

A Gathering of the Minds

Thursday 24 November 2005 - the WA Club

Speaker 4 - Hamish Milne

Beyond Forgiveness: Managing After the Fall

Peter Singer defined ethics in the Introduction to the 1991 book 'A companion to Ethics' as follows – "Ethics deals with values, with good and bad, with right and wrong. We cannot avoid involvement in ethics, for what we do - and what we don't do - is always a possible subject of ethical evaluation. Anyone who thinks about what he or she ought to do is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in ethics."

I think we can clarify this a bit further. Knowing the difference between right and wrong reflects our underlying **values**. Choosing right over wrong shows our **integrity** – especially when the result does not favour ourselves. But what about when decisions need to be made about right versus right, or wrong versus wrong? That is the challenge of **ethics**.

As Socrates said: What ought one to do?

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'BEYOND FORGIVENESS: Managing After the Fall' is the title of what I want to talk about this morning.

It has been said that: "The Church has complacently lived off the declining moral capital of Christendom."¹ In Australia, the moral monopoly of churches in general has diminished considerably from the early colonial days when the priest was moral policeman. Australians are suspicious of authoritarianism, institutionalism and hypocrisy.¹ Organised religion is in trouble.

In recent times, the decline in 'moral capital' has been accelerated in churches around the world by scandals involving priests and lay church workers. Australian churches have not been immune. This is the Fall from grace.

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¹ Preece, G., 'A theological reflection on a draft code of ethics', August 2003

Historically, misconduct (and I am talking predominantly about sexual misconduct and abuse here) was almost always played-down, minimised, diminished and many times ignored by Church hierarchies.

It is difficult to comprehend that organisations, which held themselves out as the benchmarks for morality, could act in this way. Whose interests were being served and/or ignored? Why were abusers moved within rather than removed from the Churches?

These are interesting questions, but after you have asked the questions ‘how?’, ‘why?’ and ‘who?’, it might be possible to boil it down to a problematic, one-word answer – **forgiveness**.

I want to leave that idea hanging there for the moment.

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My role as Director of Professional Standards for the Anglican Church in WA has a few aspects to it, each with its own challenges. Ultimately my role is to minimise the possibility of misconduct and abuse occurring in the

- **future** - through policy development and education,
- to efficiently address misconduct issues which arise in the **present**, and
- to investigate issues of misconduct and abuse when they surface from the **past**.

There are approximately 10 Professional Standards Directors responsible for the 23 Dioceses of the Anglican Church in Australia. Together we are developing policies in each diocese, as well as at a national level, to ultimately ensure that the Church will be a safe place for all vulnerable people.

‘Safe Ministry’ is a multi-pronged approach which involves a series of standardised policies, including:

- a national code of conduct for clergy, employees and volunteers,
- strict background and psychological checks for priests in training,
- screening processes for volunteers,
- general risk-management practices in parishes and church organisations, and
- a standardised policy across the country for managing allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct.

While it is hoped that all vulnerable people will benefit from these policies and procedures, the main driver for this has been child protection.

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How do you manage those who commit acts of misconduct within your organisation, when the public reaction is to be y for blood, but your organisation’s fundamental values include acceptance, love, inclusiveness and forgiveness?

Abuse of all kinds is widespread in our community - it is a disturbing fact of life that has an untold impact on the lives of many Australian families. Why does abuse within churches seem more problematic than, say, abuse that occurs in private homes every night?

Firstly, because of the Christian values espoused by Churches and their parishioners – how could a Christian act in this way towards another? etc And secondly, and I think this creates as much anger as the abuse itself, the fact that abuse was so often covered up, denied, minimised etc.

The reasons for the cover ups are multifaceted, but it turns out that one of the main reasons was misguided forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not a part of any of the Safe Ministry policies mentioned before, yet it is a traditional and fundamental principle of the Church - “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” etc.

Forgiveness should not be about forgetting or ignoring what happened, but instead accommodating the reality of a negative experience and providing the means to move on. An essential part of healing, forgiveness takes time. Importantly, forgiveness is also linked with justice, but unlike justice one does not have a right to forgiveness. I think that is a crucial point that was perhaps historically misunderstood.

When abuse occurred, how could those in the church hierarchy forgive the seemingly unforgivable?

Part of the answer is that the dynamics of abuse were not understood as well as they are now. This includes understanding the motivations of abusers on one side, and the behaviour and needs of survivors of abuse on the other.

When it comes to children, sexual behaviour is not only illegal, it is wrong. When it comes to adult to adult sexual behaviour, it is sometimes not as clear cut - but it all usually comes down, fundamentally, to a misuse or abuse of power. Power that is positional, traditionally inferred and conferred, and in the case of priests in the Church, ordained from God.

If one doesn't understand the dynamics and the fundamental misuse of power, proper safeguards will never be put in place to prevent abuse and our capacity to adequately respond to the survivors of abuse will be diminished.

In the past, church leaders accepted apologies at face value in ignorance of these dynamics. By simply relocating an errant priest, for example, it did not remove the underlying motivation behind his behaviour, but simply changed the temptation.

In accepting the complexities behind abuse, and addressing matters in an open and transparent way, the Church can now move beyond forgiveness to genuine healing and reconciliation.