

The human condition: We are all complicit in evil

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

I received a phone call once from a good friend, a member of my congregation with whom I had been carrying on an extended theological conversation for several years. She was a believer on most days, she said, and she was absolutely unafraid to doubt and hold up to scrutiny everything she thought the Christian church insisted she believe. I'll never forget that call and the conversation that followed. "I want to talk to you about something I don't like at all about our worship service," she said.

When I arrived at her apartment she had several church bulletins in her hand. As I sat down, she started to read some phrases from the Book of Common Worship: ". . . We cling to the values of a broken world. The profit and pleasure we pursue lay waste the land and pollute the seas . . . We condone evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed."

"Now really, John," she said. "I didn't do all that last week. I didn't lay waste the land and pollute the seas. I didn't have time to do all that. I had a busy week: went shopping, volunteered at the hospital, saw a movie, went to church. Why do you make me say all those dreadful things every week?"

I did my best to tell her what the church believes and doesn't believe about sin. I told her that it doesn't believe original sin is about sex and that unbaptized babies are going to hell because they were conceived in it. I tried to tell her that sin is the human condition, that life is "not the way it's supposed to be," to cite the title of Cornelius Plantinga's solid book. I tried to tell her about Reinhold Niebuhr's observation that the doctrine of original sin is the one empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian faith and that all you have to do to know about sin and its effects is to read the newspaper. I told her that even though she and I did not personally "lay waste the earth and pollute the seas," we did participate in political and economic structures that are plenty guilty of both. It was a hard sell, and I'm not sure she

bought it or that afterward she used the public confession in worship any more comfortably.

I thought about that conversation as I read the articles on Rwanda and South Africa in this issue. They made me very uncomfortable. They also made me appreciate that moment in public worship where we admit our complicity, even though unintended, in unspeakable evil. It makes me grateful for the Lenten journey that moves inexorably toward the cross and for the mystery of a love big enough to overcome even our sin.