

# Virtues and Vices

The dictionary defines “virtue” as having to do with moral excellence, righteousness and goodness. I bring this up because William Bennett, America’s self-appointed guru of virtue demonstrated on his radio show last week that he may need a virtue refresher course.

Bennett served as Secretary of Education during the Reagan administration and Drug Czar for the first President Bush. He is the author of the best selling *Book of Virtues*. He has been an outspoken critic of what he calls America’s “moral dilemma,” and is one of those who believe that if Ten Commandments were on display in public schools, everything would get better.

Bennett also hosts a popular radio show known as “Morning in America.” While responding to a caller recently, the issue of abortion and the crime rate got into the discussion. This is what Bennett had to say.

“But I do know that it’s true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down.”

He went on to say that such a notion was “an impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down.”

Criticism came quickly and loud, and from nearly every quarter. Even President Bush weighed in. White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said, “The president believes the comments were not appropriate.”

But Bennett remained unbowed. He argued that he was speaking hypothetically and that his comments were taken out of context. He refused to apologize and even suggested that because his remarks had been mischaracterized, that someone should apologize to him.

Missing in all this wild banter, of course, is the real offense. Bennett very

nonchalantly lays all crime at the feet of African Americans. Why single them out as the key to lowering the crime rate?

Is all crime in America perpetrated by black people? Are there no white criminals, or Asian, or Hispanic? In fact, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, twice as many whites as blacks were arrested and charged with a crime in 2003.

Bennett's remarks reveal a deeply embedded racism. He believes that crime in America has a black face. And he apparently believes it in such a matter of fact way that he does not seem to understand why his words were offensive.

A soul aflame with the fire of virtue does not think this way. A mind that revolves around issues of moral excellence, righteousness and goodness does not relegate a whole segment of America's population to the status of criminal before they are even born.

There is something sadly amiss in the current conservative movement, of which Bennett is a leading spokesperson. There is a sort of moral arrogance at work which allows many of these folks to harshly judge the failings of others while quietly excusing their own flawed behavior.

Jesus had something to say about this—something about removing the log from your own eye.

This current wave of conservatism, of which Bennett is both contributor and result, also seems to lack a sense of genuine compassion for others. Seriously, if there is a heart of virtue beating in your chest, do you ever think about genocide, even hypothetically? Bennett's willingness to strip certain human beings of their dignity and humanity reveals a gaping virtue vacuum.

I'm not sure how he got the job of America's resident expert on virtue, but I propose we declare the office vacant and start a search for another candidate.

*[James L. Evans](#) is pastor of Auburn First Baptist Church in Auburn, Ala.*