

## A Moral Compass

Christopher Bollinger

I frequently hear people talk about a “Moral Compass.” My daughter recently asked me what that was and I gave her a quick and probably not very satisfying answer: it’s a little thing inside us, like a compass, that tells us the right direction when we have to make decisions about right and wrong. While strictly correct and certainly helpful for her, it’s not really the right answer. What we really want to know is how do we judge a person’s character? How do we know if a person will make a moral and good decision? The Christian right has made this a major issue in politics recently and frankly I’m glad. It is important. It’s crucial.

We vest great power into our political leaders (frankly too much if you ask me). In particular, the role of the President has become very strong. We apparently no longer require the President to ask congress for a declaration of war before entering into a war (apparently we haven’t since 1946, yet the constitution still requires it). Presidents can, through executive orders and the organization of the executive branch, dramatically change the regulatory environment in this country in ways that impact citizens in myriad ways. With this much power vested in a single person, we need to ensure that the person holding office is one of the most moral and upright persons we can find. The Moral Character of the President is crucial.

Many claim to have easy answers as to how to evaluate a person’s moral character. They frequently forward a litmus test of a single issue. For example, we might take the Gay Marriage issue. The Christian right will argue that any person who supports Gay Marriage is not following God’s word. If this single test is used on Adolph Hitler we find that he is moral: he clearly did not and would not support Gay Marriage. The Humanist Left would argue that a denying the “right” of marriage to Gay people is not God’s work and so someone opposing Gay marriage is immoral. Yet Mother Theresa, a good Catholic and perhaps one of the most saintly persons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, clearly opposed Gay Marriage. A single issue cannot possibly be a good measure.

A more important condemnation of the “single issue” measure is that we all have failings. A person could be very moral and very good in so many ways, and yet have a failing on a single issue. A great example of this, I believe, is Martin Luther King. His commitment to non-violence in the pursuit of social justice remains to this day an outstanding example. His commitment to God and Jesus was unassailable. We know as an historical fact that he carried on multiple affairs. I want to make it clear that to me personally, this is a serious moral failing. Any person who betrays the marriage commitment is a sad disappointment in my eyes. Yet, I cannot dismiss Dr. King as an example of a man with a Moral Compass.

Many will also argue that the person’s commitment to religion, or to a particular religion, is a clear measure. The problem here is how we measure that commitment. The Bible warns us of “false prophets” and I think that warning applied clearly here. It’s

so easy to do all the outward signs of commitment to a religion: go to church, donate money, or talk about your commitment to others. People often argue that “witnessing” is the true sign of a person with a deep commitment to a religion. I’m not really convinced. Jimmy Swagart, Jim and Tammy Baker, and others spend a lot of time “witnessing,” yet I think it’s very difficult to believe that they are really that moral in their own actions. The Baker’s, in particular, seem to have twisted their ministry toward their own benefit in ways that make most people very uncomfortable. The Bible discusses this as well, in Jesus’ Parable about the poor woman who donated only a penny. Jesus notes that the rich “all contributed out of their abundance” but the poor woman had contributed “everything she had” (Mark 12:44). It is much easier for a person of wealth to make these “outward” signs. Certainly it’s easy for me to contribute money and even time to my Church. So how does one evaluate a person’s commitment? Perhaps even more importantly, can one be Moral and not be a part of an organized church? (One might want to consider Jesus, Peter and Paul before one answers this question).

To evaluate a person’s Moral Character, one must look at how they conduct themselves in many arenas. I would also point out that you will not find any person who will be perfect. That does suggest that one might place higher weight on certain behavior, and lower weight on other behavior and one might have different weights when evaluating people for different positions. For example, I place a very high weight on fidelity in evaluating people for a potential spouse. On the other hand, I place lower weight on that characteristic in evaluating people for public office. Not because I don’t believe it’s important, but simply recognizing that a failing in this arena, while devastating in a spouse, might be less important in a political leader. Since it’s difficult to find someone who is perfect in every way, I am more willing to tolerate this failure in a political leader. But it is still very much worth evaluating.

One failing that many people have is selfishness. It appears to be abundant in politicians and if we require the kind selfless commitment of Mother Theresa in our elected officials we will have a lot of empty posts. I would urge you to examine carefully if the candidates for president place their interests above those of the country. In particular, if they confuse their interests with the interests of the country. Placing your self interests above those of the larger society is something that we must consider a serious moral failing. To judge someone here, consider what they give up to be a politician. Consider what they gain. Also examine times when there was choice to be made between their interests and societies. Who do they usually choose? Have they ever made a sacrifice for some higher purpose? Has their life been one of avoiding sacrifice, while furthering their own political or economic station? Did they ever take an unpopular stance because it was right, even though, perhaps, they lost friends and comrades?

Pride is also a serious flaw. This limits a leader’s ability to learn from his or her mistakes. It can lead to overconfidence in one’s ability to make good decisions and the failure to listen to the advice of others. Again, it is hard to find a political candidate without some failings in this regard as well. We all make mistakes: failures of judgment, failures of conscience. People with a true moral compass learn from those mistakes and incorporate them into how they conduct themselves in the future. People who cling,

steadfastly, to an opinion or idea, even when it has clearly been demonstrated that they are wrong, suffer from the sin of pride. As leaders they will make the same mistakes again and again. They will fail to learn from others and improve both themselves and our country.

Honesty is something that I consider crucially important when casting my vote. I was deeply disappointed in Clinton in this regard. All candidates have a large degree of dishonesty. It's unfortunate but true: we want candidates to promise the sun, the moon and the stars to get our vote. I'm reminded of the 1988 elections. Dukakis was honest, he said we must raise taxes. Bush said "No New Taxes." In this case part of the burden is on the voters: don't require your politicians to lie about bad news. Here though, don't judge candidates on what they promise in stump speeches. Evaluate them in places where they are free to act. Examine them when they lie: do they bend the truth easily? Or is there some reluctance to do this? Don't confuse changing your mind and learning from your mistakes with lying. What we consider here is the case where a person willfully and knowingly misleads others simply to get their own way. Even scarier, do they believe their own lies? That's not a sign of conviction to a cause, it's a sign of complete dishonesty.

I think the most important area is how a person treats those they disagree with and those who are less fortunate in any way. Christianity (and many religions) tells us to turn the other cheek when attacked. The Golden Rule is to love your neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates that all of humanity is your neighbor. Jesus warned us that how we treat those less fortunate is how we treat him. These are hard commandments to live up to and many (perhaps especially I) will have a difficult time keeping them. If a candidate considers that "if you're not for me you're against me" he or she has missed the point. If a candidate is willing to treat their enemy with cruelty and abuse, he has no moral compass. If a candidate has no compassion (and saying you have compassion is not sufficient) for those in jail or who have made other grave errors in life, they aren't moral leaders.

It is crucial and important to consider morality as a key characteristic of a President or any office holder. A simple single issue litmus test is a poor measure. A much more thorough and complete evaluation must take place. It's difficult to be moral. There is no easy path here. It's also dangerous to be moral. It is much less dangerous (at least in the short run) to be selfish, to attack your enemies (or those you perceive as enemies), and to ignore criticism and do things your own way. Treating people who are not good or nice people with compassion is very hard. Forgiving and learning to love even the most egregious criminals is so difficult that only a handful of the most saintly have accomplished this, but many fail to even try because it is so hard. When you evaluate any candidate – but especially Presidential candidates – don't expect them to be perfect, but expect them to try. If they use religion as a club, they are not moral. If they are prideful and selfish, they are not moral. If they have not even tried to love their enemies, they are not moral. If you haven't figured out that Bush fails egregiously in these regards, you haven't been listening. Kerry is not perfect, but he is much better.