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Sinful Trumps Exceptional: A Review of We the Fallen People

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Abstract

"Christians of all political persuasions... must face deep questions about how their faith in Christ's kingdom intersects with their participation in the kingdoms of this world."

Posting about the book *We the Fallen People* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/sinful-trumps-exceptional-a-review-of-we-the-fallen-people/>

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Sinful Trumps Exceptional: A Review of *We the Fallen People*

Scott Culpepper

May 12, 2022

Title: *We the Fallen People: The Foundation and the Future of American Democracy*

Author: Robert Tracy McKenzie

Publisher: IVP Academic

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Wheaton College Historian Tracy McKenzie has cultivated a well-deserved reputation as a meticulous and careful scholar with a distinctly Christian approach to interpreting the past. McKenzie's determined adherence to those standards stands as a rarity in a time when too many Christians prefer to scratch their itching ears to the tune of culture warriors providing a revisionist narrative of American history for partisan consumption. *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy* continues the quest McKenzie began with *The First Thanksgiving*¹ to write responsible popular history accessible to the common reader and distinctly Christian in orientation. The First Thanksgiving proved successful at dispelling some of the cherished myths surrounding the holiday observance while still finding a core worth commemorating. The result was compelling and interesting to scholars and general readers alike. *We the Fallen People*, while a little more theoretical in its subject matter, remains grounded well enough to speak to popular audiences while offering some deeper reflections on doing history responsibly.

We the Fallen People offers a historical mediation on eighteenth century views of what Christian theologians in the Augustinian tradition have called "original sin." McKenzie argues that the American founders' understanding of humanity's inherent fallenness provided them with a balanced sense of democracy's possibilities and inherent dangers. Over time, this understanding has been replaced with an idolization of American democracy that sees democracy as inherently good in and of itself without acknowledging the basic reality that the founders understood. Such an understanding, according to McKenzie, saw democracy as a tool that could bring about flourishing, but one which could just as easily be coopted for less noble ends by fallen human beings. Checks and balances were crafted into the founding charters of the nation to provide safeguards against human vices. McKenzie writes, "The problem as (the founders) understood is not that we're wholly evil; it's that we're not reliably good." ²

McKenzie takes his readers to three pivotal points in American history to trace the evolution of Americans' cultural framing of democratic ideals. He first explores the founding era at the end of the eighteenth century, where he provides evidence for his argument that the founders crafted a system designed to deal with the problem of fickle human morality. He then carries the narrative forward to the early nineteenth century when Jacksonian populism began to reshape the way Americans saw themselves and the nature of democracy. The vision of "Manifest Destiny" and Americans as a chosen people reshaped the way people wrote about the past and their expectations for what democracy could achieve in the present. He rightly notes here how the forcible removal of the Cherokee people along the infamous "Trail of Tears" during this era illustrates how majority rule can produce tyranny as well as freedom. A narrative of American goodness and righteousness displaced the old cautionary warnings about human fallibility. McKenzie's closing chapters lead to the late twentieth century and explore how current political movements have used the narrative of "American goodness" to frame expectations of what democracy can achieve. In the process, they make democratic institutions more vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous persons who offer simplistic readings of current events and equally simplistic solutions to the problems. Radical visions of American goodness require a glittering assessment of successes while ignoring, or at best, minimizing the national failures. Throughout, McKenzie includes excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* (published 1835 and 1840) and sets de Tocqueville's analysis of the young republic in conversation with Christian ideals as well as the broader sweep of American history. The myth of American goodness derived much of its contemporary power from misquotations and misunderstandings of de Tocqueville's text. McKenzie sees a careful and correct reading of that text as one corrective to America's self-absorption, a self-absorption which de Tocqueville noted in his own day.

Tracy McKenzie has written an important book that has a timeless quality while still speaking to the current fractured context. *We The Fallen People*, like *The First Thanksgiving*, offers a model of meticulous and careful scholarship instructive for both formal students of history and everyday readers. While one may disagree with some of his conclusions, it's hard to see how any fair critic could take issue with McKenzie's methodology. What should be standard stands out in McKenzie's work because it has become so rare in popular historical writing. His accessible style and clarity of argumentation offer scholars a model for engaging in public scholarship that retains the meat of academic rigor while framing ideas in a way that can be grasped by regular readers.

McKenzie's discussion of the founders' views of human fallibility delves into territory that I would like to see expanded in future works. As a historian of the early modern period, I'm often frustrated with the one-dimensional portrayal of Enlightenment thinkers, particularly when it comes to the issue of human nature. Surface level summaries treat Enlightenment figures through the lens of John Locke's optimistic anthropology expressed in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (published 1690). Locke's *Tabula Rasa*, or blank slate theory of human nature, argued that humans were born free from innate corruption in contrast to doctrines of original sin, but Locke made his argument exactly because he recognized that human nature is not consistently good. He differed in regard to the origins of that human proclivity to corruption

and the forces that shaped it, not its existence. Most of the founders were people of faith and also people of the Enlightenment. Not all of them agreed with Locke, and many of those who did still recognized that human nature cannot be trusted without limits. Views of good and evil in human nature are far more complex in the eighteenth century than a simple reflexive adherence to Locke's views. McKenzie hints at that complexity throughout his first section and gives good supporting evidence for how that understanding is grounded for many founders in Christian theologies of sin. The question I would like to see addressed in more detail is what resources from the Enlightenment tradition also reinforced these views. I think McKenzie offers some perspective here, but more would give us a fuller understanding of the complicated interplay of Enlightenment sentiment and religious influences in the founding era.

McKenzie's use of de Tocqueville brings another strong element to the book, one which I would also like to see explored further. His skillful account of the false quote attributed to de Tocqueville that America is "great because she is good" offers the kind of helpful myth-busting that McKenzie does so well. The inclusion of de Tocqueville's insights throughout help us recover an important voice from the past, one which looks at our early republic through the eyes of an interested and informed outsider. His distillation of de Tocqueville reminds the reader that historical legacies more often than not are turned to ironic uses, sometimes cutting against the grain of the very principles their authors espoused.

The substance of McKenzie's argument calls for serious consideration and will launch many helpful future conversations. Christians of all political persuasions—from progressive social activists to conservative evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal culture warriors—must face deep questions about how their faith in Christ's kingdom intersects with their participation in the kingdoms of this world. What legitimate goods can Christians achieve through political engagement? What inherent temptations are there when we draw close to power? Is Christian political engagement based on thoughtful reflection naturally emerging from our theological foundations or are both the foundations and the means of our political engagement simply a thin Christian veneer applied to goals and strategies adopted from mainstream cultures? McKenzie's exploration of how our veneration of American "goodness" has evolved from Jacksonian populism to our current polarization provides valuable historical context for addressing these issues.

1. IVP Academic 2013

2. pg. 17