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We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy (Book Review)

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Robert Tracy McKenzie. *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021, 304 pages. ISBN 978-0830852963. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois-Springfield.

Robert McKenzie's new book is worthy of close attention from American citizens who love and support their democracy, despite its faults and flaws. To read the book once is good; to study it and re-read it repeatedly is better. My enthusiastic favor is partly because a casual sampling of the book while standing in a library aisle might yield the impression that it's merely a dull and boring tome. There is small talk abounding about America's founding fathers, commentary about the presidency of John Quincy Adams, much gritty detail about Andrew Jackson. The political demise of the Second Bank of the United States is told. Explored in great detail are the opinionated views of a French nobleman who visited America in 1831 for less than a year. There is selective attention to recent politicians, including Hillary Clinton and, in greater detail, Donald Trump.

I assure you, though, that this is historical analysis from a careful Christian perspective. This opinion has been acknowledged far and wide, as *We The Fallen People* has won a *Christianity Today* book award and was a *Foreword* INDIES Book-of-the-Year finalist in 2021.

McKenzie holds the Arthur F. Holmes Chair of Faith and Learning at Wheaton College, and a revealing comment from him about himself posted in 2017 tells us this:

As a Christian historian, I have come to believe that part of my calling is to be a historian for Christians outside the Academy. If you are a Christian who is interested in American history, I want to be in conversation with you about what it means to think Christianly and historically about the American past.

The book reviewed here elegantly carries forward McKenzie's vision of this kind of appropriate scholarly conversation.

The acute tool for scholarly analysis that McKenzie employs is *comparison and contrast*. And the bulk of McKenzie's analysis is to identify and

explain an enduring plot twist in the drama of American political history, centered on what various political groups have viewed as "the people," how they have defined and described this nebulous group.

To see clearly and think deeply about American democracy past and present, McKenzie begins by articulating the cautious views the founding fathers expressed about "the people." Not surprisingly, they were uniformly untrusting about being ruled by a monarch. But democracy as well, as in "rule by the people," was a step too far. They were, for example, skeptical about "the folly and wickedness of mankind," "the natural lust for power so inherent in man," and, sensing instead, that "The mass of men are neither wise nor good" (50). These American founders were well read in philosophy about government. They knew Thomas Hobbs's view that "everyone against everyone" produces an uncivil society and John Locke's thinking about a state of nature "full of fears and dangers." As McKenzie points out, the founders produced a constitution and set in motion a governing system for a "fallen" people.

America's seventh president, General Andrew Jackson, responded to and articulated what he heard from "the people." The voice of the people was, for him, "the voice of God." One of four contestants for the presidency in 1824, Jackson received a plurality of electoral votes from the states, but not a majority. Following the constitution, they subjected the issue to the jurisdiction of the House of Representatives. The two political insider candidates, John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, combined the votes of their congressional supporters for a majority in behalf of Adams, who became president. Four years later Jackson ran against Adams again, this time prevailing with an electoral vote count of 178 to 83.

McKenzie closely examines two particular political-policy victories in which President Jackson prevailed by stimulating majority movements

among the voting public. The first policy win was to displace the American Indian tribes residing in states east of the Mississippi River. Prior to Jackson's presidency, the policy views in effect were aimed to civilize the native Americans, respect their property rights, peacefully negotiate land agreements with them, and bring about their assimilation. Jackson, with congressional majorities supporting him, radically shifted public policy with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Despite serious legal challenges and disputes in the courts, the political agenda of the president, supported by the dominant white population, prevailed in Congress. Stark injustice was imposed on native tribes as a legitimate enactment of representative democracy.

A second epic political enactment under President Jackson was the termination of the national bank. McKenzie regards it as Jackson's premier populist achievement. One of Jackson's continuing political rivals, Henry Clay, then the leader of the National Republicans, endorsed the renewal of the national bank's charter in 1831 even while the existing charter had four more years to run. Anticipating Jackson's disapproval of the national bank, Clay and his allies expected that the success and popularity of the bank would provide an issue that would help them defeat Jackson's reelection in 1832. A bill to extend the bank's charter for an additional fifteen years passed in both the House and Senate. President Jackson vetoed the bill. As McKenzie explains, "his veto *message*... was a 'masterstroke' of populist propaganda" (167). Soon thereafter, in the 1832 presidential campaign, Clay's supporters condemned Jackson's abuses of power, but in a three-candidate race, Jackson prevailed, winning 219 of the 286 electoral votes available.

By historical happenstance (or what we acknowledge as common grace), in 1831 an acute observer from France came on the scene to scrutinize the American experiment with representative democracy as its method for filling the office of president. The young aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, was well-versed in the ups and downs of recent French governance. He knew well that "France had recently careened from absolute monarchy to democracy to dictatorship to a conservative constitutional monarchy to something marginally more

democratic" (198). He came to America to measure the effectiveness and the morality of a "majority rules" standard for governing. Nominally a Roman Catholic, but apparently not a Christian, Tocqueville "admired Christian morality greatly." Qualitative distinctions regarding Christian faith among American citizens was not his concern, but he sensed a sufficiency of commonplace professions of "some religion" among the people (235). He found in America that Christianity "reigns without impediment" (237), thereby successfully restraining wickedness. Nevertheless, Tocqueville did not overlook the consequences of a white majority's view that Native Americans and imported African slaves were and always would be inferiors and not worthy of white-on-white civil justice. Cherishing justice, Tocqueville warned that democracy provides opportunity not only for equality but also for oppression and injustice.

Concluding his book with "Lessons for Today," McKenzie concedes that his examination of the modern world "has been the hardest section to write" (245). What made the task difficult was his determination to violate the usual secular academic expectation in history-writing to be objective and dispassionate. Instead, "impelled by religious conviction and a deep sense of vocation," he was determined to express himself as a historian with a distinctively Christian perspective (247). It was his commitment as a Christian to acknowledge the fallenness of humankind in his scholarly analysis. His analytical tool for analysis is a repeated line of thought: "If we took original sin seriously, then we would" He says, for example, that we would realize that contemporary American democracy preaches an untrue gospel of human goodness. We would realize that office-seekers falsely proclaim how generous and wise the voters are. We would perceive how politicians credit their potential voters too generously for promoting the common good and securing liberty and justice for all. Such a faith is inappropriately one-sided: "Tocqueville's insight [was] that democracy is indeterminate instead of intrinsically just." It can and does decide political outputs that vary from "the morally upright to the morally indefensible" (258). The egregious wrong to Native Americans under President Jackson was achieved by a thoroughly democratic process. To

this day, McKenzie cautions, “the minority is never truly safe from the majority” (261).

Addressing the need for *We the Fallen People* to transform our political behavior, McKenzie urges Christians to “run from every effort to meld Christianity with a particular political party, movement or leader” (268). He cautions that the seductiveness of political power can “tap into our sense of fear and victimization” (273). His illustration? The 2016 Presidential candidate Trump saying, “Christians in our country are not treated properly.... If I’m there, you’re going to have plenty of power.... You don’t need anyone else” (273). McKenzie responds, “living out a belief in original sin will require us to push back against the inexorable expansion of the imperial presidency, even when—*especially* when—the current resident of the White House is one of *us*” (275). McKenzie goes on to say, “Why then, would we cheer when

a public figure proclaims that *we* are good, *they* are evil, and our only hope is in *him*.” To the contrary, says McKenzie, such claims are “antithetical to the gospel” (278).

For all Americans, especially Christian Americans who sadly embrace the truth that we are corrupt, unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil (e.g., see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3), it is prudent to acknowledge that political power has potential for both good and bad, right and wrong uses. McKenzie has spun for us a noteworthy cautionary tale. We Americans are indeed a fallen people. Our democracy is not dependably morally sound, nor are the people intrinsically good, wise, and just. What our nation will always need is spiritually acute Christians, like McKenzie, to engage vigorously in political advocacy and bear witness for both genuine liberty and authentic justice for all our people.