

Scriptural Pragmatism

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Introduction

Our English word *pragmatic* generally connotes that which is practical, that which “gets the job done,” sometimes to the exclusion of reasonable or artistic considerations. When I was a youngster growing up on a central Texas ranch (before the advent of duct tape), baling wire was the remedy for a wide variety of problems and emergencies. Its use sometimes defied reason, and always art, but it “worked” for everything from mending fences to repairing a muffler on a truck. To call one a “pragmatist” in the general sense would generally be considered a compliment. It is an innocent word that conveys no evil in itself.

However, a school of philosophy called “Pragmatism” has adopted this good word and given it an altogether blasphemous connotation. Pragmatism gained some prominence in the first half of the last century, led by the likes of C.S. Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. These men advocated abandonment of all dogmatism or accepted truth in favor of whatever “works.” The new credo (dogmatism?) they preached was “if it works, it is true.” Applied to religion, the philosophy accepted no doctrine or principle as absolute or dogmatic, on the assumption that we do not know which type of religion is going to work best in the long run. Applied to morals, it denied moral absolutes in favor of freewheeling amorality – whatever “works” for oneself. John Dewey, generally recognized as “the Father of American public education,” applied this principle to education, leading him to abandon time-honored and proved principles of instruction in favor of experimentation. When he coupled his Humanism with Pragmatism, we should not wonder that our public education system has so miserably failed to educate our children for several generations.

Although the word *pragmatism* has been seriously tarnished by the heinous philosophy described above, I submit that the Bible teaches a philosophy of pragmatism. This philosophy, which we might name “Scriptural Pragmatism,” consists of the idea that God’s way – the way of life set forth in the Bible – “works.” Consider now some illustrative principles of God-ordained pragmatism.

Marriage and the Home

Marriage, in which a man and a woman pledge their lives and loyalties to one another until death, has been God’s plan from Creation (Gen. 2:24; Mat. 19; 4–6; Eph. 5:31; Rom. 7:2–3).

The home thus created – society’s fundamental unit – is the place God has provided for bringing children into the world and nurturing them until they begin their own homes (Eph. 6:1–4). Sexual unions (whether with one of the same or of a different sex) outside of Scriptural marriage, constitute adultery or fornication (Mat. 5:31–32; 19:9). These practices (sins) will cause those who refuse to repent of them to be damned (1 Cor. 6:9–10; Rev. 21:8). However, besides the eternal consequences of marital infidelity, there are hideous personal and societal consequences.

Fifty years ago, divorce was comparatively rare in our nation. It and its participants were generally stigmatized. Our culture has so radically changed in the last half century that divorce (often repeated by the same persons) has become commonplace and single parent “families” number in the millions. Every divorce implies broken vows, unhappiness, shattered dreams, and suffering. All of these are multiplied when the union has produced children, who often suffer the most.

The widespread unfaithfulness to their marital vows by husbands and wives (coupled with the influence of radical feminists) has relegated marriage to the status of an undesirable arrangement in the minds of many. Thus, millions of men and women (led by most of the entertainment luminaries) are no more inclined to “bother” with marriage than are barnyard animals. They live openly in adultery and/or fornication and feel no shame or guilt for their sin. Many mothers have slept with so many men that they cannot certainly identify the father of their children. Obviously, many do not believe God-ordained marriage “works.”

However, it is not marriage that does not work, but the **people** in the marriage that fail to make it work. God wants us to be happy. He created man and then created woman from and for man. When He brought them together to be one, intending them to thus be till death broke the bond between them, He did so for their ultimate happiness and welfare. Marriage “works” when husbands love their wives, give themselves up for them, and nourish and cherish them, as Christ did the church, His bride (Eph. 5:25, 29). Marriage “works” when wives submit themselves to and love their husbands, being sober, chaste, home-workers, and kind (Eph. 5:22; Tit. 2:4–5). The home “works” when parents lovingly nurture their children in the chastening and admonition of the Lord and when children obey their parents in the Lord (Eph. 6:1–4). How badly the people of our nation – and of all the nations – need to become Scriptural Pragmatists regarding marriage and the home.

Personal Relationships

All sorts of evil deeds are done and words are spoken because of hatred, jealousy, unkindness, anger, lust, and other ill-begotten selfish attitudes. Such words and deeds destroy personal relationships. They cause us to ill-treat others. They break up marriages, divide brethren unnecessarily, alienate employers and employees, and sever friendships. James observed that such behavior was not very practical; these ways just will not “work” if one is seeking peace and happiness.

Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your pleasures that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and covet, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not. (Jam. 4:1-2).

On the other hand, the Lord’s plan for relating to our fellows is perfectly practical. A skeptic once chided a Christian for believing in his antiquated, behind-the-times Bible, the teachings of which had long-since been outmoded by modern sophisticates. The Christian pointed to the utter fallacy of such an averment by citing only one statement from the Lord: “All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Mat. 7:12). “Men have not even begun to measure up to this one challenge,” the Christian added.

We can only imagine what gargantuan improvement would come over even a small town if every resident acted upon this one passage. They could dismiss the police force and turn the jail into a museum. Door locks would be superfluous, and angry words and deeds would disappear. Immorality would not be known. None would have insufficient food or clothes. Neighbor would not try to cheat neighbor. There would be no more church splits over personalities and mere matters of opinion. Would this not be a wonderful place to live?

Paul gives us a great sampling of the ingredients of good personal relationships in every sphere of life in Ephesians 4:25-32. God is still waiting for most people to thus live, but He knows that His way to live “works” to produce good personal relationships.

Financial Matters

The world is consumed with covetousness and materialism. People often make moral compromises and even engage in criminal behavior in order to gain more and more money. As I write these words, radio newscasts are telling of the long queues of people who are waiting to buy lottery tickets for the Texas Lotto jackpot of \$76,000,000. Robbing and killing in order to

gain money are constant occurrences. Some who have honestly gained great wealth selfishly cling to it as their god.

God's way of dealing with material things is diametrically opposed to the foregoing descriptions. Jesus warns against heaping up earthly riches at the expense of our spiritual treasures:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also (Mat. 6:19–21).

As unpleasant as it may be to contemplate the annual tax deadline that comes around every April, the Lord still said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Mat. 22:21).

We are wise and will be amply rewarded in this life—as well as in that to come—if we will realize that life does not consist in material wealth. We will certainly not carry any of it with us to the grave (Luke 12:16–21; 1 Tim. 6:7). Paul urged: "Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17). We are to work, not just for our own livelihood, but that we may have somewhat to give to others who cannot supply their own needs (Eph. 4:28). Paul summarized God's giving principle we are to follow: "But this I say, He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6).

By obeying Him in money matters we can find great happiness and joy, and we will also stay out of trouble! Many can testify that the Lord's way "works" in handling their financial affairs.

National Morality

The decline in morals and the culture corruption in our nation over the past thirty-five years have been almost breathtaking in degree and extent. The entertainment industry (Hollywood, Television, and much of the music industry) and a few self-styled "artists" have pushed the sex, violence, and filthy language limits so far away from all standards of decency and propriety that standards hardly exist anymore. Pornography is a multibillion-dollar business. The sin for which God destroyed Sodom is now glorified and defended as if it were normal and innocent. Legalized gambling was once confined almost exclusively to Las Vegas and Reno. Now many of the states not only allow privately owned casinos, but most of the states actually sponsor gambling and commercially advertise its "virtues." Illicit drug usage is

rampant and consumption of the legal drug of alcohol is taken for granted by most. As a nation, we are committing suicide by drowning ourselves in a cesspool of wickedness.

The corrupt Clinton administration of the past and the public response to it further demonstrate the general moral collapse. The absence of a concerted national outcry against such behavior in our president and his cohorts is unquestionable proof of how low our nation has sunk. Should one need it, the elected officials who placed party above principle, excusing his behavior and demonizing his just accusers, serve as an additional barometer of national moral degeneracy. All of these behaviors are of the devil and they do not “work” except for our sorrow: “Shall I not visit for these things? saith Jehovah; shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?” (Jer. 5:29).

God holds nations accountable for their national behavior, even as He does individuals. Solomon’s inspired observation is no less true now than when he penned it 3,500 years ago: “Righteousness exalteth a nation; But sin is a reproach to any people.” (Pro. 14:34). Do not Jehovah’s words through Moses to Israel have an extended application to every nation, including ours? “And now, O Israel, hearken unto the statutes and unto the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them; that ye may live...” (Deu. 4:1a). God’s warning to Israel about forgetting Him in their national prosperity and success are good for us to hear also: “Beware lest thou forget Jehovah...” (6:12a).

No nation’s real strength lies in its territorial or population size, its prosperity, or its military might, but in its righteousness: “And thou shalt do that which is right and good in the sight of Jehovah; that it may be well with thee...” (v. 18a). Here again we see demonstrated a Scriptural Pragmatism. God’s way of righteousness “works” in the preservation and prosperity of nations, as in every area of life and experience. The dedicated Christian is the ultimate “pragmatist.”

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the April 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-pagemonthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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