

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

THE LORD OF THE STORM

Over the weekend of 27-29 June 2008, a terrible, fast-moving storm hit Omaha, Nebraska, where I live. According to the National Weather Service, winds peaked at 115 mph! Many parts of the city looked like a war zone and over 130,000 people were without power. The Bible speaks much of God's work and power evidenced in a storm (see Psalm 83:15; 107:29; Nahum 1:3 and, of course, Jesus in Mark 4:37 and Luke 8:23). The Bible also argues that radical, powerful changes in weather are used by God to teach and to reveal. Elijah made that point in his dealings with King Ahab. Jesus' stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee spoke volumes about His authority and power over nature. Throughout the US this summer, we have witnessed significant storms, flooding, and wildfires in the west due to the dry weather conditions there.

Several brief theological reflections:

1. I cannot and will not be dogmatic on this, but is it possible that God is trying to get our attention? Is it possible that He is screaming to us through these examples of extreme weather that we are not autonomous, nor independent of our reliance on Him? Is it possible that He is trying to teach us that we are indeed utterly dependent on Him?
2. Modern living is dependent entirely on technology: Computers, cell phones, I-pods, let alone all the appliances that need electricity. When the power company goes down due to a storm, we are virtually helpless, at least in terms of our technology. A storm like the one that hit Omaha reminded me of this reality about our lifestyle. We are not really that autonomous at all. We are wholly dependent on technology for our perceived autonomy, but take the power away and we see how totally dependent on God we really are.
3. A summer like the one we are having now also demonstrates how interdependent we are as a people. When power is out or when there is flooding, people begin helping one another. We become aware that we need each other, that we can actually help one another through this catastrophe. That is not a bad thing to learn!
4. Finally, a closing thought: In Omaha over that tragic week, we heard many speak of "being without power," referring of course to electrical power. But, perhaps a better way to exegete that phrase is that we truly "are without power" in the ultimate sense of that term "power." God has ultimate power and He demonstrated that again in the recent storm, in the flooding of the Mississippi River and in the horrific fires in the West. If we learn that lesson of dependence on His power, we have learned a valuable lesson indeed.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

FAITH AND AMERICAN CULTURE

The Pew Forum recently released a report entitled, the “US Religious Landscape Survey.” It is truly a remarkable document, for it reveals the significant impact the Postmodern worldview has had on American thinking and practice when it comes to religious faith and belief. For example, the study shows that Americans are a religious people: 92% believe in God; 74% believe in life after death; and 63% say their respective scriptures are the word of God. But the study also demonstrates a broad trend toward tolerance and that many Americans hold a belief that is directly contradicted by the doctrines of their professed faith. Indeed, 70% of Americans affiliated with a religious denomination said they agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” Incredibly, 57% of evangelicals agreed with that statement, as did 79% of Catholics. About 13% of evangelicals do not believe in a personal God! But the survey likewise confirmed that those who are most conservative in their theology attend worship services most frequently, and for them abortion and gay rights issues remain important issues. But there is also great confusion: While 78% of Americans say that there are “absolute standards of right and wrong,” only 29% say that they “rely on their religion to delineate these standards.”

As with the first report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, this report sheds light on the religious values and practices of Americans. This second study reveals more about the unaffiliated in America. Neela Banerjee of the *New York Times* summarizes this part of the report: “Like the overwhelming majority of Americans, 70% of the unaffiliated said they believed in God, including one of every five people who identified themselves as atheist and more than half of those who identified as agnostic.” Further, 9% of atheists report that they are skeptical of evolution. Atheistic creationists? At first reading, this sounds absurd. How can an atheist affirm any kind of a belief in God? The depth of personal belief is obviously absent in many of these Americans. Further, this new survey demonstrates a broadening of belief that a majority of people in the US will go to heaven. The Pew study and other scholars who have studied such findings conclude that this incredibly broad view of salvation and heaven reflects more about doctrinal ignorance than deep-seated beliefs. Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, writes: “It could be that people are not very well educated and they are not expressing mature theological points of view. It could also be a form of bland secularism. The real challenge to religious leaders is not to become more entrenched in their views, but to navigate the idea of what their religion is all about and how it relates to others.” The survey also tried to determine how religious affiliation and practice shaped peoples’ views on culture and politics. As with the earlier Pew study, it showed that Americans who prayed more frequently and attended worship services more often tended to be more conservative. For example, 73% of American evangelicals who attend services once a week believe that abortion should be illegal in most or all cases. Also, 57% of evangelicals agree that “government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt.” More than half believe that stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost.

In short, perhaps this study illustrates the inadequacy of a survey approach to understanding religious beliefs and practices. However, no matter how one parses this study, there is confusion in the land. Perhaps at the vital center of that confusion is that typically Americans see little connection between their personal belief system and their ethical practices on a daily basis. Americans, including evangelicals, tend to compartmentalize their lives: I may believe

something about God and about His ethical law, but that belief has no relevance to my daily life. Consider some of these examples:

- First, at Gloucester High School in Massachusetts, a group of teenage girls apparently made a pact to get pregnant. They had romanticized the whole idea of being pregnant and an unwed mother. As this summer of 2008 begins, 17 girls at Gloucester are pregnant. Some are calling this the “*Juno* effect,” referring to a popular 2008 movie that tended to glamorize unwed motherhood. What at first seemed like a positive anti-abortion message from this movie, has turned out to be an unintended consequence of free sex and glamorized unwed motherhood. Gloucester is a heavily Catholic community and has always frowned on public promotion of birth control. The sex-ed classes preach abstinence but also that teen mothers are encouraged to take their children to a free on-site day care center. The school and the community has frowned upon the whole idea of handing out birth control pills to high school girls. There is a disconnect between the strong Catholic faith of these girls and their actions.
- Second, consider the practice of homosexuality and AIDS. A recent study demonstrates that the number of young homosexual men being newly diagnosed with HIV infection is rising by 12% per year, with the steepest trend among young black men. The American culture has accommodated to the gay lifestyle, even though all major religions make an ethical judgment that homosexuality is wrong. But because of the broad appeal of Postmodern tolerance, it is almost impossible to publicly make an ethical judgment about this lifestyle. Hence, the strong connection between HIV infection and the gay lifestyle. It is almost at an epidemic proportion among young males, as this study shows. Again, a disconnect between a clear ethical guideline and the lifestyle choice. Young men will thereby die because of this disconnect. Tragically, this 12% increase in HIV infection among gay young men is a metaphor for the ethical crisis in America.
- Finally, consider the state of the mainline Protestant denominations in America. Most of these are giving serious consideration to breaking with the clear teaching of Scripture on the matter of homosexuality and permit clergy with homosexual partners, and to sanction blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples. For example, within the United Church of Christ, theological liberals are in clear control and the denomination has endorsed gay marriages for both church and society. The Evangelical Lutheran Church recently released a draft of a new sexuality policy. It sidesteps the Bible on this issue and concludes that there is no church consensus on the morality of “committed same-gender relationships.” This document will be reviewed and then the 2009 assembly will determine whether to allow actively gay and lesbian pastors. The United Methodist Church has passed an amendment that declares homosexual practice is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Although a significant minority of American Methodists disagrees now with that statement, about 40% of Methodists are overseas and they are more conservative. The Episcopal Church accepts gay clergy and same-sex rituals (e.g., Gene Robinson, Episcopalian bishop with a gay partner). But American Episcopalians are at a loggerhead with the larger Anglican Communion, which is witnessing a struggle between the southern and the northern hemisphere Anglicans, with the south being far more conservative. All of these Protestant denominations are in clear violation of Biblical ethics on sexuality and marriage. Could there be a connection between this ambiguity and the decline in their numbers?

- Episcopal church down 34%
- Evangelical Lutheran Church down 16%
- Presbyterian Church USA down 25%
- United Church of Christ down 38%.
- United Methodist Church down 25%.

In conclusion, the Pew study identifies a confusion and lack of clarity when it comes to theological understanding and personal beliefs. That confusion, this *Perspective* has argued, spills over into several ethical practices and lifestyles within America. That confusion will continue until evangelicals and Protestant mainlines reaffirm a deep-seated commitment to God's Word and the clarity of its ethical teaching. May that deep-seated revival come soon!

See Neela Banerjee on the Pew study in the *New York Times* (24 June 2008); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (27 June 2008); "Breakpoint" (26 June 2008); Associated Press story on the Pew study in the *Omaha World Herald* (24 June 2008); Kathleen Kingsbury in *Time* (30 June 2008); David Brown on the HIV infection among young gays in the *Washington Post* (27 June 2008); Richard Ostling, "The Unending Debate Over Gays" in *World* (5/12 April 2008).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

ISLAM AND THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN

One of the strongest apologetics for genuine biblical Christianity is the liberating effect Jesus has had on the social position of women. The same cannot be said of women in a typical Islamic society. Broadly speaking, women are not considered equal and do not enjoy the same liberties and freedoms as men. Consider this example: The practice of purdah in many fundamentalist Islamic cultures.

Purdah is the practice of the seclusion of women from public observation by covering their bodies from head to toe. It is also a state of social isolation, which confines women to their homes. In Muslim cultures, these facts are known:

- Purdah is seen as a protection of the dignity of women.
- In some cases, segregation is taken so seriously that houses are surrounded with 8 to 10 foot high purdah walls.
- Purdah is frequently carried to such extremes that women suffer from softening of bones, eczema and ulcers due to lack of sunlight.
- In Bangladesh, women have been attacked with acid because they were brave enough to be seen in public, transgressing the traditional boundaries of purdah.
- Purdah includes the restriction of women's access to medical care.

The Bible teaches that all women are created in the image of God and are spiritual equals with men (see Genesis 1:26ff and Galatians 3:28). It is a monstrous tragedy that women are denied basic God-given rights in many Muslim societies. Make it one of your goals to pray that God will liberate Muslim women from the unbiblical and ungodly restrictions imposed on them.

See "[30 Days of Prayer for the Voiceless](#)," day 8.