

## "People are Basically Good" - Evidence to the Contrary by Rich Deem

### Introduction

Many present day philosophies and worldviews claim the people are basically good and that bad or immoral behavior is the exception. The Bible states quite the opposite - that people are selfish and sinful as soon as they are able to express that kind of behavior. Because of this fact, people need a Savior in order to be acceptable to God. In contrast, the implication of the "people are good" worldview is that good people don't need a Savior. This paper will show that the biblical worldview and not the "people are good" worldview matches reality.

### Human atrocities

If you examine the atrocities perpetrated by people within the last century, you find a huge number of murders. Adolph Hitler killed 6 million Jews prior to and during the second World War. Joseph Stalin killed 20 million Soviet citizens between 1929 and 1939 because they were not politically correct. Mao Tse-tung killed 34 to 62 million Chinese during the Chinese civil war of the 1930s and 1940s. Pol Pot, the leader of the Marxist regime in Cambodia, Kampuchea, in the 1970's killed over 1.7 million of his own people. These do not include all the people killed in "legitimate" wars.

Many would object to this analysis, since they could claim that these atrocities were perpetrated by only a few individuals. However, these individuals could not have done anything if they were not backed by others, who agreed with their "values." The vast majority of Germans willingly followed Adolph Hitler and gave their consent to his policy to get rid of the "Jewish problem."

### Communism

A great experiment was performed in the last century that definitively demonstrated the sinfulness of entire generations among an entire people group. The experiment was called Communism. I am not referring to the attempt by Communists to spread Marxism throughout the World through civil wars. What I am referring to is the reaction of the Russian people themselves to the "equality" created under Communism. The basic tenet of Communism is that all people would share equally in the resources of the country. On the surface, that sounds good. In fact, this is what was practiced by the Christian church during the first century. The problem with Communism was not the philosophy *per se*, but the realization by the people that they would not be rewarded for hard work. It didn't matter how you worked, you got the same reward. At this point, the sinfulness of man stepped into the picture and everybody in the Soviet Union became lazy and indifferent to their responsibilities. This lack of accountability has led to an alcoholism rate of 40% and an abortion rate of over 50%! The sinfulness of all humans was definitely demonstrated in an entire society, so much so, that it led to the eventual economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Communism failed because humans are basically sinful, lazy, and self-centered. The only reason why "Communism" succeeded in the first century Christian Church was that the people had been transformed by the power of Jesus Christ.

### People in the U.S.A.

You might counter that we in the United States are not like the Russians. After all, we are industrious people who work hard. I would agree that we are not generally a lazy people. However, sin can be expressed in a number of ways. Let me give you a couple examples. I am the backup driver for one of the van pools at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Last week, I drove the van every day. In order to get to the carpool lane, we must cross four lanes of heavy, rush hour traffic. The primary van pool driver uses the "stealth" approach to changing lanes. He doesn't use his turn indicator, since people almost always will not let you in if they think that you are going to take the place in front of them. I use the turn indicator, just to get an idea of what percentage of people are kind enough to let you into "their" space. In the entire week of driving (48 lane changes), there was only one instance where a driver intentionally let me go in front of him. Now, being rude and selfish is not what most people would consider to be a great sin. However, the rudeness is an indicator of the hearts of the people. It is obvious from this example that the vast majority of people in Los Angeles are not "basically good," but sinful and selfish.

Let me give you another example, from a group of people who are supposed to be committed to raising their children with strong moral values. In October, 2001, I went to Camp Cherry Valley with a group of 140 Webelos Scouts and 110 adults (mostly parents of these Cub Scouts). At meal time, there were two lines, equally divided to be served their food. However, your position in line did not correspond to when you would get your food. Every time we lined up for meals, there were children and adults who let their friends/parents/children cut in front of them. Parents were actively encouraging their children to cut in front of other people. It was so bad that our group ended

up at the end of the line every time. However, this was not the end of the selfish behavior. When we got into the dining hall, all the seats were either occupied or "reserved," even though there were enough seats for all Scouts and parents. We were forced to eat outside at every meal. Even though these "good" parents were "committed" to teaching their children strong moral values, they were actually teaching their children to be selfish and rude. And these are people who, if you asked them, would say that they were Christians. Our moral values have changed to such a degree that most people do not even recognize that their own behavior is immoral.

I recently went to a Promise Keepers "Turn the Tide" convention in Anaheim, California. One of the Speakers was Matthew Barnett, the "Senior" Pastor at the Dream Center (an inner city church in South-Central Los Angeles). He was relating some encounters he experienced as he was building his church in a neighborhood that was characterized by gangs, prostitutes, and pimps. One prostitute (who is now a Christian) related the story of her heartache in the big city. She came to Hollywood to become a movie star, but fell into drugs and prostitution. When she became pregnant, she was told to get an abortion, but chose to keep the baby. When her baby was nine months old, the mother's pimp came to find out why she wasn't making as much money as she had been. When he saw the baby, he blamed his reduced income on the baby, pulled out a gun, and shot the baby in the head while being held in her mother's arms. When I heard the story, I totally lost it. How could anybody be so evil? The only rational explanation for such kinds of evil is that there are powerful evil forces working in the lives of those who have completely rejected any absolute basis for morality.

On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by terrorists, killing thousands of innocent people. The attack on the United States was about human greed, desire for power, hatred and sinfulness. The idea that "people are basically good" is a humanistic fallacy of monumental proportions. Yes, religion is the surest way to hell. Relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the only answer to man-made religion that preaches hatred and violence.

### **Experimental evidence of human depravity**

**The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature** A number of psychologists have performed controlled experiments that demonstrate the level of depravity that people can stoop to. In the age of human subject's rights and human subjects review boards, none of these experiments would be allowed to be performed today, because of the extreme stress placed upon many of the subjects. However, at the time, most of the experiments were reproduced by other investigators with similar results, so we know that they represent true human reactions and capacity for evil.

#### **Stanley Morgan's electrocution study**

Following the atrocities of Nazi Germany during World War II, psychologist Stanley Milgram designed an experiment to examine the degree to which people would comply with immoral commands from authority. A teacher (the experimental subject) and a learner (a confederate of the experimenter) were supposedly examining the effect of punishment (electric shock) on learning. The learner was strapped into a chair on the other side of a barrier (but within hearing distance). The teacher was instructed to read a list of two word pairs and ask the learner to repeat them back. If the learner got the answer correct, then they moved on to the next set. If the answer was incorrect, the teacher was supposed to shock the learner, beginning at 15 volts. The simulated shock generator consisted 30 switches in 15 volt increments, up to 450 volts, along with a rating, ranging from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock". The final two switches were labeled "XXX". The teacher was instructed to automatically increase the shock setting each time the learner missed a word in the list. To make add to the authenticity of the shock generator, the teacher was given a real shock from a 45 volt battery prior to the start of the experiment.

No experimental subject hesitated to give shocks up to 300 volts. However, at that point, the learner pounded the wall between the himself and the teacher and refused to answer. The teacher was instructed that no response was to be considered a wrong answer and to increase the voltage and administer the next shock. If the subject hesitated or complained, the following prods were given to attempt compliance:

"Please continue. The experiment requires that you continue. It is absolutely essential that you continue. You have no other choice, you must go on."

Twenty-six of the 40 subjects continued to "shock" the learner up to the maximum setting of 450 volts. Although Dr. Milgram's colleagues had predicted that only 3% of subjects would continue to the maximum voltage, 65% actually

did so, even though they believed that the shocks they had given were extremely painful.

Some people have protested that people would not react this way in today's world. However, 46 years later, Jerry Burger partially replicated Milgram's experiment, finding that 70% of subjects would shock the learner up to the maximum voltage.

### **Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment**

Following the Attica and other prison riots of the early 1970's, Psychologist Philip Zimbardo embarked upon an examination of the effect of simulated prison conditions on normal human subjects. Comparable groups of students were randomly assigned to be either "guards" or "prisoners" in Stanford University's simulated prison. However, to make the experiment seem more real, those assigned to be "prisoners" were "arrested" by the Stanford Police Department, cuffed and booked before being turned over to the Stanford jail. Within a day, there were conflicts between the "prisoners" and the "guards", which resulted in the beginning of harsh treatment of the "prisoners". Some of the "troublemakers" were put into solitary confinement or stripped of clothing and made to sleep on the floor. The "prisoners" eventually became compliant, even though they could quit the experiment at any time. The treatment by the "guards" continued to deteriorate to the point that the experiment had to be ended on the sixth day. None of the "guards" protested the evil actions of their "coworkers".

### **Solomon Asch's conformity experiments**

Psychologist Solomon Asch performed a number of experiments to determine the degree to which experimental subjects will go along with the majority - even if they know the majority is wrong. The setup was simple - an experimental subject, along with a number of the experimenter's confederates, was to look at two cards and determine which line on one card matched one of three lines on another card. The lengths of the lines were sufficiently different that there was no question what the right answer was. Even so, one third of subjects lied about which lines matched just to go along with the group. Although the "sin" committed seems pretty innocuous, conformity to the majority has resulted in the support of human atrocities by some pretty evil regimes throughout history.

### **Moral hypocrisy**

In another set of experiments, subjects were asked to assign two different tasks - one to themselves and another to another (nonexistent) participant. One task was interesting and resulted in a reward, whereas the second was boring and unrewarded. Predictably, most subjects assigned the interesting task to themselves. When told that they could use a coin flip to assign the task, only about half used the coin toss. However, of those who used the coin toss, the majority still assigned the better task to themselves - even when they lost the coin toss.

### **Conclusion**

The unending human propensity for hatred, violence, and evil will continue as we, the "righteous" haters will seek out and kill the "unrighteous" haters. An underlying spiritual cause of all this hatred is the only reasonable explanation of human depravity. Evolution does not account for the extremes of our violent behavior, but the Christian worldview fits the data exactly - humans are basically evil until transformed by the renewing power of Jesus Christ.

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