

In the summer of 1971, Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment to determine the impact of prison on human behavior. A mock prison was set up in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Seventy-five students responded to an ad offering \$15 a day for participation in the simulation. Twenty-four were chosen and randomly assigned roles as guards and prisoners. The simulation was designed to test a theory that prison abuse was inherent in the personalities of some people. In orientation, the guards were prohibited from harming prisoners physically; however, humiliation and depersonalization of prisoners was built-in to the experiment. Educated middle class white males with no criminal record were expected to simulate a prison without developing typical prison behavior, with only a few minor exceptions. To enhance authority, the guards wore khaki uniforms and sunglasses and carried wooden batons. The prisoners wore ill-fitting smocks and sock caps. They were assigned numbers printed front and back on their smocks. On entrance to the prison they became numbers instead of names. A small chain was locked around one ankle to remind them even in sleep that they were prisoners.

The experiment was planned to run for two weeks. In a matter of hours, the guards began to find ways to abuse prisoners. A third of the guards exhibited sadistic behavior. Some prisoners were defiant at first, but most became submissive. Five had to be released because of depression, one with psychotic symptoms. Zimbardo noted changes in his own behavior: "I began to talk, walk, and act like a rigid institutional authority figure more concerned about the security of 'my prison' than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care." After six days, Zimbardo's fiancé, a graduate student, was allowed to interview the participants. She was appalled at the unhuman conditions and the unethical behavior she observed. She convinced Zimbardo to abort the experiment immediately. He noted that she was the only one of fifty observers who registered any objection.

In retrospect, numerous critics have judged the prison experiment to be ethically flawed, poorly conducted, and scientifically weak. It would not be allowed today. In spite of obvious problems, Zimbardo believes he learned something important about human behavior: that evil is not the private property of evil people. The situation is primary. Given the right (or wrong) situation, Zimbardo believes that ordinary people have the capacity to do things they would normally judge unthinkable. In 2004, he testified for the defense in the court martial of Ivan Frederick, a guard at *Abu Graib* prison, that without proper training and supervision few individuals can resist the powerful situational pressures of a prison to become abusive.

What is the human nature? Are people born to do evil or good, or do the circumstances determine our behavior? These are not just theological questions. They involve our economics and politics as well as ethics. Just how much control do any of us have over our circumstances in life or the integrity of values to decide against the circumstances?

In a 1887 letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, the British historian and moralist Lord Acton stated his view of the human condition: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We usually stop there, but Acton also said, "Great men are almost always bad men." Whether the power belongs to political office, the control of an American prison guard, or the Kapos in a Nazi concentration camp, persons harbor the potential to distort judgment and compromise ethics.

A century ago Walter Rauschenbush was serving a German immigrant population in Hell's Kitchen New York. He saw the essence of sin in selfishness and identified the "profit motive" of American capitalism as the catalyst. Evil was not a private business between a person and God. Rauschenbush learned to look beyond the particular moralism of the day to the causes of evil in society. He saw a group function encouraged by community values. The robber barons of his time were as criminal in their behavior as the common thieves serving time in penitentiaries. He complained that the wealthy prayed for the poor on Sunday and preyed on the poor on Monday. The Counsel attributed to Paul seemed to point to the early 20th century: "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1Tim 6:10).

Contemporary of Rauschenbush, Max Weber was a German economist and politician. He attributed capitalism to Protestant, primarily Puritan Calvinist, influence. He coined the term "Protestant work ethic" and located its origin in the emphasis on hard work, frugality, and opposition to wasteful living. Giving to charity was discouraged; it supported laziness and beggary. The prevalent theology justified accumulation of wealth as a sign of divine favor and indicative of the theory that people get what they deserve in life. We have encountered this theology in recent years in the "prosperity gospel" teaching that God wants you to be rich, beginning with the preacher of this gospel.

John Calvin's theology identified human evil as a universal condition called *total depravity*. His theology crossed the sea with the American Puritans and came out in the preaching of Jonathon Edwards. Calvin began with the base line of human evil, that all of us are depraved and deserving of eternal punishment by a just and holy God. Only by sheer grace some of us claim salvation by the incomprehensible election of God. I always associate Calvin's view of human nature in Isaac Watts' old hymn "Alas and Did My Savior Die." For centuries we sang "would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." Only in recent years have the words been softened to "sinners such as I."

Paul blamed the whole problem of sin on Adam. Because human evil is universal—"all have sinned"—the origin must be at the root of human history. Although Adam is a symbolic person even in Old Testament reference, he is a point of reference on the beginning of things. So, Adam is not only the biblical point of departure for human life, life in the image of God, he is the point of reference for the beginning of sin. Long before anyone knew about genetics, Augustine associated the transmission of universal evil through the physical procreation of the human race. He justified the baptism of infants on inherited sin, the guilt of Adam with which we are born.

We have been so bombarded by condemnation for so long in churches, some have seen the problem of evil in the arrogance of thinking that some of us are

better than others and have a right to condemnation. Especially in light of the religion wars of history and the 9/11 attack, religion has been seen as the problem rather than the solution. In recent years, the “new atheists” have accused religion as the cause of human evils. Largely because of the high claims for science and reason to save humanity, Chris Hedges described the new atheists under the title *When Atheism Becomes Religion*. They claim that if we would learn to follow science and reason, the human race could overcome its evils. One only needs to note that many of the atrocities committed in the Nazi Jewish Holocaust were done by medical people in the name of science. Don Smarto taught criminal justice at the very conservative Christian school Wheaton College. He decided to repeat Zimbardo’s experiment with better safeguards and selecting volunteers from the evangelical Christian student community. Within the first hour the same problem of authoritarian abuse began. Smarto concluded, “Anyone is capable of doing anything under the right circumstances.”

Confession is the beginning of salvation. This whole line of thinking is terribly depressing. Most of us live in constant need of encouragement rather than condemnation. We need to keep in mind the word of the gospel, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). The reason for experiments in social behavior is to get at the truth, and the theology of universal sin has roots in biblical teaching going back to the Old Testament prophets. One of the more controversial sacraments of the Catholic Church is confession. The theology at the base of confession is universal sin. Priests, bishops, and popes are expected to have a father confessor to share their most intimate thoughts and to seek forgiveness. Without debate about the particulars of the Catholic confessional, let us consider that confession is better than denial of the reality in which we live.

The power of confession is a safeguard against arrogance. The problem with autocracy in human government is the lack of accountability. Power corrupts when it is unchecked and uncontrolled. The genius of the democratic system in which we live is the basis of accountability in checks and balances. Somehow the founding fathers of this nation, as skeptical as many were about religion, were keenly aware of the danger of unchecked human power.

Demonic evil is the misrepresentation of God. What happens to Adam and Eve if they eat the forbidden fruit? They become as gods. I do not believe in spirit beings who possess and overpower our will and cause us to do things in opposition to our values. The devil made me do it may work in stand up comedy, but it fails in human responsibility. I do believe that we do things in groups we would never consider doing alone and that we are all subject to failure to live up to the standard we know to be right and good.

The Gospel according to Paul, Romans, is not without merit. Paul declares that God’s grace grows to meet the challenge of human evil. The bad stuff we don’t want to hear has a ring of truth that we need to hear. The good news of the gospel of Christ is without merit if we cannot meet head-on the bad side of the gospel, the human tendency to behave badly.