

Pride, Politics, and Our Post-Election Dilemma

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The relationship between act and consequence is complex, both in the Bible and in human experience. One basic issue is whether a person committing evil deeds or using inflammatory rhetoric will suffer negative consequences. When posing this complex question, the Bible presents a surprisingly mixed perspective. Some passages defend a fair system of retributive justice: “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling” (Prov 26:27). After giving the law to Moses, God promises to hold human beings accountable for sinful behavior: although merciful, this Deity is not interested in “clearing the guilty” (Exod 34:7). Similarly, the friends of Job insist on divine justice as they maintain an essential link between human behavior and punishment. For example Eliphaz declares, “As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” (Job 4:8).

Yet other voices do not see such consistency and rail against the promise of retributive justice. The most famous example in this regard is the author of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), who observes an unpredictable world: “A gain I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (Ecc 9:11). With refreshing candor, Qoheleth is willing to look at the unpredictable tangle of human experience and acknowledge inconsistencies.

The relationship between behavior and consequence is essential for exploring our primary verse under consideration, which is from the book of Proverbs: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). The key Hebrew word is the one for “pride” (*ga’on*), and it can appear positively as “exaltation” or “majesty,” usually referring to God (e.g., Exod 15:7: “In the greatness of your majesty [*ga’on*] you overthrew your adversaries”). With regard to human beings, *ga’on* usually indicates incessant self-regard (as in Prov 16:18), the attitude that prizes selfish advancement over all other factors. The second half of the saying parallels the first, making basically the same point. A person with a “haughty spirit” will eventually stumble.

This famous saying in Prov 16:18 claims that arrogance can cause a person’s downfall. The person responsible for this maxim does not appear to suggest that a thunderbolt will strike the individual who displays pomposity, but rather that brash, self-serving actions eventually lead to ruin. Rather than promoting an immediate act-consequence connection, this maxim argues for a *character-consequence* relationship. If a person exhibits prideful behavior, at some point he or she will receive a justifiable comeuppance. Pride sparks foolish decisions, and patterns of stupidity based on ego concerns will lead to ultimate “destruction.”

When considering the contemporary relevance of this saying, it is appropriate to think about pride in the context of our political landscape. As we draw closer to Advent, there is an intervening event that has engrossed the American public for over a year now: the divisive presidential election. Political discord, especially of an all-consuming, hyper-partisan variety, dominates American culture as never before.

Whereas many other countries have much shorter election periods (The recent process in the UK took only a month), American campaigns are now perpetual. The lengthy primary season, the endless, circular chatter on the cable news networks, constant fundraising by Super PACs and the candidates, and the unwieldy influence of corporate donors and lobbyists have created a permanent national distraction. The opportunities for grandstanding and impugning the reputations of others are more prevalent than ever.

The dangers of pride are intrinsic to the political process. As Reinhold Niebuhr famously observed, “Politics, to the end of history, will be an arena where power and conscience meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.”¹ When the opportunity for power presents itself, humans naturally feel inclined to reach for as much as possible, especially when prideful inclinations take over. The sage responsible for our saying in Proverbs understood the precipitous fall that can accompany decisions based solely on prideful self-interest, particularly when matters of conscience become secondary.

When considering pride in this context, examples of notorious decline are numerous in the annals of American politics. Obvious cases include the short, tempestuous career of Joseph McCarthy, whose Senate Committee on Permanent Investigations in the 1950s allowed him to pursue character assassinations of perceived rivals whom he labeled as communists, almost always without any factual basis. And yet after censure by his Senate colleagues, McCarthy lost his power in Washington and died a tragically premature death at the age of 48. Demagoguery in the service of pride has also ruined other public figures to varying degrees, from Huey Long to Richard Nixon. Despite wielding significant power, such individuals endured ignominious defeat or worse, the vengeful bullet of an assassin.

The tightrope of political success is tenuous, and prideful behavior often leads to devastation. For example, as governor of Alabama, George Wallace built a power-base through the politics of anger. He understood instinctively that racist language and vitriol against the federal government could cement his popularity. Wallace mastered vicious populism, using coded language to induce fear. As Dan T. Carter explains in a biography of Wallace, the former governor capitalized on economic woes and rapid social change by condemning those who were different from the white, Protestant majority: “It was no accident that the groups singled out for relentless abuse and condemnation were welfare mothers and aliens, groups that are both powerless and, by virtue of color and nationality, outsiders.”²

Additional examples affirm the veracity of the maxim that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” The assumption of invulnerability after the reins of power are in one’s possession is a timeless one in politics. From local aldermen to members of Congress, pride is a threat to individual careers and the public good. From Rod Blagojevich, the former governor of Illinois who attempted to sell President Barack Obama’s vacant Senate seat to the highest bidder, to the recent case of Kathleen Kane, the attorney general of Pennsylvania who sullied the reputations of political rivals and then lied about it under oath, the timeless wisdom of Prov 16:18 is regularly overlooked.

The perils of excessive pride are manifold. Adultery, graft, voter fraud, and other issues are usually traced to the personal failings and arrogance of the official in ques-

tion. One can also look to such underlying issues as fragile egos, broken childhoods, and the need for constant affirmation. Armchair psychoanalysis frequently characterizes our assessments of pride in politics, as we seek to mine the ultimate reason for dramatic falls from grace.

And yet we must acknowledge the capacity for redemption after the loss of power. Governor Wallace sought forgiveness from civil rights leaders in the waning years of his life. Paralyzed from the waist down after an assassination attempt and observing the shifting tide brought by the civil rights movement, Wallace reached out to African Americans who had suffered as a result of his brutal tactics. One could argue that opportunism and changing circumstances, especially the voting power of African Americans, drove Wallace's reversal more than genuine remorse, but his efforts at reaching out to such pivotal leaders as John Lewis are nevertheless remarkable. Lee Atwater, a Republican political operative famous for his manipulative campaign tactics, showed contrition at the end of his battle with cancer. Atwater apologized to a South Carolina Democratic official he had criticized for receiving electric shock therapy, and he expressed regret for some of his harsh tactics against Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee for President in 1988. Once again, one could argue that these were self-serving acts that bolstered Atwater's ultimate reputation, but it is noteworthy that powerful individuals often experience regret more than contentment if they have used inflammatory rhetoric in the service of political gain.

When we consider hubris and dysfunction in American public life, it becomes necessary to address the specific circumstances that created our rancorous political landscape and our own culpability in creating those circumstances. Many readers will remember the wise assessment of the commentator Edward R. Murrow when assessing the dangerous tactics of Senator McCarthy:

The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it—and rather successfully. Cassius was right: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."³

Murrow's last reference is from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and it illustrates the need for all citizens and persons of faith to recognize our responsibility in creating a climate of fear and mistrust, where prideful inclinations too frequently sap any movement towards addressing the many problems that ail us as a society. Inaction, apathy, and the unswerving belief that our opinions are always accurate reflect a corrosive atmosphere.

Readers of this essay will probably have noted up to this point the lack of specific references to the candidates for President in 2016 and to one of the more bizarre years in the history of American politics. Never has such an outsider captured the nomination of a major political party, and no woman has ever come this close to winning the presidency. Whatever the result in November, this is a historic election. Some of those reading this essay are supporting one of these two candidates, while others are looking for an alternative. The diversity of political perspectives in American public life is a wonderful aspect of our democracy, and the new outlets for expression on social media have allowed for a more participatory process.

Yet the reclaiming of mutual trust seems far from certain in our current political climate, and baneful pride at all levels is playing a key role in dividing us from one another. The xenophobic, misogynistic, and divisive rhetoric used to great effect by Donald Trump has echoes of many of the political figures I mentioned above, especially George Wallace, and the whole country is in a surreal fog as a result of his unprecedented candidacy. My task here is not to assess the likelihood of Mr. Trump winning the election, a highly remote possibility as of the writing of this essay, but rather to consider the saying from Proverbs in light of our current political dynamics. And rather than rehearse once again the many incendiary comments made by Mr. Trump over the course of the current campaign season, rather than reiterate the shortcomings of Secretary of State Clinton in the interest of a fair balance, we return to the same line cited by Edmund R. Murrow, which is more relevant than ever: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.”

Our entire society and recent cultural trends, not just Donald Trump, created the atmosphere that led to such a toxic election season. We have segregated ourselves far too much according to race, income, and political persuasion; we have allowed our neighborhoods to become a place where we check Facebook rather than get to know those around us; and we have decided through self-righteous indignation that the other side is wrong and our beliefs are always correct. Moreover, our ever-shortening attention spans, fascination with celebrity, and fear of the other have created the environment for some of the views espoused by Mr. Trump to gain such traction. He has masterfully exploited longstanding mistrust as a means of advancing his own fortunes. All politicians seek self-advancement, but the damage wrought by this incendiary election season cannot be placed back in a bottle after November 8. Our political atmosphere has been so poisoned by prideful mistrust that a rebuilding effort is necessary.

One essay cannot begin to plot a comprehensive blueprint for rebuilding, but a few suggestions are worth noting. The first is the need to separate the political process more clearly from our cult of celebrity. Over the last few decades, the fortunes of public servants have become another form of celebrity entertainment. This development can be traced at least as far back as the 1980s. In a provocative and convincing book, Matt Bai cites the increasing superficiality of American political discourse, tracing this development to an obsession with personal scandal that intensified with the infamous episode involving Senator Gary Hart in 1988 and certainly with the scandals a decade later involving President Clinton. Bai does not defend such behavior, but he does point to our obsession with drama as a national distraction at the expense of pressing issues like poverty and the solvency of Social Security. He argues that our nation and its media have taken “a hard turn towards abject triviality.”⁴

I recently went with my family to the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. The area of the museum focusing on human rights includes heartbreaking descriptions and photos of problematic regions in the world, and the impact on visitors is understandably jarring. My 12 year-old son Charlie looked carefully at the exhibit on longstanding strife in Congo, and he turned to me and said, “Dad, why are we talking all the time about what Mr. Trump did or said at a rally, but this is the first time I am ever hearing about what is happening to boys my age in Congo?” I did not have a good response except to agree.

The inclusive vision for justice in Scripture demands that believers seek to protect

the most vulnerable in society, especially those on the margins. This imperative is apparent in the Torah: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod 22:21). Jesus embraces this call for benevolence: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36).

The “abject triviality” into which we have descended reflects both pride and fear, and a reclaiming of community is the only way to transcend our current predicament. In a recent editorial, Garrison Keillor argues that kindness and humility are the keys to rejuvenation:

The old America endures, as long as baseball endures, or gardening, or joke-telling, or the state fair where people go to see pigs the size of Volkswagen and ride inside something like a salad spinner. It endures along with church suppers. They are dying out some places because the Myrtles and Gertrudes who were the brains of the church supper movement faded away, but the suppers survive in small towns, a cultural institution.⁵

This last point is not an incidental one: churches have a role to play if we are to reclaim mutual trust. Churches can celebrate our cultural diversity, seek to foster generational friendships, and perhaps show greater flexibility with regard to outreach within the community (e.g., different times for worship, innovative leadership models, creative outreach ministries). Solidarity can triumph over the poisonous balkanization of our public discourse if forms of community, including church, are fresh and welcoming.

Our model in this effort is the life and witness of Jesus Christ. The current calendar year does not culminate with the presidential election, but with the hopeful expectation for a miraculous birth. Jesus, through his lowly beginnings and model for humility, reminds us that human pride is never the ultimate goal. The hymn of Philippians 2 explains this perhaps better than any other passage: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:5-7). While capable of attaining any earthly treasure, Christ did not regard his status as something to be exploited (Greek *harpagmos*), but took the path of servant leadership. Such a model works against common human instincts. Our prideful inclinations are basic to our humanity, reflecting our fallibility. Yet Advent reminds us of the humble roots of the Christ-child, the expectation of a “new and glorious morn,” and our need to live into this new reality, however imperfectly.

We return to our original question: do we reap what we sow? Is there retributive justice, both reward and punishment, on a consistent basis? The answer in many cases is no. Qoheleth was surely correct that the weak often perish, and those who abuse positions of power do not necessarily receive appropriate punishment. Even so, we can also affirm the veracity of the saying from Proverbs: excessive pride leads to destruction. We have operated too frequently with the assumption that sophisticated methods for communication, gadgets, and other technological advances send us on an ever-upward spiral of advancement. And yet the loss of community has perhaps never

been more profound. Regardless of who wins the presidential election, the imperative stands before people of faith to be voices for inclusion and hospitality, to find creative ways of bringing together those from across the ideological spectrum, and to minimize the politics of personal destruction. Withdrawal from society is not the best option within the Reformed tradition: the breakdown of community and rancorous division demand our earnest attempts at reform. A rebirth of mutual trust can happen most effectively at the local level, where *koinonia* (“community” or “fellowship”) is not just our best hope, but one of the essential elements of the Christian faith. One of the most common clichés is that “Elections have consequences.” This particular cliché is accurate. Perhaps a consequence of the current election is that we might turn away from pride and excessive partisanship, seeking to unleash what Abraham Lincoln so eloquently described as “the better angels of our nature.” The alternative is a further worsening of our frayed communal life, such that we collectively prove the veracity of the ancient saying: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Notes

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1932), 4.
2. Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of The New Conservatism, And The Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 468.
3. Edward R. Murrow, “See It Now: A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy,” CBS-TV, March 9, 1954.
4. Matt Bai, *All The Truth Is Out: The Week Politics Went Tabloid* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 218.
5. Garrison Keillor, “Make the most of your brief time on Earth,” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2016.