

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
April 23, 2016

## ***The Deteriorating Social Fabric of America***

America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems disorderly, somewhat chaotic and rather dysfunctional. There are four major forces sweeping through American civilization all of which partially explain this disorder. Columnist David Brooks capably summarizes these four forces: 1. Global migration is leading to demographic diversity. 2. Economic globalization is creating wider opportunity but also inequality. 3. The Internet is giving people more choices over what to buy and pay attention to. 4. A culture of autonomy validates individual choice and self-determination. *The Economist* emphasizes the importance of both Google and Facebook in this culture of autonomy: "Google has masses of data about the world, whereas Facebook knows about you and your friends; you go to Google to get things done, but turn to Facebook when you have time to kill . . . Astonishingly, Facebook takes up 22% of the internet time Americans spend on mobile devices, compared with 11% on Google search and You Tube combined." The social network increasingly defines us as Americans! Brooks concludes: "All of these forces have liberated the individual or at least well-educated individuals, but they have been bad for national cohesion and the social fabric."

What are the evidences of this weakened social fabric in America? Brooks makes several observations:

1. Alienated young men join ISIS so they can have a sense of belonging. Isolated teenagers shoot up schools. Many people grow up in fragmented, disorganized neighborhoods. Political polarization grows because people often do not interact with those on the other side. Finally, racial animosity stubbornly persists.
2. The liberation of the individual was supposed to lead to mass empowerment, but people can effectively pursue their goals only when they know who they are, what the basis of their identity is. But identity comes only when people are embedded in a "rich social fabric."
3. In this age of a weakened social fabric, a new morality has developed. On college campuses today, many students and faculty carefully guard their words, fearing they might transgress one of these new norms. But what are the new norms? *Christianity Today* writer, Andy Crouch, argues that college campuses and much of the larger culture now embrace a "shame culture" in which you know what is "good and bad" by what your community says about you, "by whether it honors or excludes you." In this shame culture, social exclusion makes people feel they are bad.

4. Crouch also argues that the omnipresence of social media intensifies the power of this shame culture. The world of Facebook, Instagram, etc. is a world of exhibitionism and constant display. “The desire to be embraced and praised by the community is intense. People dread being exiled and condemned. Moral life is not built on the continuum of right and wrong; it is built on the continuum of inclusion and exclusion.” The ultimate sin in this culture of shame is to criticize the group, especially on moral grounds. Good and bad must defer to talk about respect and recognition: “Talk of right and wrong is troubling when it is accompanied by seeming indifference to the experience of shame that accompanies judgments of ‘immorality.’”
5. Therefore, in this shame culture, everyone is perpetually insecure “in a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion. There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgment of the crowd. It is a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panics, during which everyone feels compelled to go along . . . The modern shame culture allegedly values inclusion and tolerance, but it can be strangely unmerciful to those who disagree and to those who don’t fit in.”

As a Christian, I believe I can bring to the table a solution to this weakened social fabric in America. It involves viewing human beings the way God does and it involves an institution which provides a sense of belonging and meaning to life.

There are three critical pieces to God’s view of humanity:

- First is the Concept of a Created Person —humans are both dependent on God (created) and relatively independent (person). Humans are both a creature (dependent) and a person (independent).
- Second is the Image of God: Humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26ff) and, as such, this establishes the basis for all the worth and value of humanity. Being created in the image of God has two dimensions:
  1. Humans resemble God (substantively and relationally) in His communicable attributes (e.g., intellect, emotion, will).
  2. Humans represent God in that they have dominion authority over His world. Humans are His theocratic stewards on earth.
- Third is the Community of Man concept, which means that God created humanity as a relational/social creature (e.g. marriage, Israel, the Church).

The church of Jesus Christ, to which all who have trusted Christ belong, is the living body of Christ (an organism) and is also manifested in the local body of believers with its own leaders, structures and responsibilities (the church as organization). The church is that organism where

identity is established, where the sense of belonging is achieved, and where there is security, comfort and hope. Restoring the American social fabric will not come from government, from Wall Street or from the broader culture. Only the church, in my opinion, is the key to restoring the social fabric of America society. May the church of Jesus Christ (both as an organism and as a local organization) proclaim and live the Gospel of its Lord. Only then will the renewal of America's social fabric be achieved.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (15 March 2016 and 4 April 2016); *The Economist* (9 April 2016), pp. 11, 21-24; and Andy Crouch, "The Return to Shame," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (10 March 2015).