When Apostles and Atheists Agree

What if I told you that a prominent, atheist philosopher agreed with the apostle Paul on the origin of modern human rights and democratic society? It's true.

In his national bestseller, *A Brief History of Thought*, French philosopher Luc Ferry writes, "The Greek world was fundamentally an aristocratic world, a universe organised as a hierarchy in which those most endowed by nature should in principle be 'at the top', while the less endowed saw themselves occupying inferior ranks. And we should not forget that the Greek city-state was founded on slavery. In direct contradiction, Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity – an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance."

Almost two millennia earlier, the apostle Paul wrote similar words in his international bestseller, the letter to the Romans. He writes, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me,'" (Romans 15.1-3).

Christian readers do not always appreciate the surprise of Paul's teaching here. As a former Jewish rabbi trained in the Old Testament, Paul would have been expected to base his ethical imperatives in the Torah – or at least in the Proverbs. But Paul doesn't say, "We have an obligation because the Law or the Proverbs say so." He doesn't quote one of the many moral principles enumerated in the Old Testament. Rather, he quotes a verse from the Psalms and uses it to point to the work of Jesus Christ.

Considering the source, this is an unexpected move. Yet it is not a position unique to Paul. Over and over throughout the New Testament, Paul and the other apostles consistently ground Christian ethics not in abstract moral principles, but in the concrete person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is the spiritual revolution noticed by Ferry. Prior to the Christian message, there was no universal concept of "human rights" for all people. Even the civilized Greeks saw no problem with the naturally strong dominating the naturally weak. But from the very beginnings of the Christian movement, a new and better principle is injected in the philosophical bloodstream of human society: every person has dignity, and the strong have an *obligation* (not just the *option*) to bear with the weak – to seek their good. Why? Because that is what Jesus did for us.

Historically, then, it may be true that the notion of universal human rights originated in Christian teaching. But so what? Now that the principle has emerged, why retain the rest? Butterflies begin in cocoons, but they don't stay there. The same question could be asked here. Why not just embrace the ethic, and discard the dogmatic eggshell? Many modern people – and most Western societies – have attempted to do precisely this.

Can such "creedless compassion" succeed? The answer is yes – and no. At one level, it is certainly true that non-religious people often experience and demonstrate courageous amounts of compassion and self-sacrifice. There are many non-religious people who work in emergency response agencies. Christians should acknowledge and be thankful for their services. Yet on another level, there is a deep problem in this approach to ethical behavior. This can best be seen if we ask the question: *why* should any of us treat others as equals?

If our answer does not come from outside of us – from God – then it must come from inside us. If ethical motives don't come from our Creator, then we create them ourselves. But this means they are self-centered. Tim Keller explains, "We may decide to give our lives to serve the medical needs of poor people; but why…? The proper [non-religious] answer… is that we are doing it not because we are obligated to do it but because we freely choose to find this activity significant for us. However… that means we are actually helping sick people for our sake, not theirs. We are doing it because it makes us feel worthy and significant."

Understand what Keller is saying. If we serve others for reasons we create, then we are not serving them simply because they are *equal* – but because we find them *useful*. We are using them for our own ends – in the same way the Greeks used their slaves. In the end, self-created reasons for doing good are just creative ways of being selfish.

But the New Testament shows us there is a better way. Though its practitioners frequently fail to demonstrate it consistently, the Christian ethic is not a morality based on self-service, but on self-sacrifice. Christianity does not teach "Do good to feel good," but rather, "Do good to others because God did good to you." Christianity proclaims not just a God who commands service and self-sacrifice, but a God who demonstrated ultimate service and self-sacrifice in the cross of Jesus Christ.

This last point is crucial. In orthodox Christian belief, Jesus Christ is not a mere man setting a good moral example. (If he was, he would be subject to all the problems of self-created morality we've outlined above.) Rather, Jesus Christ is the Son of God who gave himself to rescue and transform us into his own self-sacrificial image. He is not only the man who pays for our sins; he is the God who empowers our self-sacrifice and purifies our motives. This is a revolutionary idea. Isn't it worth investigating?

Atheists admit: Jesus Christ changed the history. The apostles insist: if we connect to him by faith, he will change our destiny. What if they're both right?

Jeremiah Montgomery is pastor of Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church in State College. Visit Resurrection online at resurrectionopc.org. He quotes the English Standard Version of the Bible.