

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Human Depravity and 21st Century Horrors

Genuine biblical Christianity rejects the proposition that humans are basically good. The Bible affirms that every human being is born with the guilt and sin of Adam (see Romans 5). The Bible also affirms that humans are capable of the most egregious evil and despicable violence. Theologian Wayne Grudem writes: “. . . every part of our being is affected by sin—our intellects, our emotions and desires, our hearts (the center of our desires and decision-making processes), our goals and motives, and even our physical bodies” (see Romans 7:18, Titus 1:15, Jeremiah 17:9). Ephesians 4:18 declares that humans “are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in [us], due to the hardness of [our] hearts.” Apart from the work of Jesus Christ in our lives, there is no hope and no purpose, and can do no spiritual good.

Therefore, evil is real and you can see it in the actions of humanity throughout history. The epitome of such horror is war: The wars of the ancient world were despicable (e.g., the three Punic Wars as Rome consolidated its power in the western Mediterranean). The unimaginable terror of Rome as it dealt with its enemies is magnified by its most contemptible form of capital punishment—crucifixion. The medieval period saw the horrors of the Crusades when tens of thousands were slaughtered in the name of God on both sides of this religious conflict. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) witnessed entire sections of northern Germany destroyed. America’s Civil War (1861-1865) saw 750,000 dead! But World War I and World War II witnessed a human slaughter that reached inconceivable heights, including the deliberate slaughter of an entire race—the Holocaust. Through these wars technology, wealth and human innovation combined in the 20th century to slaughter tens of millions of soldiers in combat and tens of millions of civilians in the urban areas of the most advanced nations on earth. Nothing more validates the Bible’s claims about human depravity than war.

Today, it is the civil war in Syria where we see the depths of human depravity once again. The depths of this horrific war are rarely mentioned anymore. Rarely do we see reports on the national news of its horrors. But quite recently we saw a real, human side to this barbarity. Most of us saw the photo or viewed the tape on YouTube of Omran Daqneesh, a 5-year-old boy in Aleppo, Syria. He lived with his parents and three siblings in the rebel-held Qaterji neighborhood of Aleppo, which Russian or Syrian government forces targeted in a brutal air strike. Omran was pulled from the rubble and placed on the seat of an ambulance. Peggy Noonan describes Omran: “The left side of his head was covered in blood. His thick dark hair was stiff from smoke and dust. His legs were marked by soot and what looked like bruises. One report said he’d been in the rubble an hour before they dug him out.” For all five years of his life, Omran has lived in a nation being destroyed by war!

Omran's president, Bashar al-Assad, has used poison gas and has dropped barrel bombs on his (civilian) people. Long ago, Assad crossed the "red line" America's president declared he must not cross. Last week the UN Security Council accused Bashar al-Assad, the country's blood-soaked president, of gassing his people with chlorine. Assad supposedly dismantled his chemical arsenal in 2013 under a UN-backed agreement with America and Russia. Chlorine, which has non-military uses, was excluded from that deal, but its use as a weapon is banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Syria is a party. Such attacks were once deemed a "red line" by Barack Obama, but the American president has allowed Assad to cross it with impunity. New sanctions will now be considered—and likely blocked by China and Russia. Meanwhile, the Syrian war grows more chaotic, as the Turkish army battles Kurdish forces in northern Syria. Both are members of the American-led coalition against Islamic State, which is itself accused of using mustard gas on enemies. Vladimir Putin of Russia is bombing civilians and Syrian rebels with impunity. Iran's Revolutionary Guard is backing Assad with money, soldiers and military equipment. Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese militia and sworn enemy of Israel, is enthusiastically supporting Assad. It is a civil war that shows no signs of ending soon or equitably. Meanwhile, civilians such as little Omran continue to suffer and die. And the whole world responds with deafening silence!!!

Max Fisher of the *New York Times* has summarized the seeming hopelessness and intractable nature of this conflict:

1. It is a conflict immune to exhaustion. The core combatants—Assad and the insurgents which have been fighting since 2011—are backed by foreign powers, whose interventions have suspended the normal "laws" of war. Forces that normally slow down a conflict are absent in this one.
2. No one can lose and no one can win. The foreign internationalists have removed all mechanisms for peace. They instead introduce self-reinforcing mechanisms for an ever-intensifying stalemate. These foreign powers are strong enough to match virtually any escalation. No one can force an outright victory because the other side can always counter.
3. War's structure encourages atrocities. Syria has seen repeated indiscriminate mass killings of civilians, on all sides. There is little incentive to protect civilian populations. Both sides use collective violence and terror.
4. Fear of defeat entrenches the status quo. Combatants are now more worried about preserving what they have than risking it to pursue their broader goals. Each foreign power understands that it cannot win, but earnestly fears that a victory by the other side would be unbearable.
5. Syrian parties are built to fight, not win. In Syria, because each side is backed by multiple foreign powers, every sponsor on one side would have to drop its support at the same time. That will not occur.
6. An obstacle to peace: No peacekeepers. If there ever is an agreement, there will need to be some kind of military force to restore security and clean up any remaining militias or "warlords." But such a force would be a target of jihadist terrorists and would then face another form of insurgency.

7. A drift into disaster. All of the foreign powers involved in this horrific civil war make this war's expansion into other nations a real possibility. Neighboring states could easily become involved, which could cause this horror to spread. This could be a war "whose darkest days may still be ahead."

Syrian civilians are being slaughtered by the thousands. Over 2.5 million+ refugees have been created by this war. The toll of human suffering from this war is approaching proportions not seen since World War II. All major powers of the world are involved in this conflict—with no end in sight. There is no greater modern evidence of human depravity than this irrational, blood-soaked war in Syria. Common sense, human compassion and basic reason play no part in this conflict—only power: Preserving power in a nation that is self-destructing. What kind of prize in warfare is that?

See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 497; Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (27-28 August 2016); and Max Fisher in the *New York Times* (27 August 2016).