We the People: William F. May’s Vision for America

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Since the end of World War II, runaway fears of Soviet imperialism, global terrorism, and anarchy have tended to drive American foreign policy toward an imperial agenda. At the same time, uncurbed appetites have wasted the environment and driven the country’s market economy into the ditch. As we negotiate three foreign wars and massive domestic challenges, including economic crises and environmental devastation, how can we best sustain our identity as a people and resist the distortions of our current anxieties and appetites?

In a new book leading ethicist William F. May draws on America’s religious and political history and examines two competing concepts at play in American politics—contract and covenant. *Testing the National Covenant* is being praised as the "the capstone of the life’s work of William F. May” and as a book of “stylistic elegance, theological depth, perceptive analysis, and persuasive criticism” by theologian Charles E. Curran. The book argues that the biblical idea of a *covenant*, which binds a nation or people together for the common good, offers a more promising way than the idea of the more limited and self-interested *contract*, to contain our runaway anxieties and appetites.

“We the people,” May notes, is not “We the individuals” or “We the interest groups.” Rather, this covenantal phrase presupposes a history of mutual giving and receiving and of bearing with one another that undergirds all the traffic in buying and selling, arguing and negotiating, which occurs in the rough terrain of politics. M. Cathleen Kaveny of Notre Dame Law School reflects on May’s study of the national covenant, remarking “the idea of covenant is rooted in a fundamental model of God’s gift and our grateful response. It is therefore capable of inspiring not merely enlightened self-interest, but also the self-expenditure on behalf of the common good that America so sorely needs to face its current challenges.” May closes with an account of the covenantal agenda ahead, and concludes with an analysis of the implications of covenant and the moral obligations that we, individually and collectively, assume for immigrants and undocumented workers. Allen Verhey of Duke Divinity School believes that *Testing the National Covenant* “should be read by anyone who cares about America. [May] puts on display our runaway fears and desires. He traces the ways those anxieties and appetites have distorted our international policy, our domestic policy, and our economic life. It is a prophetic indictment of our culture, but it is no mere jeremiad. It is a hopeful call for a course correction, for a turning (or a returning) to the tradition of covenant. The concluding chapters elegantly contrast covenant and contract and point the way to a better common life in America.”

William F. May is a senior fellow at the Institute of Practical Ethics and Public Life at the University of Virginia. He received his PhD from Yale and taught for many years at Southern Methodist University, where he was the founding director of the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility. A former president of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Christian Ethics, he has written several books on medical and political ethics.