

INTRODUCTION

The Center

I am Not, and God Is

When we open our eyes as babies we see the world stretching out around us; we are in the middle of it . . . I am the center of the world I see; where the horizon is depends on where I stand . . . Some things hurt us; we hope they will not happen again; we call them bad. Some things please us; we hope they will happen again; we call them good. Our standard of value is the way the things affect ourselves. So each of us takes his place in the center of his own world. But I am not the center of the world, or the standard of reference as between good and bad; I am not, and God is.¹

—Archbishop William Temple

AT A RECENT FAMILY gathering my wife was greeted by two of our small grandchildren who live in different cities. They ran to her shouting, “Grandma! Grandma!” One of them burst into tears crying, “She’s not your Grandma! She’s my Grandma!” William Temple (1881–1944), Archbishop of Canterbury, accurately described the universality of our human situation.

The implication of Temple’s assertion is that the source of our conflict with others resembles our grandchildren’s perspective. We are the center of our world and they are the center of their worlds. This is true not only for individuals but for families, political parties, tribes, cities, and nations. Our self-centeredness creates the need for laws, locks, police, prisons, and time-out places for children. This self-as-center is the cause of divorce, litigation, corruption, murder, war, genocide, and terrorism.

1. William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, 52.

Introduction

Human self-centeredness ultimately puts us in an adversarial posture not only with others but with God himself.

We attempt to civilize this self-centeredness by seeking some exchange that seems advantageous to both. Huge systems of qualifications, paper trails, legal agreements, regulations, and constant vigilance must be in place to avoid unfair, ruinous, and self-centered abuse. Although we seek to harness and domesticate our self-centered perspectives and desires, human ingenuity for taking unfair advantage of others always seems to get ahead of regulations and regulators. As long as we are the standard of reference between good and bad we will be in conflict with another's different standard of reference. Self-interest is an ever-present, potentially destructive force even when interests and goals unite us in mutuality and cooperation.

Although this human condition may be treated and modified in an infinite variety of ways, history and personal experience have taught us that, no matter what common alliance, mutual agreement, inhibition, or limitation of our wills we attempt, self-interest rises to the top as a potentially destructive force. Admirably, we often try to see things from the other's point of view, but our empathy is limited. I recall saying to my wife, who had sprained her ankle two years before I sprained mine, that I remembered how awkward and inconvenient it was for her, but "I don't remember it hurting like this!"

The most workable solution to this universal difficulty is to commit oneself to a center greater than the individual self. But what center? Today's postmodern, post-Christian culture would answer unity in diversity. But unity or solidarity based on what? Tyranny has produced much unity (e.g., the 600-year Ottoman Empire and the union of the Soviet Socialist Republic in the twentieth century) but at a great cost to freedom. A business partnership can provide a higher claim on our time and energy as long as one subordinates oneself to the partnership's economic goal. Unity based on family alone squelches individuality and independence. Unity based solely on kinship produces clan warfare. Unity founded on a community results in tribal warfare. Unity based on personal loyalty to an institution can produce uncorrected corporate and political dishonesty and corruption. Unity based only on national identity is constantly threatened by unchecked power, chauvinism, and wars with other national entities.

The twentieth century saw at least two examples of collective resolutions to human self-centeredness. National Socialism (i.e., Nazism) in Germany claimed the nation as the center and Communism gave the Soviet Union the hope of an international classless society. Each amounted to radical subordination of self-interest to national or classless interest.

Another alternative is Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism, the pursuit of one's own rational self-interest and one's own happiness as the highest purpose of life. The influence of her philosophy, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, and of her novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* can scarcely be exaggerated. Leading business executives in the twenty-first century, including Alan Greenspan, long-time Chairman of the Federal Reserve, are among her most ardent admirers and followers.² He called himself one of Rand's acolytes, but when the economic bubble burst he acknowledged that self-regulation by Wall Street had failed: "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholder equity, myself especially, are in a state of shock disbelief." Rational self-interest interpreted by a self-centered self will exploit the weak and disadvantaged, is susceptible to greed, and will produce regularly occurring scandals such as the Dutch Tulipomania (1634–1636), the South Sea Bubble (1711–1720), the collapse of the American corporate giant Enron, and the meltdown of the banking industry in the twenty-first century. Two modern hopes attempt to resolve the problem of human self-centeredness: the loss of self in a secular collective, as in Nazism or Communism, and the commitment to rational self-interest, as in the philosophy of Ayn Rand that underlies much of modern capitalism. Each has been shown to be not only inadequate but dangerously destructive.

The simple point that William Temple makes is that we are not only born self-centered and are in rivalry and conflict with others who are also born self-centered, but we are naturally at enmity with the true center, God. In a secular world stealing someone's pen is merely a crime against its owner but it is a much deeper offense. In God's world the pen belongs to Joe and if Bill steals it he is attempting to create a world in which it belongs to Bill. It is an offense against the real center: God. If Bill kills Joe it is not simply a crime against Joe. Bill is trying to create a world in which Joe does not exist. The crime, the offense, the sin is an antagonism against God, the true and final reality. "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and

2. Doherty, *Radicals For Capitalism*.

Introduction

done this evil in thy sight . . .” (Ps 51:43). To ignore this reality and put our confidence in either some communal center or our own rational self-as-center is a false and malignant hope. Jesus warned us long ago about such hopes:

“Take heed. Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”
(Matt 16:6)

We desperately need a new center, a commitment beyond our own selfish nature, the state, or a classless society. Things of this world will inevitably fail. Only in rediscovering the true center can we hope to have justice, mercy, and freedom in a culture where Christianity has been distorted almost beyond recognition. In this book, we will explore the simple text of Jesus’s warning that is capable of clarifying myriad complexities that obscure a clear view of the world and of the Christian promise.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is said to have observed that he cared nothing for “simplicity this side of complexity,” but would give his life for “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Simplicities before complexities are to be avoided because they cannot recognize, acknowledge, or encompass the infinite aspects of reality. Such simplicity as “people are good” cannot acknowledge and treat the fact of human destructiveness. “People are bad” is a simplicity that cannot perceive the reality of human ingenuity, creativity, and love. It would be easy to simply dismiss the Pharisees and Sadducees as bad people and keep ourselves in the category of good people. Such assumptions blind us to reality and to our own need to heed Jesus’s warning. What is it about the teaching of the Sadducees and Pharisees that we need to beware of in our lives today? A fresh and unclouded view of our culture and our churches can show us how we have ignored the warning and have fallen under the spell of these erroneous teachings.

SADDUCEES

The biblical Sadducee is a near equivalent of today’s secular humanist who believes that this world is all there is. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, spirits, or angels. The modern Sadducee attempts to resolve our human predicament by depending solely on ingredients of human invention restricted to this world. The results are in vain and the consequences destructive. With no final and transcendent hope, the Sadducee yeast renders each historical commitment as the final and ultimate last

word. The vain hope for justice in history alone will break our hearts as each commitment proves inadequate, corrupt, or ineffective. Without God's judgment upon it, immorality or evil done in this life becomes the final injustice when any perpetrator of evil dies with no accountability. According to the Sadducee, the perpetrator has no final reckoning for his evil deeds and is thus rarely able to receive justice or mercy.

Let us ponder a fictional story of a bank robbery and murder. A man came into a bank with a gun. He demanded that Agnes, a clerk, give him all the money in her drawer. She pushed the alarm. He shot and killed her and ran out of the bank into a waiting car and escaped. Sometime later Bernard James, a suspect, was arrested, tried, and on the testimony of Susan, (Agnes' fellow cashier), was found guilty and executed. However, Susan's testimony was false; she only wanted revenge and for someone, anyone, to pay for her friend's death. She knew when she testified that James was not the murderer. Years later Susan died peacefully in her sleep. For the Sadducee, truth and justice are forever denied and buried in the graves of Susan and James. The inescapable trust of the secularist is that injustice and the grave are the end.

Peter T. Forsythe is credited with the observation that when within us we have nothing above us we soon succumb to what is around us. We are surrounded by the beckoning call of self-centeredness. Whether manifest in a call to baseless unity or endless self-glorification, evidence would suggest that churches are no longer looking up but around for direction. When lost people come to church many find only a reflection of the world and go away empty. Sadducean yeast relegates us to being no more than the self-centered creatures who continue in rivalry, conflict, and self-destruction beneath a veneer of constant compromise and endeavors to control.

PHARISEES

Unlike Sadducees, the Pharisees agree with Jesus about eternal life; however, they see this not as a gift, but as what they have earned and deserve. Self-righteousness is the product of the Pharisee yeast. It feeds the very self-centeredness that Jesus Christ came to heal. When found in the church, it represents Christianity to the world in a singularly unattractive and undesirable way. A common expression: "heaven for the climate, but hell for the company" is an indication how people react to Pharisaical

Introduction

Christians. They would rather be in hell with other sinners than in heaven with those who thought that they were good enough to be there.

Perry Temno, a leader in the community and generous contributor to the Episcopal Church and local charities, was proud of the fact that he had lost friends and business because of his stand for integration. He was sincerely grateful that he was not a Baptist or Methodist and despised talk about being born again. With several generations of his family buried in the churchyard and a degree from Yale, Temno considered himself a faithful, though somewhat imperfect, Christian—not a sinner—one who believed he had kept the Ten Commandments. In comparing himself with his friends he considered himself a far better citizen and church member. He believed that Jesus was a good teacher, though often impractical, and generally a good example for his children to follow. His inescapable trust, as an example of a contemporary Pharisee, was in his own goodness, especially when compared with others.

The Pharisaic alternative to the Sadducee yeast is that when within us we have nothing above us we soon succumb to what is within us. The Pharisaic yeast will not let us humbly admit either our need for forgiveness before God, who alone is righteous, or that we have fallen far short of the persons we were intended to be. Thus, we are left with the singularly unattractive burden of reliance upon our own flawed goodness and our endeavors for self-esteem.

Jesus's warning to his closest followers concerning these two cancers is the simplicity that explains enormous complexities. His teaching helps us to see with a clearer vision and then begin to receive, hear, and appropriate the love that these cancers have obscured and forced out of our vision. Today's Sadducee is characterized by a low view of God, an unconcern with heaven or hell, and a commitment to self-esteem at the expense of transformation, salvation, and true unity with God. The other yeast finds Pharisees in the church with a higher view of God but one reduced to the level of their own worthiness. This means justice without grace, redemption without repentance, and assurance of salvation by one's own goodness. The discrepancy between God's justice and our goodness is rectified by lowering the awesome righteousness of God while at the same time inflating one's own self-worth.

No one can claim immunity from this cancerous yeast. Even among the most astute theologians the temptation is there: "When [Karl] Barth was working up his *Church Dogmatics* during summers in the Swiss Alps,

he wrote to a friend that he had to guard himself every moment from slipping back into the old way of making the self both center and standard.”³

We live and breathe in an age that does both. Such assumptions make it impossible to appreciate fully the wisdom and power of Jesus’s teaching concerning the Pharisees and Sadducees. Our arrogance, as seen in the church as well as in the secular world, makes it increasingly necessary to heed Jesus’s warning concerning the yeasts. Both yeasts relentlessly attack the faithful. Looking over the history of the church we see in every age the results of not heeding Jesus’s warning: “Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Our secular arrogance and our religious self-righteousness are in our heritage as well as in the very air we breathe. This spiritual asthma chokes our civilization and counterfeits the Christian faith, leaving the gospel’s hope and promise largely unknown.

In order to open our hearts and minds to the warning as well as to the promise of Jesus, we must first establish grounds for humble trust in God, in spite of the arrogance of our age. Only with such trust will we be able to sing the Lord’s song in our increasingly strange land.

My Song is Love unknown
my Savior’s love to me,
love to the loveless shown
that they my lovely be.

O who am I that for my sake
my Lord did take
frail flesh and die?⁴

—Samuel Crossman (1624–83)

3. Forde, *Captivation of the Will*, 21.

4. Samuel Crossman, *Hymnal*, no. 458.