

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Handling Guilt, Identity and Sin in a Secularized Culture

One of my favorite writers today is David Brooks, and his recent book, *The Road to Character*, has challenged me in many ways. In a related essay, among the many points Brooks makes is that “religious frameworks no longer organize public debate . . . We have words and emotional instincts about what feels right and wrong, but no settled criteria to help us think, argue and decide.” Instead, “society has become a free-form demolition derby of moral confrontation . . . American life has secularized and grand political ideologies have fallen away, but moral conflict has only grown. In fact, it’s people who go to church least—like the members of the alt-right—who seem the most fervent moral crusaders. We’re living in an age of great moral pressure, even if we lack the words to articulate it . . . Technology gives us power and power entails responsibility and responsibility . . . leads to guilt.” Because we live in a thoroughly secularized culture, “people still have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption. The only reliable way to feel morally justified in that culture is to assume the role of victim . . . Sin is a stain, a weight and a debt. But at least religions offer people a path from self-reflection and confession to atonement and absolution. Mainstream culture has no clear path upward from guilt, either as individuals or groups.”

David Brooks has articulated the tragedy of American culture when it comes to handling sin and guilt. I stand amazed at his courage in surfacing this incredibly important aspect of the human condition. As I have reflected on his essay, my thoughts have turned to a recent Netflix TV production, “13 Reasons Why.” The series is based on Jay Asher’s young-adult bestseller about Hannah Baker (in the Netflix series played by the 20-year old actress Katherine Langford), a high school student who kills herself and leaves behind audiotapes detailing the events that led to her death. In each tape (introduced by the words, “welcome to your tape”), she places the blame for her suicide on the actions of her high school classmates and those of a faculty member. The TV series ends with “a graphic scene depicting Hannah’s death.” The series as well depicts a mix of partying, cliques, sex, sexual violence and self-harm. The weightiness of this Netflix series is strengthened when we realize that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2014, suicide was the second leading cause of death for children and young adults ages 10 to 24. This Netflix series has caused no small reaction. High school age Twitter accounts have recently evidenced extensive discussion and identification with the character Hannah Baker. Instagram and YouTube sites depict reactions of many types to Hannah’s victimization. Further, parents are aghast at what their teens are watching on their iPhones and tablets; parental fear, consternation and anxiety are the understandable results.

This fictional story about Hannah Baker and the subsequent Netflix series really offer no viable alternative outside of suicide for Hannah. Many psychologists and counselors fear that such a

popular series will fan the faddish nature of suicide, while ignoring the serious nature of teenage confusion and disorientation that are common as teens seek clarification on their identity and their purpose in life. All of this brings us back to the points David Brooks has made. Without an ethical framework, how does a civilization that is now thoroughly secularized, help teens who are contemplating suicide work their way through this tragic emotional dilemma? Without a theological benchmark, how does American civilization enable teens and young adults to see themselves as someone of worth and value? I am a Christian so I believe that genuine, biblical Christianity offers the answer. Let me explain.

The tragedy that “13 Reasons” surfaces should drive us to a solution. That solution is found in Jesus Christ—the solution for guilt, sin and the resulting victimization. It is only in Jesus that humans can find the basis for their identity, value and worth as human beings. There are two aspects of our new identity in Christ: (1) As humans, we are created in the image of God, which establishes our infinite worth and value. It is the baseline for the value of humanity at every stage in development. That weighty truth establishes one aspect of our identity: We both resemble God (in His communicable attributes—intellect, emotion and will), and we represent Him as dominion stewards of His world. (2) The Bible also makes clear that when we place our faith in Christ’s finished work on Calvary’s cross and His subsequent resurrection, we are a “new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our new identity is that we are “in Christ,” a powerful and profound phrase used 240 times in the New Testament. The power of sin and the power of death have been broken (see Romans 6). When we place our faith in Christ, we are declared righteous by Almighty God (justification): Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to our account. Further, we are adopted into God’s family, with all the rights and privileges of being a joint heir with Christ (see Galatians 4 and Romans 8). God is now our heavenly Father and we are His children. We await the wondrous family gathering of all the brothers and sisters of God’s family in His coming kingdom. Finally, we are being transformed into the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19, Romans 8:29). We now belong to Jesus, who bought us with the price of His shed blood and we are indwelt by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Galatians 2:20 perhaps best summarizes our new identity in Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” The struggles, tensions and confusion about personal identity in this world are resolved in Jesus Christ. To be “in Christ” is the vital center of a new identity offered by God. As with all things in this broken world, the Gospel is the answer. The Hannah Bakers of this world are daily bombarded with the declaration that significance, worth and value are determined by looks, by IQ, by athletic prowess and by what others say. But that is not the message of Scripture. Who am I in Christ? I am accepted; I am secure; and I am significant. My identity comes from what God says about who I am and by what God has done for me through Jesus. Faith in those grand truths should determine my behavior because I am a new creature in Christ. May we who have found this truth declare it and live it before the Hannah Bakers of this world.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* 931 March 2017); Bethonie Butler on “13 Reasons Why . . .” in the *Washington Post* (14 April 2017); and Katherine Rosman on “13 Reasons . . .” in the *New York Times* (20 April 2017).