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Morality: The Face of Public Christianity
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A non-Christian who read recent newspapers to learn about Christianity might arrive at the following picture. Christianity believes that marriage is between a man and woman, so no marriage between members of the same sex. Christianity believes life begins at conception, so no abortion and no stem cell research. Christianity believes that God created the universe, so evolution should not be taught. Sexual activity belongs in marriage, so no premarital sex.

In this picture, Christianity is about actions that people should or should not do; it is about morality. What is missing from this public Christianity are the religion's core features. Salvation, Scripture, faith and belief have disappeared from public view. How did this happen?

The story begins in the early 1500s, with the Protestant Reformation. Prior to that, the Christianity of Western Europe was Catholic and centered on community. Based on its doctrinal interpretation of Scripture, Catholicism raised a group of men out of the community to become priests. These priests then mediated between God and the people to bring salvation, forgiveness, and blessings from God to the people. The church stood with individuals before God, buffering them in his majestic presence.

Martin Luther changed all that, starting in 1517. Instead of the church standing with the individual, Luther held that individuals stood alone before God, with only their faith, based on their understanding of Scripture, alongside them.

Despite this theological change, the social reality altered surprisingly little. Individuals still lived in communities and these communities shared a single doctrinal interpretation of Scripture. Individuals did not interpret Scripture on their own, but rather followed their community's understanding.

Often these communities were formed around the teachings of influential theologians and leaders. Luther founded the Lutherans, John Calvin founded the Reformed Church and influenced the Puritans, while John Knox organized the Presbyterians. These are just a few of the communities, the churches if you will, created from the Reformation. So early forms of Protestantism took a similar structure to Catholicism: Each was a community that brought a common interpretation to Scripture, which in turn led to common social norms-i.e., morality.

The Puritans brought this communally-organized Christianity to America, where they established a new community that would help individuals lead moral lives in keeping with the Puritan interpretation of Scripture.

But Luther's dictum of the individual alone still rang out. When Roger Williams interpreted Scripture for himself in the 1630s, the Massachusetts Puritans expelled him. Williams believed in a radical understanding of Luther's dictum: The church should be separate from the government so that the church could not use government powers to enforce doctrine and interpretation on individuals.

Williams' idea became the foundation of America's religious freedom. By the 1680s, variety was the religious flavor of the era. Formulations of Christian beliefs called catechisms proliferated. Puritan preacher Increase Mather thought that "over 500" different catechisms were circulating at the time. Over the next century or more, European immigrants brought in new Protestant denominations and Americans created their own.

By the 1800s, Christians realized all this religious freedom fragmented Christianity and interfered with its ability to accomplish the great deeds needed. So they banded together into non-denominational organizations to take on moral projects. To accomplish this unity, they overlooked doctrinal features that divided them.

Thus the great ethical movements of the century were founded: anti-slavery, temperance, women's suffrage, and missionary projects to evangelize both foreign peoples and America's "unchurched" masses. By the mid-20th century, new non-denominational groups joined with those of a more secular bent in the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements.

The lessons of these movements was that if the divided Christian populace overlooked matters of doctrine and Scripture interpretation, they could unify on moral issues. Toward the end of the 20th century, a new alliance of Christians was formed. Since the great moral concerns of slavery and personal civil rights had been resolved (more or less), these groups took up new ones.

Thus the Right to Life movement, for example, took up the cause of the unborn. This brought together an alliance of conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons, who were able to overlook their differences on doctrine and Scripture, to unite on what they saw as a great moral concern.

Morality is the great religious unifier, where different religious groups can agree. They may arrive at those moral positions through different doctrinal interpretations of Scripture, even from different versions of Scripture. But to strengthen their unity, they ignore those differences. The public unity of Christianity, as apparent in American news coverage, comes from morality rather than doctrine.