

2010

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Recommended Citation

Swanson, Gary B. (2010) "Flaws in the Tapestry (Work Station Two)," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol15/iss4/6>

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Work Station

TWO

Gary B. Swanson

Flaws in the Tapestry

If there were ever the possibility of true bipartisan consensus in American politics, even if the agreement were only implicit, it would be with regard to messing up. Bill Clinton, Larry Craig, Elliott Spitzer, Kwame Kilpatrick, John Edwards, Mark Sanford—and the beat goes on and on

Even those who are not news junkies know that a common thread runs through this fabric of public life. In recent years, each of these political “servants of the people,” of various political stripes, has endured self-inflicted public scorn. And this disapproval has resulted from their moral indiscretions—a euphemistic term for what Scripture defines as fornication, adultery, perversion, and so on.

Given the state of current society, it is in some ways ironic that reports of such scandals in the media raise so much righteous indignation. Without going into the actual demographics of immorality in this culture, can anyone in the rank and file of society truly condemn such behavior when we are fully aware that it is going on all around us on a much more everyday scale? Jesus said, “Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” (John 8:7).¹ He *didn’t* say, “Let the one who has never *committed adultery* throw the first stone!”

In discussing disciplinary action regarding “workers who,

though they have made mistakes, have manifested an earnest, self-sacrificing interest in the work,"² Ellen G. White counsels a redemptive response. She also seems to imply this broader interpretation of Jesus' defense of the woman taken in adultery as applicable to cases involving more than adultery.

Yet it is only fair and reasonable to expect more principled behavior from leadership. When Jethro counseled Moses regarding the selection of leaders, he notably included trustworthiness (Ex. 18:21) among the characteristics that Moses should look for in the candidates. In American political life, frequent reference is made to the search for leaders who fulfill the "public trust." And to a degree this is interpreted to include trust in a leader's personal life as well as public life. Can those who have been unfaithful to a spouse be expected to be faithful to the relationship they have with their constituents? Presumably they made some kind of oath of lifelong commitment in their marriages, just as they have taken an oath of office.

And, of course, this concept of the public trust isn't usually applied to the more everyday faults and foibles of leaders. Characteristics like short-temperedness or arrogance or conceit are often overlooked in the interest of sound leadership—even among Christian leaders.

In a collection of essays published in 1959, Charles Simeon, a highly respected 19th-century chaplain at Cambridge University, was described as "proud, imperious, fiery-tempered; a solitary individual, eager for friendship, whom others avoided because of his conceits, eccentricities, and barbed words."³ Described in this way, does this sound like someone you'd like to know? Would you like to have him living next door, maybe? Yet most historians of the Christian Church who have made a study of that era consider Charles Simeon a "hero of the faith"!

Often, in Christian posterity, those who have gone before are depicted in terms that suggest they may have had a kind of glow—or aura—surrounding them through life that would have been unmistakable to those around them. Something like the description of Jesus during His transfiguration: "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light" (Matt.

17:2).

In fact, Scripture says when Moses returned from Mt. Sinai to receive personally from God the Ten Commandments, that his face shone with such an intensity that Aaron and the rest of the camp found themselves backpedaling, such that Moses felt called upon to put on a veil (Ex. 34:29-35).

And through history, many of the heroes of faith—scriptural and post-scriptural—are depicted as being, if not divine, at least superhuman. They may seem to have achieved a level of piety that precluded any kind of mundane flaws or shortcomings that plague the rest of lowly humanity. This tendency to idealize certain historical people is likely what led novelist Dorothy Sayers to observe that “Bible characters’ are felt to be quite different from ordinary human beings.”⁴ They are considered larger than life.

But in fact, they all, without exception, represent the species *Homo sapiens*. The Apostle Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, Ellen G. White, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu (replace any of these names with those of any number of your own faith heroes)—*all* were utterly human. All would have been accurately described as falling “short of God’s glorious standard” (Rom. 3:23).

Much is made, of course, of the considerable moral lapse—the utter public disgrace—of such biblical characters as Noah, Samson, and David. Wouldn’t the blogs and tabloids of Old Testament times have steamed with the lurid details! It would have been a great time for writers of headlines: “What *Really* Happened in Noah’s Tent That Night?” “Blind and Shackled: Samson’s Great Fall From Grace”; “Nathan Explodes a Bombshell in David’s Court—News at Eleven!”

And the “lesser” failures in human nature were included in Scripture to convey other lessons. Abraham faced times of faithlessness and dishonesty, Jacob could be downright shifty and deceitful, Paul was disputatious and uncompromising; Peter experienced one great moment of cowardice.

Moses, though described by Scripture as “more humble than any other person on earth” (Num. 12:3), made excuses to avoid serving God (Ex. 3:11), dealt with feelings of inadequacy (Ex.

4:14), jumped to wrong conclusions (Numbers 32), and had serious issues with anger management that truly brought on grave consequences (Ex. 2:12; Num. 20:8-13).

Whether the stories of the lives of the members of God's Hall of Fame down through the ages exhibited the most grievous or the lesser faults that make up the sinful human condition, it is certain that they were all just as much in need of God's grace as we are today. And that is the beautiful pattern that runs through the sometimes sordid tapestry of their lives.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this article are from *The New Living Translation* of the Bible.

2. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 278.

3. Arthur Pollard and Michael Hennell, eds., in *Charles Simeon (1759-1836): Essays Written in Commemoration of His Bicentenary by Members of the Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1959), p. 152; quoted in Chris R. Armstrong, *Patron Saints for Postmoderns* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 130.

4. Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993), p. 300.