

## The Human Condition and Our Current State of Affairs

I recently celebrated my 50<sup>th</sup> college class reunion in Grinnell, Iowa. It was a wonderful occasion. The best times were spent in conversation with former classmates, some of whom I had known well and others barely at all.

In one of those conversations we got to talking about the human condition and our current state of affairs. At some point I found myself interjecting that I believed in sin, something my classmate friend might not have been expecting. I went on to add that, after all, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, once observed that the doctrine of original sin is "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith."

One might suppose that if there is any doctrine on which almost all Christians could agree, it would be the doctrine of sin. Yet many Christians seem more ready to affirm various other doctrines that lack such empirical support. Granted, the traditional doctrine of *original sin*, which claims that the sinful condition of humanity originated with the Fall and has thus been inherited from Adam and Eve, is hard to swallow. I don't believe we are born sinners. Neither did Niebuhr.

Rather, as scholar Joseph Hartman has written, Niebuhr found the Christian doctrine of sin to be "the best available description of the human tendency toward outsized self-importance, partiality, failure, and moral corruption. . . . [B]y sin Niebuhr meant the bent toward self-deceptive pride that infects the corrupted human will. The evidence is everywhere, however we wish to avoid it." Likewise, I conclude from surveying the human condition that sin is an existential reality that somehow infiltrates the life of every human being I have ever known, not least myself.

It is one thing to subscribe to the idea of sin, however, or even to recognize its manifestations in our interpersonal relations. It seems to be quite another to fathom just how widely and deeply it permeates our lives in community and society.

Thus it is a matter of profound concern that many of the same Christians who think the idea of sin is important and accurately descriptive of the human condition are at the same time unable to recognize the pervasive depravity and corruption that infects so much of our national political and economic life. How can anyone be happy about the current state of affairs? Never before have I seen such wanton abuse of power, such brazen exploitation of public office for private benefit, such cynical manipulation of people, data, and facts for personal advantage, such greed, duplicity, and hypocrisy. How can anyone of conscience regard the current situation as morally or politically acceptable?

No doubt many people in public life, and many in corporate board rooms, believe they are acting with good intentions. Indeed, their conscious intentions may be good. But anyone who knows anything about the human condition must realize that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Human tendencies toward "outsized self-importance" and "partiality" and "moral corruption" and "self-deceptive pride" (aka sin) – especially when not subjected to self-criticism, effective constraints, or the scrutiny of others – invariably tend to result in predatory behaviors

and the destruction of our common life.

Founding Father James Madison understood that “if [we] were angels, no government would be necessary.” But our government is now failing us, largely because people who do not adequately understand the human condition have elected candidates whose corruption they fail to repudiate. We will not have the government we need, the society we desire, or the world we cherish, until we elect persons of integrity who would rather do good than be great.

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