

What's Happened to Community Spirit?

by James L. Payne

Are people as considerate as they used to be? Drive through any large city and you don't even have to get out of your car to know the answer. You can see the vandalism that has destroyed property, the graffiti that insults the passerby, the litter and trash thoughtlessly thrown, the steel grillwork to check the press of crime. The occasional jogger runs with an attack dog.

What we see in the streets is reflected at other levels of society. Professions that used to be characterized by an ethic of service and self-sacrifice, such as nursing and teaching, are now known for strikes where members abandon their responsibilities for personal gain. Bankers and brokers overlook their fiduciary duties to make personal "killings." Even our top "public servants," the Congressmen, are a national scandal, grasping for higher incomes and benefits at the expense of the community. Today, everybody seems to be reading *Self* magazine.

What can be done about all this selfishness? How can we move toward a society of helpful, caring individuals? Several generations ago, a lot of reform-minded people thought they had the solution. It was government. Government was supposed to amplify our community-oriented impulses in helpful, compassionate programs. Government was supposed to check our self-centered disregard for others and make us behave nicely. Obviously, something is fundamentally wrong with this theory. Over the past century, government helping and correcting programs have

multiplied many times over. Yet instead of a society of considerate, sensitive individuals, we have an alarming jungle. What happened?

The answer is that reformers didn't understand government. They overlooked the fact that government is a coercive institution, that it works by using physical force to push people around: guns, billy clubs, handcuffs, and jails. Once you realize that, you begin to see why government action undermines community spirit. Forcing people to do things, even nice things, does not make them nice; it makes them resentful and self-centered.

Suppose your neighbor has a barking dog that is bothering you. If you take a gun and threaten to kill him and his dog, he will probably do something to end the barking. But is he going to feel helpful toward you in the future? If your battery is dead some freezing night, is he going to get out of bed to give you a jump start?

The same principle applies when "society" uses force. Take a simple example. In 1988, the Internal Revenue Service levied 2,153,000 accounts of some 1,133,000 taxpayers. That is, it sent banks and employers letters demanding money belonging to the taxpayer. Employers and banks complied because the IRS threatened to use force against them if they didn't.

How did these million-plus taxpayers feel about this? They went to the bank and discovered that their savings were gone, or their checking account was wiped out and their checks were bouncing. Perhaps the levy was an IRS mistake (there are hundreds of thousands of these), but even if it wasn't, the individual is bound to be angry. Political philosophers may say this seizure process is necessary to enable the government to help the

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needy, but our taxpayer is not a philosopher. He feels "ripped off," robbed by "society."

What, then, will be his attitude toward "society"? As he drives home, is he going to be patient and courteous toward other drivers? Does he feel that it's his duty to make the world a better place for others? More than likely, he is looking for an opportunity to get back at the impersonal "they" who injured him, by defrauding the phone company, or a department store, or a stranger with whom he does business. And so continues the cycle of selfishness and harm, initiated by the government's use of force.

Federal, state, and local governments are now making wide use of coercion to produce desired behavior in a myriad of activities. Force is being used to dictate hiring and firing decisions. Force is being used to prevent all but officially approved individuals from operating schools, restaurants, bus lines, clinics, beauty salons, and scores of other enterprises. Force is being used, through the government's legal liability system, to enable individuals to pursue real and imagined

grievances against businesses, professionals, and neighbors.

Each instance in which force or the threat of force makes someone do what he didn't want to do adds to the cynicism. The individual is increasingly persuaded that he lives in a hostile world and must protect himself. And so he indoctrinates his children, his friends and acquaintances: you've got to watch out for number one. Talk about helpfulness and self-sacrifice is for saps. The message spreads, even to Congressmen.

How to reverse the process? The answer is simple, but many will have to swallow hard to accept it: recognize what government is. Make explicit the fact that government involves the use of physical force. When, for example, Congress takes up the issue of access for the handicapped, don't say, "We should use government to help the handicapped." Say what you mean: "We should use coercion to help the handicapped."

Once we recognize what government really is, it will be easy to notice how we undermine civility by resorting to it. □

Ezekiel's Job

by Ridgway K. Foley, Jr.

Basic distinctions often prove elusive. Whether by virtue of inattention, human resistance, lack of comprehension, or some indefinable perversity of life, we human beings often fail to grasp and act upon the most central differences both of concept and deed. As a result, all manner of disappointing and disturbing events take place, inasmuch as one misstep at the outset of a journey can foreordain an unexpected destination.

Consider one such essential distinction: personal belief and action premised upon a set moral code versus the coercive imposition of one's moral strictures upon another, unwilling human being. The dissimilarity is fundamental and not particularly obscure; yet, the blurring and commingling of these two very different precepts (and their attendant activities) have vexed men and women across time.

Ezekiel provides insights into this common and perplexing situation. Of course, it is not "with it" to relate modern problems to some old fellow who lived long ago and far away; in the skeptical and intolerant climate of today, so lacking in the civility of open thought, it just does not meet the modern dictates of intellectual exclusivity to refer to the Bible, to Christianity, or to any traditional religion—particularly one with established attitudes of "right" and "wrong." Yet the Book of Ezekiel lays a firm foundation from which all of us, no matter our religious persuasion, may investigate the differences between proper belief and proper respect for the beliefs of others. After all, the es-

sence of the human condition remains unchanged despite the passage of centuries.

Recall the backdrop of history. The Jewish people received the gift of insight into the very marrow of the individual—the ability to choose, to evaluate, and to select among alternatives, and in so doing to affect not only the actor's destiny but also the course of a lineal world history: "... I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed shall live. . . ." (Deut. 30:15,19)

These ancient men and women displayed the same features and failings as we do. At times they made venal, undesirable, and unwise choices, and as a result suffered the inexorable consequences which flowed from their conduct. As a nation, ancient Israel waxed and waned: Things worked out well when the people adhered to the Decalogue, and bad times followed their evil exploits. God endowed men with freedom, even the freedom to forsake Him and to choose wrongly, for freedom necessarily entails the freedom to fail. Although the ineluctable law of cause-and-consequence foretold unpleasant sequels from inappropriate acts, the Jews of old seemed hell-bent on the eternal folly of trying to beat the house.

Now and then, when the Hebrew nation deviated sufficiently from the proper standard of behavior, God sent a prophet, a man assigned to remind His flock of the rules of the game and to warn them of the inevitable lunacy of trying to avoid responsibility for their wickedness. Sometimes the body politic listened; more often, the people ignored, joshed, or abused the prophet.

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