

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***A World in Crisis and World Leadership in Crisis***

As mentioned in a previous *Issues* (2 July 2016), the world order set in place after World War II is coming apart. In the Middle East, nation states are disappearing, replaced by ancient tribalism and clan loyalties rooted deep in the region's history. The benefits of open borders with lower tariffs and growing international trade are being challenged by a narrow nationalism, a dangerous isolationism and a short-sighted introversion. Islamic terrorism is fostering bloody rivalries between Sunnis and Shiites, rendering the nation states created after World War I irrelevant and dangerous. All aspects of the old order (e.g., the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, NATO and the European Union) are under siege with little or no public trust in that order. Because this old order was built on globalization, free trade and a commitment to democracy, the democracy part of the foundation is producing an unexpected tension between the leaders of the world and those being led. Upheaval, chaos, disorder and dysfunction now characterize our world. In the midst of the collapse of the old, there is absolutely no agreement on what the new will look like. Further, there are no leaders to show us the way. As there is a world in crisis, there is an abysmal crisis in leadership.

Columnist Peggy Noonan recently made an astute observation: "The leaders of the world aren't a very impressive group right now. There's a sense with some of them of playing out a historical or cultural string, that they're placeholders in some way . . . Which has me thinking, of the concept of the genius cluster. They happen in history and no one knows why. It was a genius cluster that invented America. Somehow Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, Adams, Madison, Hamilton, Jay and Monroe came together in the same place at the same time and invented something new in the history of man . . . There was a small genius cluster in World War II—FDR, Churchill, deGaulle . . . There was a genius cluster in the 1980s—John Paul II, Reagan, Thatcher, Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, Lee Kuan Yew in his last decade of leadership in Singapore." Such clusters of gifted people emerge during a time of significant crisis, for "historic figures need historic circumstances. Also members of genius clusters tend to pursue shared goals." Our world today is crying out for wise, steady, determined leaders with shared goals and shared determination. Can you think of anyone today who fits such traits? There are certainly none in Europe right now. Vladimir Putin is a bully who governs a nation in serious economic and financial difficulty, but who is determined to re-establish the glory of Russia—at all costs. There are none in Asia right now either, as each nation gropes with how to respond to an increasingly aggressive China. And then there is the United States. The Republican Party is about to officially nominate one of the most immoral, unprincipled, bombastic men in the history of the Republic. He lies, he bullies and he intimidates, all the while offering platitudes in place of reasoned, well-thought out policy proposals. He feeds people's fears and casts himself as the singular solution to the serious challenges of immigration, globalization, terrorism and the place of America in the emerging new world order. The

Democratic Party is about to nominate a woman with one of the lowest confidence and trust ratings in history. The scandal surrounding her private email server while she served as Secretary of State, recently involved a secret meeting between the Attorney General of the US and her husband Bill Clinton, which deepened the suspicion surrounding the scandal. And when the FBI issued its report concluding that her actions do not warrant prosecution, the suspicion that the system is “rigged” intensified. As someone once said, perhaps we get the leaders we deserve.

All of this drives me to the question of what makes for a great leader? Character in leadership is certainly the baseline for capable leaders. It is most interesting to me what has occurred among American evangelicals. In 1976, Jimmy Carter ran for president and in an interview declared that he was “born again,” causing millions of evangelicals to reengage and vote for Carter. They turned on him with a vengeance once he was elected. During the 1990s, evangelicals demonstrated a visceral reaction of bitterness and disgust towards Bill Clinton. He was a living example of the fact that character in leadership matters and that the absence of character is fatal. The sexual scandals of Clinton, evangelicals concluded, demonstrated that character is essential to leadership. But now in 2016, if the polls are correct, evangelicals are embracing a man who has appeared on the cover of Playboy, has boasted of multiple affairs, has made his fortune in gambling casinos, and whose bullying style reflects an abandonment of all decency and virtue. Theologian Albert Mohler writes that “true character and leadership is also demonstrated when a leader responds to his own moral failure in a way that shows true repentance and moral courage.” Would anyone say that of the Republican nominee? Of the Democratic nominee? Whomever you decide to vote for, do not expect sound, moral leadership from that person. Expect ethical failure, muddy moral leadership in key cultural issues, and a letdown in promoting what is really important to God. As Mohler argues, “We are going to learn a great deal more about the candidates in weeks and months ahead. But it’s also increasingly true that we’re going to be learning a great deal about ourselves as evangelical Christians. Perhaps we had better brace ourselves for what we’re going to learn.”

James Davison Hunter, University of Virginia sociologist, writes that “Character matters, because without it trust, justice, freedom, community, and stability are probably impossible.” President Harry S. Truman once observed that “A man cannot have character unless he lives within a fundamental system of morals that creates character.” The crisis in leadership we are now facing in our nation and in our world must drive us back to Scripture. This crisis must cause us to honestly evaluate ourselves, our own personal values and morals. This crisis must drive us to the central problem of the human condition, which is rebellion against a sovereign God whose character and values are reflected in His revelation to humanity. What then does Scripture say about character, about moral authority in leadership? Psalm 15 is a masterpiece on defining the boundaries of character. The psalmist defines the characteristics of godly character (Psalm 15:2-5 ESV). A person of moral character is:

1. One who walks “blamelessly.” i.e., is a person of integrity.
2. One who does “what is right,” as in a life of righteousness according to God’s standards. This is a person who is bringing his/her life into conformity with God's standards of righteousness and character.

3. One who “speaks truth in his heart.” This is the person who has made a decision of the will to be and to live truthfully before God and before others.
4. One who therefore “does not slander with his tongue.” The Bible makes it quite clear that the tongue is a window into a person’s heart and soul. (See James chapters 1 and 3.)
5. One who “does no evil to his neighbor.” In the Old Testament that meant one who “loves his neighbor as himself” (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus repeated this and His brother called it the “royal law of love.”
6. One who “does not take up a reproach against his friend.” This person protects the welfare and reputation of those with whom he associates.
7. One “in whose eyes a vile person is despised.” Vile, evil, and despicable people are never affirmed or rewarded with leadership positions. He/she only “honors those who fear the LORD.” This person does not give honor to those who are devious, duplicitous and dishonest, but only affirms the godly traits of someone who seeks the LORD and His character.
8. One who “swears to his own hurt and does not change.” This person takes seriously the sanctity of a vow, a promise, an oath. In the words of Jesus, “his yes means yes and his no means no.”
9. One who “does not put out his money at interest.” This Old Testament law gave focus to never taking advantage of someone by promoting loans that were oppressive or exploitative. Business dealings that defraud or misrepresent never characterize this kind of person.
10. One who “does not take a bribe against the innocent.” This type of person never shows partiality to the rich, to the privileged, or to those in power just for personal gain.

Obviously, Psalm 15 presents the ideal of integrity and character. No one except Jesus meets these character traits perfectly. But such a Psalm gives us a sense of God’s perspective on moral leadership and the importance of character. It constructs a standard for us as disciples of Jesus of what we should expect of ourselves and of our leaders. It also shows that the crisis in America today is, among other things, a profound crisis of moral leadership. We are a nation under judgment and our national crisis in moral leadership reflects the depths of this judgment. It must drive us to the conclusion that our hope is in God, not the Democratic candidate and not the Republican candidate.

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (2-3 July 2016) and Albert Mohler essay on “Character in Leadership” at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (27 June 2016).