

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

A GROWING PERCEPTION IN AMERICA: OUR INSTITUTIONS ARE FAILING

Over the past several months, I have been noticing that there is a growing perception within our nation that our institutions are failing. This perception of institutional failure is potentially lethal for our civilization and our way of life. It could lead to a period of national renewal or it could lead to our further demise as a civilization. Institutional failure is the topic of this first *Perspective*.

- First of all, why is this perception of institutional failure growing? Is there genuine evidence of such failure? As David Brooks has commented, “Americans have lost faith in their institutions. During the great moments of social reform, at least 60% of Americans trusted government to do the right thing most of the time. Now, only a quarter have that same kind of trust. The country is evenly divided about President Obama, but state governments are in disrepute and confidence in Congress is at withering lows. As Frank Newport of the Gallup organization noted in his year-end wrap-up: ‘Americans have less faith in their elected representatives than ever before.’” Government has become so involved in every area of our lives that it has lost its fundamental mission. Columnist Peggy Noonan observes that “our federal government now does 10 million things, many of them not so well. Its attention is scattered. It loses sight of the essentials, which is part of the reason underpants bombers wind up on airplanes.” Also consider American perceptions about Wall Street. Confidence in Wall Street is at an all-time low as well. Public perceptions focus on greed, self-centeredness and huge bonuses at the expense of the public. Many Americans perceive Wall Street as the central cause of the recession in America. Also consider the church. In a recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, an astonishing result was documented: Seven percent of Americans say they “attend religious services in someone’s home.” This statistic is rather significant for it defies all mainstream conceptions of what it means to go to church. For this 7%, the established and recognized ways of worship are simply not working anymore. Indeed, Gary Laderman, professor of American religious history at Emory University, has argued that “What’s going on is a kind of deinstitutionalization of religious life.” Further, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna research group, contends that many Christians are expressing “disappointment that the congregational models have become consumeristic.” He goes on that “House church” [aka home church, simple church, organic church] is “the new expression of hippie Christianity.” The same thing is occurring within Roman Catholicism, where there are a burgeoning number of house churches where the mass is said with the help of a priest. Lisa Miller, *Newsweek* columnist suggests that “As people reject a one-size-fits-all approach, they’re yearning for a church that’s more homemade.” When the institutions of civilization do not

work (or at least are perceived not to work), new institutions or a significant modification of these institutions will occur. In my opinion, that is what is occurring within American civilization.

- Second, consider the Tea Party movement within America. David Brooks writes that “The Obama administration is premised on the conviction that pragmatic federal leaders with professional expertise should have the power to implement programs to solve the country’s problems. Many Americans do not have faith in that sort of centralized expertise or in the political class generally.” It is this very mindset that is energizing the tea party movement. In general, this movement is really defined by what they are against. Brooks writes that “They are against the concentrated power of the educated class. They believe big government, big business, big media and the affluent professionals are merging to form a self-serving oligarchy—with bloated government, unsustainable deficits, high taxes and intrusive regulation.” The tea party movement is especially popular among independents. The Rasmussen organization confirms that among independents, the tea party ideas are resonating. The tea party movement manifests among a significant minority that American institutions are failing, or at least are perceived as failing. Smart, resourceful people in leadership should not ignore this movement. It could possibly shape the next decade of American civilization.
- Third, permit me one final comment. Fundamentally, God has created three central institutions, each with clear stewardship responsibilities defined in Scripture. Each institution is a dimension of God’s common grace. If they function properly according to His defined parameters, there will be common grace blessing. If they do not function according to His parameters, there will be failure. Those institutions are the family, the state and the church. From almost any vantage point, those three institutions are not functioning well within our civilization. This is not only a perception; this is truth. It will be important for us to understand that the renewal of American civilization must begin with the renewal of these three institutions—along the lines of God’s clear mandates defined in His Word. Perhaps America is indeed at a crossroads. Renewal will not come from Washington, D.C. It will come from His church, re-energized by the clear teachings of His Word. May God in His grace renew our civilization.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (5 January 2010); Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (2-3 January 2010); and Lisa Miller in *Newsweek* (11 January 2010).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

BRIT HUME, TIGER WOODS AND POSTMODERN PLURALISM

On *Fox News Sunday* nearly two weeks ago, former news anchor Brit Hume made this startling declaration: “Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer. Whether he can recover as a person, I think is a very open question. The Tiger Woods that emerges, once the news value dies out of this scandal, the extent to which he can recover, seems to me, depends on his faith. He’s said to be a Buddhist. I don’t think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you

can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.” The response was predictable. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* called him a “sanctimonious busybody” engaged in “telling people what religious beliefs they ought to have.” MSNBC’s David Shuster called Hume’s religious advice “truly embarrassing.” Countless blogs and emails have poured forth with even more vehemence and vitriol. What is going on here? Why such a response to some rather basic comments of comfort and encouragement to a man who desperately needs some religious counsel? Let’s think about this together.

- First, the situation with Brit Hume is really about Jesus Christ. As Hume argued in a recent interview with *Christianity Today*, “It is simply a fact of life that the two most explosive words in the English language appear to be Jesus Christ.” What is being attacked is the exclusive message of biblical Christianity. John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 make that claim for exclusive truth rather clear. There are not multiple paths to forgiveness and cleansing; there is only one—Jesus! This Postmodern world does not want to hear about exclusive truth, especially exclusive theological truth. What the Postmodern world wants is for all matters of faith to be privatized. It can never be public or even stated publically. Matters of personal faith cannot be in the public square and, if they surface, it becomes a matter of tolerance—or rather intolerance. For the Postmodern cultural critical, Brit Hume is a perfect example of bigoted, judgmental intolerance. Jesus made it very clear that He came to bring division and controversy. The name of Jesus almost always brings a visceral reaction in this Postmodern culture—and Brit Hume’s comments produced that predictable response. Brit Hume came to faith in 1998 when his son, Sandy, committed suicide at age 28. He found a life preserver, so to speak, in the Christian faith. As columnist Michael Gerson has observed, “[Hume] offered that life preserver to another drowning man [Tiger Woods]. Whatever your view of Hume’s beliefs, he could have no motive other than concern for Woods himself.”
- Second, what is it about Postmodernism that causes such a visceral reaction to Hume’s comforting words? The answer is to examine Postmodernism as a worldview. There are two relevant aspects of this worldview that apply here. (1) **A Radical Relativism.** Here is the center of postmodernism: The doctrine of the autonomous self living in community. In postmodernism, the self defines reality. There are virtually no boundaries for behavior and there are few authority figures that matter anymore. For example, the 7 May 2000 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* devoted an entire issue to this concept of autonomy. Autonomy impacts all aspects of culture—entertainment, business, law, leisure and religion. I, the self, define all aspects of reality. There really is nothing transcendent that defines it for me; I am autonomous. Such a claim has a haunting ring of familiarity to it, for the book of Judges has as its refrain, “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” When individual autonomy is mixed with America’s deep-seated commitment to rights and liberties, one sees how lethal this becomes in areas of sexuality, ethics and morality. There are no boundaries or absolutes. It is the right of the individual that is absolute. This frames discussion on the key cultural issues of our day—abortion, homosexuality, and cohabitation before marriage, genetic and reproductive technologies and their use, and the right to die with dignity. When “every man does what is right in his own eyes,” the limits to freedom and rights are boundless. A 2002 Zogby International poll of college seniors demonstrates the impact of this radical relativism. Nearly 73% of students surveyed said that when their professors taught ethics, the normal message was that uniform standards of right and wrong do not exist.

(Cited in the John Leo article, *US News and World Report* (22 July 2002), p. 14.) Instead, what is right or wrong depends on differences in each individual and in the individual's culture. So, if all beliefs are equally valid, there is nothing to debate. Nothing separates personal "truth" from self-delusion. If students currently in college are convinced that ethical standards are simply a matter of individual choice, they are less likely to be reliably ethical in their careers. (2) **A Radical Pluralism.** America is currently a culture where there is a smorgasbord of religious choice. No worldview has a corner on truth. There are many "truths" and, since there is no certainty anyway, it does not matter which worldview you choose. Postmodernism stands for a radical pluralism and universalism. Since all religions are social constructs and none is inherently more superior than others, then all religions are equally valid and all paths lead to God. Religion, says the Postmodernist, is not based on something external but stems from internal needs and subjective personal experience. Religious people are therefore not discerning truth but rather are the source of their own truths, says the Postmodernist. Something is true if it is true for me! Such a tenet explains why Postmodern jargon is so pervasive in our culture. We use terms like "diversity," "inclusion," and "multiculturalism" as positives reinforcing the claim that there is no truth and no one can claim truth. Everyone's opinion is equally valid and worthy. Hence, increasingly Christians are bombarded with charges of bigotry and hate mongers because of the claim that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6) and that Jesus is the only name under heaven by which men are saved (Acts 4:12). This is exclusivistic truth penetrating an inclusive world. It is indeed exclusivistic truth, embodied in Jesus and proclaimed as such by His followers.

See [Christianity Today.com](http://ChristianityToday.com) (7 January 2010); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (8 January 2010); and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 1-9.