

The Assurance of God's Faithfulness

by Kel Good

A central doctrine held by many of us who subscribe to "moral government," which comes under much criticism, is the idea that God is voluntarily good. This means that holiness in God is not a natural attribute which God possesses outside of His choice. Holiness is a moral attribute, the sum total of all the choices which God makes. Character in God is what it is in man, the result of habitually acting in a certain way. The difference between God and man in this area is that men have sinned. Scripture teaches that God is perfectly holy, without sin. The Bible also declares that God does not change, and will be the same forever. Thus God is not only holy, but faithful. God's character is constant and can be relied on. For moral government advocates these passages teach a dynamic faithfulness, a holiness that is constant, but a matter of choice in God.

This view is in contrast with the commonly held belief that God's holiness is involuntary, something He does not choose. On this view it is simply a fact that God is holy. He could not be otherwise because His choices flow from His nature, which is holy, instead of from His will. His choices do not determine His moral character, but express it. Obviously, on this view God would also be faithful. He could never cease being holy since holiness is a natural attribute, which controls His choices.

The concern with the moral government view is obviously not its claim that God is holy or that God is faithful. The concern is the nature of this faithfulness. In this position God is only holy because He chooses to be. The obvious implication of this is that God could choose not to be holy. He could choose to sin. This possibility seems an inevitable consequence of the moral government view. Since the faithfulness of God is presented in scripture as an assurance to us that we can trust God, it appears that the moral government view undermines this very assurance, and installs doubt in the theological landscape. "It might be argued that, based on his track record, God is not likely to change into an ogre. Yet there is no assurance of this..."

Who Does Not Rationalize Sometimes?

Our view is charged with being a rationalistic explanation of God's holiness, not based on scripture, but on making God in man's image. It is not that scripture teaches that holiness is voluntary in God, or that God could sin (Does not the Bible actually teach God cannot lie, cannot be tempted?), but that moral government advocates are too concerned with rationality to submit to the clear teachings of scripture. They rationalize that since holiness is voluntary in man, it must also be in God. Critics retort that if God could sin, He could choose not to be faithful as the Bible teaches. Nor could the passages be true which teach that sin is impossible for God. The moral government view must be in error.

My response to these objections is that I believe that the central concern, to secure the assurance of the believer in the trustworthiness of God, is a good one. Our critics are

concerned that if people take our view of God's holiness seriously, they will begin to doubt God. It is not my desire to teach doubt of God. I share our critics' desire that people trust God. With reference to the accusation of allowing rationalization to take the place of submission to scripture, I would suggest that our critics carry out their own form of rationalization. It appears that the only way they can assure themselves of the faithfulness of God is if they depersonalize Him and make Him into a holy machine who (that?) is guaranteed to be reliable because He (it?) has been programmed to act that way.

One can hear an echo here of the age old question, "Why did God make men free?" He could have assured our obedience if He had made us machines and would not have subjected His creation to all of the sin which it presently contains. The classic answer to this, and many of our critics have used it themselves, is that if God had made us machines we would have been incapable of obedience, incapable of love.

This answer only says about man from God's standpoint in creating him, what we are saying about God from the standpoint of what we understand holiness to be. If God were programmed to be good, He could not be good, because goodness is not a natural attribute. Goodness is voluntary, as is sin. Men could only have been holy by being given free will and using it rightly.

Aside from this recognition of what holiness is we are also concerned with what our opponents' approach to this question does to the whole Biblical picture of God, and of man's responsibility. Concerning the passages teaching God's unchangingness and His faithfulness, these alone do not require the view of either moral government or of our critics. They can be read either way. They may be speaking of a metaphysical unchangingness, as our opponents believe, or they could be declaring the dynamic constancy of God's character, His choices to be holy and faithful, a moral unchangingness, if you will. All they declare is the fact of God's faithfulness, not the cause.

Man's Responsibility (see also "Moral Obligation")

We are concerned with how people read God's call for them to be holy. If holiness can only come from a constitutional nature which does not allow sin as an option, then why try to be holy as God has called us to be? Many people approach walking in the Spirit from the belief that if they are not presently holy it is because God has not yet made them holy. It is God's fault, not theirs. Again the confusion arises because if God did make them holy by causing holiness in them, apart from their own choices, it would not be them being holy, it would be God. They would only be instruments or tools.

Another concern is with people's ultimate destiny. Hebrews 12:14 warns that "without holiness no one will see the Lord." Many people believe that at death God will simply create a new character in them. This is very dangerous thinking if holiness (at least in man) is voluntary. Death will not change the character we have developed in this life. If we are to be transformed morally, now is the time during which this must take place.

God's Glory

Besides these concerns about man's responsibility, moral government advocates are concerned that our critics' view robs God of other glories attributed to Him in the scriptures. God is said to be worthy of worship and praise for His character. No one praises someone for his eye color, or for how many hands and fingers he has. People are not responsible for natural attributes. We praise people for the good things they do which they did not have to do. Because they could have done otherwise, we are grateful that they did what was good. It seems to me that believers in God's holiness as a natural attribute either ignore, or do not notice, the implications of this for worshipping God. As Finney said, their reason takes them beyond their reasonings. If God is a holy machine, what worship or praise does He deserve for that? God is praiseworthy because He really is holy, in the sense that we understand that term.

Even our opponents would have to admit, given the history and commonness of human sin (which I suspect is what has them so disturbed that God could be freely good), that between a God who simply could not choose to sin, and one who could but has always been faithful, it is the second God who is awesomely praiseworthy. Of the first God I am tempted to say, who could not be holy that way? On our critics' view, we ought to stand more in awe of holiness when it occurs in men, than when it occurs in God, because when we manage to be holy it is voluntary! We could do otherwise! Does this not make our holiness more praiseworthy than God's? Of course I speak rhetorically. God is awesome in His holiness. He has always chosen and will always choose our good. Our critics rob God of His due veneration.

Incarnation And Encouragement

Then there is the matter of the temptations of Jesus and how Hebrews uses the fact that Jesus was tempted in all points like we are, but did not sin, to reassure us we can resist temptation. On our critics' view I must ask, what reassurance of my obedience in the face of temptation should this give me? Jesus could not have sinned if he had wanted to or tried to. God cannot sin; cannot even be tempted to sin. However, I have to face temptation and seek to obey God, when all the while I could sin. Jesus' charade of pretending to be tempted and then obtaining "victory" does not encourage me one bit. If I did not believe Jesus could have sinned when He was tempted, what comfort could I find in this passage? Our benefiting from this passage requires the belief that Jesus faced temptation on the exact same ground as we do with the same possibilities for sinning. Our critics rob believers of this assurance.

Does The Common View Grant Assurance?

The most important thing to note about our opponents' rationalization of God's holiness as an involuntary rather than a voluntary attribute, is that it fails to give the extra assurance they seek from it. How do our opponents know God's holiness is involuntary? Not from what the Bible says. The Bible only tells us God is faithful. Our opponents' belief that this faithfulness is involuntary is a rational theory which would explain how

God could be faithful as the Bible claims. Admittedly their view would insure this faithfulness if it were true, but the fact that the Bible says God is faithful, and the fact that God has shown Himself to be faithful, does not make this theory of His faithfulness to be true.

Moral government advocates also know that God is holy because of what God has said and done. The Bible does not say that God is voluntarily good. This is the understanding which moral government advocates feel best explains the Biblical data of understanding holiness in God. It cannot be proven from the fact that scripture shows God is faithful. We simply believe it makes better sense of everything else we know about our own moral categories in being called to holiness, and does justice to the Biblical claims of God's praiseworthiness and Jesus' victory over temptation for our encouragement. We feel justified in reasoning from what we know about holiness and sin in ourselves, not because we are trying to make God in our image, but because God has also told us we have been made in His image. This gives us Biblical reason to expect God to be like us in the voluntariness of holiness, only in a much greater way.

But does not the moral government view undermine the assurance of God's faithfulness in a way in which the more common view does not? Does not the common view assure us of God's faithfulness, while the moral government view must leave it forever in doubt, since God could any time cease to be holy? The answer to this is, if we could know the common view was right, it would leave God's faithfulness beyond possible doubt. But we could not know this view was right unless we already were convinced of God's faithfulness. The only way we could know that this was the right view of God's holiness is if He told us. Even then this could only convince us it was true if we were convinced prior that God was faithful, and hence was not lying to us. Anyone can tell you something, but unless he can be trusted, his testimony is worthless. This is why scripture not only tells us about God, but shows us God's actions. From this we can develop faith in God's trustworthiness, the same way we develop faith in anyone's trustworthiness.

In the end it is the evidence of God's trustworthiness in His dealings with us which develops our faith in this fact. This we obtain by what God does, in addition to what He has said. The Bible records God's acts, as well as making propositional statements about God. We have a history of God's dealings. Without an assurance of God's doings as demonstrating His holiness, no one could accept a statement to that effect. Whether God's holiness is involuntary or voluntary, we can only know He is holy from the evidence of His faithfulness. A theory on the nature of this faithfulness cannot satisfy this need, for assurance in the truth of the theory would require that we already could trust the testimony of God, since He alone could confirm its truth.

While it may be true that God is involuntarily holy - and this fact would guarantee He never would (or could) sin - the only evidence that He was faithful in this way would be His continued constancy. But this constancy would not prove His holiness was involuntary, for such constancy could also be explained by His continued voluntary holiness. Since we have evidence of God's faithfulness by what we know of His doings, we could obtain assurance of the common theory's truth, were God to reveal it. But this

still would not become the foundation of our assurance of God's faithfulness, since its very truth depends upon such faithfulness if we are to accept the testimony. In any case, God has not given such testimony. He has told us only that He is faithful, and shown it in His deeds.

The True Source Of Assurance

Therefore, assurance of God's faithfulness does not arise in our hearts through a theory of the nature of God's holiness. It arises through evidence that God is reliable. This is why we trust God. Suddenly hearing a person question the more common idea that the reason God is faithful is because He could not help it, makes us do a double take on whether we have a right to our confidence. When we look more closely, we realize our confidence is not in a theory of the nature of divine holiness, but in the person of God as He has made himself known, both by saying and doing. If He had not done so, we would have no assurance He was faithful, whatever our theory of the nature of His Holiness. This being the case, the fact that the moral government view allows that God could sin, could cease to be holy, in no way undermines confidence in God's faithfulness. We have the same assurance of this as our opponents do. God has shown Himself faithful and has given us His promise. Therefore, we have confidence in God, who does not lie.

What of the Bible's claims that God cannot lie, cannot be tempted? God's character is established in holiness. This impossibility is a moral one, not a metaphysical one. Again we have an example of this, even on a human scale. We know of people whose character is so constant that we can say of them, that they simply could not do certain things. It would be impossible to tempt them to do so. We do not mean by this language that they could not feel any temptation to do so, or that they have no ability to perform the actions, but recognize that their voluntary character is established to such an extent that they would not do these things, even though they could.