



Men Are NOT Naturally Good

RICHARD S. EMRICH

THE FOUNDING FATHERS of this country (see Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers*) believed in the "universal venality of human nature." Men were by nature selfish, rapacious, and always corrupted by power. Because of this sinful human nature, privilege is misused, and no man or group of men may be trusted with unlimited power.

Once men get power they do not give it up, but will rationalize any extravagances or justify any social conditions to maintain it. This sinfulness is not just in one man, but every man; not just in one group, but every group; and even a superficial view of history reveals that the church, the military, capital, labor, education, men and women — everybody — have misused power. Men always claim to be purer than they are, and always fail to see that their own power is based on some injustice. The Founding Fathers were realists, and remarkably free of sentimentality.

Since power in the hands of men is dangerous, they believed that it must be broken up, fragmented; and so they devised a system of government in which power is not concentrated but dispersed. They created a system of checks and balances.

There are three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial), each checking

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the others. Church and State were separated, not because they wanted a godless state, but because the religious intolerance of Europe revealed that the power of Church and State should not be combined. Power was further diffused by giving rights to the states and local governments; and the final power was placed in the people so that in the last analysis they could "throw the rascals out."

But even the people were not to be trusted, for a majority can tyrannize over a minority, and mobs often deprive individuals of their rights. So the people, who can be fickle, were placed under the limitations of law.

With a realistic view of corrupt human nature, America was founded upon a profound skepticism about all concentrations of power, and in particular governmental power. We believe, then, in our system of government, not because men are good, but because they are not; not because men are pure, but because they are corruptible. Having seen the fruits of this realism about human nature, you will understand it when I say that the teaching of Original Sin is a most fortunate and blessed teaching.

Lack of Spiritual Realism

The cause of political freedom has been weakened in the modern world because we have lost this spiritual realism. For a profound view of human nature, we have substituted the sentimental belief that men are naturally good.

Rather than seeing what every man who studies history ought to be able to see — that men are by nature selfish and only made into something half decent by discipline and the Grace of God — we have attributed human evil to ignorance or the social system under which men live.

But if evil is due to ignorance, then all professors should be saints; and to say that is to laugh. And if evil is due to the social system, then we must ask who corrupted the social system? Do we really believe that men will necessarily be improved by shifting the furniture of society?

Having lost our deep realism about human nature, we have lost also our realism about government and our skepticism about concentrations of power. The fact that governmental power has grown in America is not the deepest danger; because of the growth of the nation and the complexity of our problems, it had to grow. What is alarming is our loss of skepticism about governmental power. But it is all quite logical. If men are good and can be trusted, and if some immediate advantage comes to us from permitting it, why not let the government concentrate power?

It is sobering to remember that our real danger is our sentimental belief that human nature is naturally good. If human nature is good, we don't need either the wisdom of the Constitution or the Grace of God. ♦

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