



Judge — but not for yourself

The moral of the story is what counts

I was walking out of Fisher Research Library at Sydney University recently when I was stopped by a rather nosey student. He had noticed that I was carrying an armful of books on criminology. I think the title of the topmost book must have caught his eye. It was the landmark work, *Crime and Human Nature*, by James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein.

“Are you a psychology student?” he asked, rather imperiously.

“No,” I said, “I’m not.”

“Then what are you studying?” he inquired.

“Theology and philosophy,” I said. “Bah!” he exclaimed. “What’s that got to do with crime?”

Then, before I could give him a reply, he turned on his heel and stormed up the stairwell. Although he took off at a rapid pace, his question has lingered in my mind: does the Christian faith have anything to say about the burgeoning crime problem?

Over the past few decades, criminologists have argued about the reasons for the recent surge in crime in Western democracies. With prison populations exploding at a frightening rate — for instance, in the USA there has been a tenfold increase in the past 25 years, now with two million inmates — there is obviously a desperate urgency to re-examine some of the theories that have been used to formulate our policies on crime and punishment.

What is it that lies at the heart of the escalating crime rate? In no issue of modern life are we more in need of better answers. For several decades now, social theorists have been conducting a vigorous debate over the significance of such factors as poverty, family breakdown, population change and softer judicial penalties as the major causes of crime.

For example, those who see poverty as the key factor can certainly point to the fact that street crime is more common in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But they cannot explain why the crime rate remained stable or declined during the Great Depression but rose sharply during the prosperity of the '60s.

Again, while it's possible that broken homes may contribute to the problem of juvenile delinquency, there is also substantial evidence that finds no direct relationship between single-parent families and crime.

Further, while it's true that a rising number of young males in a population will lead to an increase in crime, this does not shed any light at all on why the age-specific crime rate (that is, the number of crimes committed by young males of a given age) can also rise or fall from one period to another. For instance, since handguns have been available in America for decades, what really lies behind the recent spate of high school shooting massacres by young teenage boys? Age can't be the real reason.

This is where the Book of Judges may be of some help to us. In the last five chapters of the book (17 to 21), the writer relates a number of gruesome stories with an express purpose in view — to remind us what happens when we turn away from true religion and personal virtue instilled by God's Word.

One verse, which is repeated twice in these chapters, is the key, not only to this section but to the whole period of the judges. We discover it first in Judges 17:6: *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."* In the final verse of the book (21:25) the writer emphasises the lesson by repeating the statement.

This is a vital insight that has a direct and contemporary relevance. The problem with Israel, the writer complains, is that without a strong authority they abandoned the civilising revelation of God and adopted, in its place, a philosophy that emphasised personal rights, instant gratification and radical individualism. Sound familiar? With a change of a few dates and place names, we could well be writing about the significant changes of worldview that took place in the 20th century.

The results of abandoning biblical faith in Israel were catastrophic. After their spiritual defection, they experienced a shocking moral collapse. As the nation went into ethical free-fall, crime mushroomed around them (see Judges 19:25-30). The incidence of sexual assaults and violence spiraled as the culture of self-expression flourished.

Scholars of social history with an interest in the past two centuries have noticed a similar phenomenon in some English-speaking countries from about 1830 onwards. In America particularly, there was a significant increase in crime in the 1830s and '40s that was followed by a dramatic decrease in the crime rate from the 1850s to the early 1900s.

James Q. Wilson, Ted Gurr and Eric Monkonnen, to mention just a few criminologists, have produced a number of studies that seem to confirm the conclusion of the Book of Judges. They suggest that the best explanation for the falling crime rate in the latter half of the 19th century lies in a massive effort from all levels of society to engage in moral uplift. They note that this came through many routes — religious revivals, the Sunday school movement and the widespread push for temperance. This effort had the support of the intellectual and social elites.

On the other hand, Wilson notes that when the intellectual elites abandoned religious and moral uplift as a social ideal from the 1920s onward, the crime rate began to climb. It took off from the '60s, when the culture of self-expression came to full flower.

The upshot of all this should be obvious: the crime rate is particularly sensitive to the effectiveness of religious and moral education in society. It seems that the best way to keep crime under control is to redirect our efforts and resources to cultivating traditional virtues in each rising generation.

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