

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD

Personally, I should never be surprised with evil when it raises its ugly head! I must constantly remind myself that we live in a fallen world. Tragedy, suffering, pain, hurt, emotional devastation and the evidence of monstrous inhumanity are everywhere. In this *Perspective*, I want to site a few examples of our human fallenness and then focus attention on the solution.

- First, several recent examples of our fallenness.
 1. South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford. A husband and father of four boys, he recently admitted to a year-long affair with a woman from Argentina. This public transparency occurred only after a bizarre and confusing absence where at first his staff announced that he was hiking along the Appalachian trail. He was not! He was in Argentina with his mistress over Father's Day weekend!! His wife, Jenny, and their four sons have sought refuge in their large beachfront cottage outside Charleston. What would possess a man to self-destruct in this manner?
 2. The death of Michael Jackson. Jackson was one of the most gifted musicians and businessmen of our era. Setting tastes in music aside, Jackson changed the course of music history. His status as a pop-culture hero was revolutionary. His music, his dancing and his business skills made him wealthy and culturally powerful. From age 5 on, he was in the spotlight. He never knew what it was like to be a child. Perhaps that is the reason for his "Neverland Ranch" in California. Perhaps that is the reason for his perverted affection for young boys. Whatever the emotional and psychological nature of Jackson's complex personality, it was obvious that he could not handle fame or fortune. It is difficult to see him as anything but a horrific tragedy. Talented, gifted and wealthy, few would stamp across his life the term "success." He self-destructed!
 3. The death of Farrah Fawcett. Beautiful and talented are the terms to describe Farrah Fawcett. Her acting career was like a rocket. Incredibly successful at first, her marriage to Lee Majors was not! Her long-standing cohabitation with actor Ryan O'Neal defined her personal life since Majors. They never married. But for years her body was wracked with cancer. She fought it diligently but lost that fight last week when she died. How incredibly sad to read the stories of her life. All her beauty and her fame could not bring her health. She died a painful and sorrowful death.
 4. The divorce of Jon and Kate Gosselin. Their efforts to raise eight children were chronicled over five seasons on cable TV—and that made them famous. They were married in their early 20s and wanted to have children. Through a procedure that involved injections of fertility drugs combined with intrauterine insemination, they added sextuplets to their twin

daughters. Infidelity on the part of Jon, combined with other aspects of dysfunction in their marriage resulted in the pending divorce. This was Reality TV in the extreme. Whatever the complex and difficult reasons, they could not handle it and they self-destructed.

- Second, as Christians, how do we process such tragic and personal behavior of self-destruction? The only way to do this is to look to Jesus Christ. It is in Him that all suffering and evil are resolved. Let me explain. In Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12 (the prophetic Suffering Servant Song that clearly points to Jesus), we see that Jesus became a victim of evil in order to eliminate evil from this fallen world.
 1. God is present with people in their suffering. Unlike all other world religions, biblical Christianity focuses on Jesus, the Godman, who as second person of the Trinity added to His deity humanity in the incarnation. (Jesus is undiminished deity plus perfect humanity united in one person without any confusion of the attributes. He is fully God and fully man.) As the early theologian of the church (Athanasius) argued, Jesus had to be fully man to be our substitute for sin and fully God to be our perfect substitute. He is the Godman! As the omniscient, omnipotent God, Jesus is present with us in our sufferings. He knows the limitations, the inadequacies and the pain of living in a fallen world (see Hebrews 4:15 and 2:18).
 2. Therefore, He can identify with people in their sufferings. He can identify physically (see Isaiah 52:14 and 53:7). Jesus knows what it is like to suffer physically. He was scourged and beaten ruthlessly. He was crucified on a cross—the most gruesome form of execution ever devised. He knew pain and horrific suffering. As the old hymn of the church says, “No One Understands Like Jesus.” He also can identify with people emotionally (see Isaiah 53:3, 10). In His Passion, Jesus knew incredible loneliness. All of His disciples abandoned Him and He was truly alone. Finally, He can identify with people psychologically (see Isaiah 53:3, 6). When He was hanging on the cross, He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In Gethsemane, he begged the Father that if there was another way for redemption to be secured He wanted to take it; but it was the Father’s will He sought. In His death He experienced abandonment and betrayal. No one understands like Jesus.
 3. In Jesus, the challenge of suffering and evil are resolved. The Father placed all the evil, sin, suffering and dysfunction of this fallen world on Jesus, the Godman. Further, Isaiah 53:4-6 and 8 demonstrate that the Father punished Jesus. Jesus became the victim of God’s wrath. He was our propitiation! That is how much God loves us—He sent Jesus to be punished so that He would not need to punish us. Finally, in Jesus righteousness is made possible (see Isaiah 53:11-12). This is the mysterious exchange of God’s redemptive work. Our sin is placed on Jesus and His righteousness is placed on us! That “exchange” only occurs by faith. We are justified (declared righteousness) by faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work.

How has God resolved suffering and evil? In Jesus Christ, the Godman. He became a victim of evil so that He could eradicate evil, suffering, dysfunction and all pain from this planet. In the new heavens and the new earth, all of this horror will be gone! That is the gospel. That gospel is the answer to the tragedies of Mark Sanford, Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett and Jon and Kate Gosselin.

This *Perspective* is a summary of a message Dr. Eckman has preached in Metro Omaha.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

IRAN AND THE VIOLATION OF SHIITE ISLAMIC TEACHING

Shiite Islam maintains a fundamental teaching that is a foundational dogma of this sect of Islam. That dogma is called *wilayat al-faqih*—the “guardian by a jurist.” This means that, in an Islamic state, a divinely anointed scholar of Islamic law must exercise unquestioned authority over elected officials and the rest of the government. That role today is filled by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who also serves as the *mariaa*, or spiritual guide for many Shiites outside of Iran. You see Khamenei’s face on billboards in Beirut, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for example.

As *Wall Street Journal* reporters, Yaroslav Trofimov and Gina Chon, argue, “[his] moral authority—and the *wilayat al-faqih* ideology that underpins it—has been shaken by [his] handling of Iran’s disputed presidential elections.” With his brazen support of Ahmadinejad, he has departed from his traditional role as a neutral arbiter and consensus-builder. He has hailed Ahmadinejad’s re-election as a “divine assessment” and ordered an end to all protests. In addition, many clerics have sided with the protesters, defying Khamenei. Trofimov and Chon report that “This jolt from the turmoil in Iran is reverberating in Shiite communities throughout the Middle East, from the Levant to Iraq to Saudi Arabia and others. . . . A debate around Shiite clergy’s role in affairs of state has erupted in Lebanon, where a Hezbollah-led coalition lost parliamentary elections to a pro-Western bloc days before the Iranian presidential contest.” Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, warned critics not to criticize the *wilayat al-faqih* ideology: “*Wilayat al-faqih* . . . and such issues are a part of our religious belief. Insulting it is an insult to our religious belief.” But Syed Ali Amine, the Shiite mufti (chief religious authority) of Tyre in south Lebanon, has argued that Nasrallah is trying to halt all discussions about this ideology because it will challenge his authority with Hezbollah: “Despite Nasrallah’s statements, this challenge already happened in the streets of Tehran and several Iranian cities. . . . This is the biggest proof that *wilayat al-faqih* is not part of the religious beliefs, but it is power and political ideology. Those who protested in the streets of Tehran did not offend religion or the Shiite sect.”

What has occurred in Iran has diminished of the role of the mullahs and increased the power and authority of the military. As I mentioned in last week’s *Issues in Perspective*, Admadinejad placed members of the Revolutionary Guard into a majority of the ministries of his government. Iran is no longer a government run by mullahs; it is a military dictatorship. The Supreme Leader, Khamenei, has thrown his support to this military dictatorship, which has resulted in the diminishment of clerical power in Iran. It is a raw grab for power. Iran is no longer the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is a brutal military dictatorship ruled by thugs and a ruthless militia. Perhaps former President Bush was correct when he called Iran one of the members of an “axis of evil.” I doubt very much that our new president will have any success negotiating or “engaging” this brutal band of gangsters, who are on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

See the Trofimov and Chon article in the *Wall Street Journal* (26 June 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

JOHN CALVIN AT 500

The year 2009 is the anniversary of John Calvin's birth on 10 July 1509. For many, he was provocative and controversial. But he was probably the most brilliant of the Reformers during the 16th century Reformation of the Church. Of the second generation of Reformers, John Calvin was born near Paris, France in 1509 and became a Protestant sometime in the late 1520s. Fleeing for his life from Paris, he ended up in Geneva, where, along with William Farel, he led the Genevan Reformation. Although he was forced to briefly flee Geneva, he returned in 1541 and remained there until 1564, the year of his death. He was given the title of "Professor of Sacred Scripture" and began to organize the city around Reformed principles. His most famous work was *The Institute of the Christian Religion*. First published in 1536, it went through several editions, the final and definitive one in 1559. He organized his theology around the principle of God's sovereignty. His successors developed the acrostic TULIP to summarize systematized Calvinism. He also wrote commentaries on virtually every book of the Bible and he had a significant written correspondence with other reformers as well. Calvin also established an academy next to St Peter's church in Geneva, where he taught and gave oversight to the training of the city's children.

Calvin's works went beyond theology, because his system incorporated an entire worldview that involved law, politics, and economics and impacted the Netherlands, France, Scotland, England and eventually the New World, especially America with the coming of the Puritans. In fact, many historians argue that you cannot understand colonial New England if you do not understand Calvinism. The political freedoms that exist in the Netherlands, in Scotland and in America, for example, owe a significant debt to Calvinism. Calvin also argued that since God reigns everywhere, His followers should be entrepreneurs in every strategic institution, including government, civil society, commerce, media, law, education, the church and the arts. He wrote a book entitled, *Vindication against Tyrants*, in which he stressed the limits of political power and that to hold rulers accountable is natural and right. Government must be under God, he declared. Because God is sovereign, Calvin taught that even the simplest of occupations are important to God and that to work is to work for God. Thus was born the famous Protestant work ethic. The famous Calvinist theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands in the late 19th, early 20th century, Abraham Kuyper wrote: "In the rise of your university education . . . in the decentralized . . . character of your local governments. . . in your championship of free speech, and in your unlimited regard for freedom of conscience; in all this. . . it is demonstrable that you owe this to Calvinism and to Calvinism alone."

Calvin is often depicted as a rigid authoritarian at Geneva. Nothing could be further from the truth. While he was in Strasbourg for a time, he met and married a former Anabaptist, Idellete, to whom he had one son, who died after living a few days. Idellete died in 1549 of tuberculosis, leaving him sad and lonely. But Calvin had a pastor's heart, visiting the sick, doing extensive premarital counseling, playing games with children and even visiting hardened criminals in prison. But after Idellete died, Calvin did not take care of himself. He suffered from stomach ulcers and migraine headaches. He died on 27 May 1564 at the age of 54, having burned himself out in service to the church at Geneva. Western Civilization, as well as the church, owes quite a debt to John Calvin.

See John Piper in *World* (4 July 2009), p. 58.