week with their completed papers, they report how amazed they are at how contemporary the writer of Ecclesiastes is in addressing situations that face them in their lives. The reason for this, of course, is because Ecclesiastes, along with the rest of the Bible, speaks to the human condition. Modern technology and advancements in science do not basically change human nature. Human beings have the same needs and the same general makeup today that they had 2,000 years ago (in Jesus’ day), 3,000 years ago (in David and Solomon’s day), or 4,000 years ago (in Abraham’s day). In fact, people have changed little since the days of Adam and Eve. And so, as we look to the Bible, we will be amazed at how helpful its admonitions are for us in our day of moral bankruptcy.

I’m often asked as an ethics teacher if I’m discouraged at the moral decay of our generation. While I’m concerned about the current state of affairs, I’m not discouraged. This gives the Church the opportunity to be the salt, the light, and the leaven to our needy world that God has called us to be. We shine best when our environment is darkest. This also gives us a platform from which to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Actually I’m quite hopeful, and I offer this book in the light of that hope.