

Educational Opportunity

What Produces Effective Education?

Parents want a good education for their children. Some may have greater resources or a more precise picture of how to accomplish their goal, but most parents in our society are aware that a good education is fundamental to financial, professional, and personal success. If we can assume that this is true, why is it that so many of our students are doing so poorly? Many feel that poverty, crime, and the breakdown of the family are an important part of the answer. In fact, research consistently reveals that parental income and educational success are the best indicators for predicting the educational achievement of a child. Unfortunately, this is not something that schools can impact easily.

Recent research has discovered that after the socio-economic well-being of the parents, the next most important variable predicting student success is the way in which a school is organized. Research has also discovered that effective schools have similar traits. Such schools have strong educational leaders who possess a clear vision of what it means to be an educated person and who have the authority to assemble a staff of like-minded teachers. These schools set high academic standards and encourage the belief that, with few exceptions, children are capable of achieving at high levels. They encourage collegial and professional staff relationships, and establish a disciplined, and drug-free, educational environment.

An example of an effective school, in one of the most difficult of circumstances, is the Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. Marva Collins has proven that when these criteria are met students from low income, single-parent families can achieve. In describing

her inner city program she states that, "The expectations are as high here as in the most nurtured suburban area." (1) Her motto for the children is that, "we are known by our deeds, not our needs."

If we know what makes a school effective, how do we go about converting the vast number of ineffective schools, many of which are in our nations cities? The expensive reforms of the last few decades have yielded marginal results. Between 1960 and 1990 a great deal of money and effort went into school reforms. Total expenditures went from 63 billion to 207 billion in constant dollars.

During the period of steepest decline in student performance, the decade of the 70s, per-pupil expenditures increased by 44% in real terms. Much of the money went towards two areas often noted as fundamental to better schools: teachers salaries, which increased faster than any other occupation in the last two decades, and towards reducing class size. Most indicators, including SAT scores, reflect little increase in student achievement as a result of these types of reforms. These efforts failed to produce effective schools.

In their recent book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe argue that the greatest hindrance to having effective schools is bureaucracy. Conversely, the most important ingredient for creating effective schools is autonomy. Few public schools have autonomy, many private schools do. The key then to educational reform is to find a mechanism for creating school autonomy while maintaining some form of accountability.

The One Best System?

Since most Americans understand the need for a good education and more money than ever is being devoted to that end, why are we not more successful in educating our children, especially in urban areas?

Chubb and Moe argue further that government financed schools are by nature bureaucratic and ineffective. The current democratic system of governing our schools exposes them to special interest groups at the local, state, and federal levels. Everything from AIDS education to bi-lingual programs have their lobbyists advocating program expansion and higher spending. Local school boards, state legislators, and the federal government respond by enacting regulations that local schools are required to observe. Instead of being an educational leader, the local principal often becomes a middle manager, much more concerned about following regulations than enacting a personal vision of educational excellence.

One recommended reform aimed at increasing autonomy and accountability in schools is a voucher plan. According to Chubb and Moe, a voucher plan promises much better results because it inverts the way schools are controlled. Decision-making authority would be decentralized, returning local principals to the role of educational leader. The influence of outside interest groups like unions and state legislatures would be diminished. Schools would be held accountable by the market system; if they fail to attract students they will go out of business.

The concept of a voucher plan is relatively simple. The government would determine how much money it is willing to spend per student in the state or district. Parents would then receive a voucher for that amount for each of their children. Once a school is selected by the parents the school redeems the voucher for state funds.

A key attribute of vouchers is that they give parents in our worst school districts a choice of where to send their children. If local public schools are dangerous and fail to educate, a choice or voucher plan gives parents the ability to go elsewhere. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is an example of an urban center which has adopted a choice mechanism for school reform. Thousands of economically disadvantaged students are receiving vouchers of up to \$1000 per year of public money to attend private schools. Over 1000 students are on a waiting list for future spots, mainly because the program has exempted religious schools from participating, an issue that is now in court.

Although attempts to enact statewide voucher plans in Colorado and California have failed by more than a two to one margin, many are optimistic that some form of choice will be implemented by a state soon. The next attempt will probably be a more limited program aimed at disadvantaged students. The goal of reformers is not to replace public schools, but to make them better. Competition will cause schools to become more responsive to the parents they are serving rather than to outside interest groups.

Myths About Choice

Schools become more effective when they are autonomous from bureaucratic regulations. Educational choice via vouchers has been suggested by reformers on both sides of the political fence as the best way to produce autonomous schools and thus more effective schools.

What then is blocking the school choice reform movement? The greatest opposition to vouchers has come from the teacher's unions: the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. Keith Geiger, NEA president has said,

“Free market economics works well for breakfast cereals, but not for schools in a democratic society. Market-driven school choice would create an inequitable, elitist educational system.”(2) The NEA has worked hard and spent large sums of money to defeat choice legislation in Colorado and California. Let’s consider some of the specific reasons given by those opposing vouchers.

One argument often heard is that vouchers will undermine the unity of America which was created and has been maintained by tax- supported common schools. The original ideal espoused by Horace Mann and others was that students of all socio-economic classes would be schooled together and that this would create mutual respect. Unfortunately, sociologist James Coleman and others have pointed out that this has not become a reality. Public schools are extremely segregated, by race and economics. The wealthy are able to purchase homes in elite suburban school districts, others are trapped in schools that are ineffective and often dangerous. Choice would actually help to re-create the common school notion. Parents could decide where to place their children in school regardless of geography and, as a result, the schools would become more accountable to local control.

Another criticism against choice might be called the Incompetent Parent Argument. Critics feel that parents of minority or lower-income students will not know the difference between good schools and poor ones, thus they will get stuck in second-rate schools. They argue that the best students will be siphoned off and the difficult students will remain creating a two-tiered education system. Others are afraid that poor parents are not used to making important decisions or will make a schooling choice based on athletics rather than academics.

In response, it must be noted that today’s public schools are about as unequal as they can get. Jonathan Kozal’s book *Savage Inequalities* has documented this fact dramatically. Experience

indicates that choice reduces this inequality. Magnet schools have been touted for their ability to attract diverse students bodies and have been achieving better results in over 100 cities nationwide. Choice carries this concept one step further.

Actually, political scientist Lawrence Mead has found that the poor respond well and choose wisely when given the power to make important decisions concerning their children's education. Those who don't participate will be assigned a school, as they are today.

More Myths About Choice

Senator Edward Kennedy has stated that educational choice will be "a death sentence for public schools struggling to serve disadvantaged students, draining all good students out of poor schools." (3) This Selectivity Argument is one of the most used criticisms against private schools and choice.

It is true that many private schools have high standards for admissions. But many also have been serving the disadvantaged for years. Catholic schools have been open to the needs of urban city children for decades, and recently, private schools have opened for students who have failed, or been failed by the public schools—in other words, the hard cases. The Varnett School in Houston is an example, as is the work of Marva Collins in Chicago. Sociologist James Coleman argues that Catholic schools have succeeded in raising the academic achievement of students that do poorly in public schools, including Blacks, Hispanics, and a variety of children from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Another concern many have about vouchers might be called the Radical Schools Scare. Past California school superintendent Bill

Honig writes that choice, "opens the door to cult schools." (4) He also argues that by placing the desires of parents over the needs

of children we encourage societal tribalism and schools that will teach astrology or creationism instead of science.

Will there be a market for schools that are somehow bizarre or extremist? Private colleges in America are schools of choice, receive government funds, and are considered world class. Having to compete for existence quickly weeds out schools that fail to

educate. Of course, any choice plan would allow the government to protect parents against educational fraud and against schools that

fail to do what they advertise they will do. Although one wonders why this standard doesn't apply to many of our public schools today.

In many minds, the idea that tax money might end up in the hands of a Christian school is enough to cancel any choice plan. To them,

this represents a clear violation of church-state separation. In fact, the church-state argument is not a very strong one. According

to Michael McConnell, a law professor at the University of Chicago, the federal government does not maintain a very high wall of

separation when it comes to education. "The federal government already provides Pell grants to students at private, religious affiliated colleges" and "the GI Bill even covers tuition at seminaries." (5) Lawrence Tribe, a liberal constitutional law professor at Harvard's Law School, states that a "reasonably well-designed" choice plan would not necessarily violate the separation of church and state.

Many Christians feel that government intervention will follow public vouchers. But even if Christian schools refuse to

participate, many other children will benefit from new, more effective schools, which will be competing for their tuition vouchers—schools that Christians may begin as a ministry to those suffering in our troubled cities.

Other Mechanisms For Creating Effective Schools

The threat of vouchers has resulted in the passing of charter school legislation in a number of states. In 1993, Colorado passed the Charter Schools Act which allows the creation of publicly funded schools operated by parents, teachers, and/or community members under a charter or contract with a local school district. A charter school is defined by the legislature as a “semi-autonomous public school of choice within a school district.” Legislators have recognized that for schools to be effective they must be autonomous. As a result, charter schools can request waivers from district and state regulations that interfere with their vision.

California and Minnesota have also passed charter legislation. Minnesota’s program is a good example of why charter laws are more a political response to the voucher threat than a real attempt to free schools from excessive bureaucracy. Their charter schools must be started by licensed teachers who must comprise a majority of the board. They must also meet state education standards called outcomes. Charter schools may establish their own budget and establish curricula, but the goals of individual schools will be dictated by the state. The state-wide teacher union would be a powerful force within these teacher-controlled schools.

Another plan for creating more effective schools is centered around private vouchers. In 1991 J. Patrick Rooney, Chairman of the

Board of the Golden Rule Insurance Company convinced his organization to pledge \$1.2 million for the next three years to fund half the private school tuition for approximately 500 Indianapolis students. To qualify, the students must be eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches according to federal guidelines. By 1993 the program had placed over 1000 students in eighty schools.

Inspired by Mr. Rooney's concept, Dr. James R. Leininger of San Antonio created the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation which has gathered \$1.5 million in pledges from various Texas businesses. Off-shoot groups are starting in Austin, Albany, Denver, Phoenix, and Dallas. The Center for the study of Education Reform at the University of North Texas has conducted a analysis on the effects of these private voucher initiatives and found that parents are extremely satisfied with the program even though they only fund one half the cost of their children's private education.

Although charter schools and private choice programs both attempt to create more effective schools by encouraging autonomy, both ideas have limitations. Charter school's survival depends on the very bureaucracy that creates ineffective schools, and private vouchers are limited to the good will of corporations willing to invest in them. This leaves publicly funded choice through vouchers as the best hope for real change in schooling for most children.

Our interest in this debate over educational reform should not be driven by our own family's educational needs alone. God told His people, while captive in Babylon, to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare" (Jer. 29:7). Thus, the welfare of all children in our nation should be our concern.

Notes

1. Cohen, Deborah I. "Streets of Despair," *Education Week*, 1 December 1993, p. 28.
2. Jeanne Allen, *Nine Lies About School Choice: Answering the Critics*, The Center for Educational Reform, Washington, D.C.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

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Fertility and Voting Patterns

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Does fertility affect voting patterns? Apparently it does much more than we realize. And this has been a topic of discussion for both liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans.

Arthur Brooks wrote a significant op-ed on the "Fertility Gap" last year in the *Wall Street Journal*. He said: "Simply put, liberals have a big baby problem: They're not having enough of them . . . and their pool of potential new voters is suffering as a result."

He noted that "if you picked 100 unrelated politically liberal adults at random, you would find that they had, between them, 147 children. If you picked 100 conservatives, you would find 208 kids." That is a "fertility gap" of 41 percent.

We know that about 80 percent of people with an identifiable party preference grow up to vote essentially the same way as their parents. This "fertility gap" translates into lots more little Republicans than little Democrats who will vote in future elections.

So what could this mean for future presidential elections? Consider the key swing state of Ohio which is currently split 50-50 between left and right. If current patterns continue, Brooks estimates that Ohio will swing to the right and by 2012 will be 54 percent to 46 percent. By 2020, it will be solidly conservative by a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent.

Now look at the state of California that tilts in favor of liberals by 55 percent to 45 percent. By the year 2020, it will be swing conservative by a percentage of 54 percent to 46 percent. The reason is due to the "fertility gap."

Of course most people vote for politicians, personalities, and issues not parties. But the general trend of the "fertility gap" cannot be ignored especially if Democrats continue to appeal to liberals and Republicans to conservatives.

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Candidates and Character

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How important is it to elect people with character to public office? The founders of this country thought it was very important.

Over the years, I have collected various quotes from the founders about the importance of character but recently ran across a quote from Samuel Adams. He is considered by many to be the father of the American Revolution. Certainly he understood why patriots fought and died for their freedom. He was also convinced we should elect people of character to public office.

He said: "If men of wisdom and knowledge, of moderation and temperance, of patience, fortitude and perseverance, of sobriety and true republican simplicity of manners, of zeal for the honor of the Supreme Being and the welfare of the commonwealth; if men possessed of these other excellent qualities are chosen to fill the seats of government, we may expect that our affairs will rest on a solid and permanent foundation."

These are wise words to consider during this political season. So often my conversations with listeners revolve around whether they can vote for someone who doesn't match their positions on key issues. I suggest they merely vote for the person who most reflects their values unless they cannot in good conscience vote for any of the candidates for that office. We are always going to have some disagreement with a candidate on some issues.

This year I am on the ballot as precinct chairman. So when I vote for myself, I will be voting for someone that I agree with 100 percent of the time. But I will probably have some disagreement with the candidates for other offices. But I will still vote for the person who most reflects my values, and you should do the same.

Samuel Adams reminds us that being right on the issues is important, but so is character. Consider the character of the candidates when you cast your vote.

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Voting and Christian Citizenship

Applying a biblical worldview to your voting choices is an important part of your role as a citizen. Byron Barlowe looks at how Christians should exercise their right to vote and make biblically informed decisions in the voting booth.

Summary

It is both a sacred duty and privilege for Christians to serve as citizens who salt (preserve) and light (illuminate) our culture. Americans have inherited a government system based solidly on a biblical worldview, but one that also tolerates and protects other viewpoints. Truly humble, tolerant political engagement does not equal spiritual compromise. Christians found out how seductive political power can be in the 1980s and need to resist the pull of compromise. God doesn't take sides; we need to make sure we're on His side.



Although a strongly biblical candidate may be ideal, that's not often a realistic option. Instead, we must use our sanctified minds to prayerfully choose between imperfect candidates—who are *not*, after all, seeking *pastoral* positions. Believers have a duty to vote our values. How else would we vote? Our calling: not to force those values on others in a free society, but to honor the privileges of citizenship, including legitimate political influence, and to vote our convictions.

Christian Citizenship: A Duty and Privilege

One pundit wrote fifteen months before the 2008 election, “If you’re not already weary of the 2008 presidential campaign . . . you must be living in a cave... The campaign began the day after the 2004 election, making this the first non-stop presidential campaign in history. The media, desperate to sustain interest in the horse race, pursue such earth-shattering stories as: ‘Which candidate owns the most pets?’”[\[1\]](#)

Then, a new kind of Internet-age debate featured Democratic presidential candidates responding to home-grown videos posted to *YouTube.com* by members of the public. Among them: two Tennesseans dressed like hillbillies and a snowman, ostensibly concerned about global warming!

Hard to take politics seriously given all of the theater, isn’t it? But political engagement—including voting—is a God-given, blood-bought right that Christians must take seriously. We are called by the Lord Jesus to be preserving salt and illuminating light in our culture. And it’s not just presidential races that matter.

Kerby Anderson, in an article entitled “Politics and Religion,” wrote, “Christian obedience goes beyond calling for spiritual renewal. We have often failed to ask the question, ‘What do we do if hearts are not changed?’ Because government is ordained of God, we need to consider ways to legitimately use governmental power. Christians have a high stake in making sure government acts justly and makes decisions that provide maximum freedom for the furtherance of the gospel.”[\[2\]](#) Some believe we have a *cultural mandate* to redeem not only men’s souls, but the works of culture including politics.

Yet, Christians remain on the sidelines in alarming numbers.

According to one poll before the 2004 elections, “only a third of evangelical Christians—those who ought to be most concerned with moral values—[said they would] actually vote.” But the Bible says a lot about believers’ duties as citizens. “When Moses commanded the Israelites to appoint God-fearing leaders, he wasn’t just talking to a handful of citizens who felt like getting involved... And modern Christians are under the same obligation to choose leaders who love justice... Today, in our modern democracy, free citizens act as God’s agents for choosing leaders, and we do it by voting.”{3}

As believers, we’re citizens of two kingdoms: one temporal and earthly, the other eternal and heavenly. We are called to participate in both the culture and politics of The City of Man, as this world was called by Augustine, while primarily focusing on the Kingdom of God.

The longevity and value of these dual kingdoms ought to serve as crucial guides to how invested we become in them. Eternal issues matter more than temporal ones. To allow politics and social issues to overtake our commitments to the everlasting is to risk idolatry, while losing ground in both realms.

Flipping the usual focus of candidates’ qualifications onto the electorate, one Christian columnist wrote, “Those who make critical decisions for America (its voters, I mean) should come up to some minimal standards before leaving the house on Election Day. Voters should be able to tell the difference between worldviews... Voters should be free of regionalism and other types of ‘group-think’... Vocations, unions, ethnic groups and age groups that vote in lockstep are not behaving as free people. Citizens whose consciences are ruled by others should not govern a free nation... Voters should value their vote, but not sell it.” {4}

It didn’t take Albert Einstein to say it, but he did say “It is the duty of every citizen according to his best capacities to give validity to his convictions in political affairs.”{5}

Chuck Colson, convicted Watergate felon, said, “All you have to do is lose the right to vote once, and you would never again find any excuse for not going into the voting booth... Be a good citizen: Exercise the greatest right a free people have [sic].”[{6}](#)

God’s will and Kingdom will not be thwarted, and we cannot ultimately control outcomes, even as a voting bloc. As Christian citizens in America, we need to offer due diligence in voting and other political activities, trust God with the results, and keep spiritual concerns first.

Puritan Roots, Pluralism & Practical Politics

In 2007, for the first time a Hindu priest opened Senate deliberations with prayer. I asked a group of Christian homeschool parents gathered to discuss America’s political system if they could justify forbidding this, and no one could answer satisfactorily. Pluralism—when a culture supports various ethnic backgrounds, religions and political views—is a practical and, understood correctly, appropriate reality.

Americans—believers and non-believers alike—have inherited a system of governance based solidly on the Bible, but allowing for a plurality of beliefs or even unbelief. The Puritans who first colonized this land “saw themselves as the new Israel, an elect people.”[{7}](#)

The architects of our political arrangement, many of them professing Christians, were deeply influenced by the Puritan’s positive cultural impact and the Scriptures to which they appealed. Daniel Webster said, “Our ancestors established their system of government on morality and religious sentiment.”[{8}](#) John Quincy Adams said, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the

principles of Christianity.” George Washington, a devoted Christian, left room for others: “While just government protects all in their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support.”[{9}](#)

Probe’s *Mind Games* curriculum points out the realism of the founders in mitigating the imperfections of people even as they self-rule. “Again, we can see the genius of the American system. Madison and others realized the futility of trying to remove passions (human sinfulness) from the population. Therefore, he proposed that human nature be set against human nature. This was done by separating various institutional power structures.”[{10}](#) This was based on a biblical understanding of man, a proper anthropology.

So, how can such a firmly entrenched Judeo-Christian political heritage be reconciled with a culture increasingly full of Mormons, Hindus, Muslims, humanists, and other unbelievers living alongside Christians?

The Constitution and Bill of Rights justly allows for religious and political diversity. Nineteenth-century theologian Charles Hodge of Princeton regarding immigrants said:

All are welcomed; all are admitted to equal rights and privileges. All are allowed to acquire property, whatever their religious feelings, and to vote in every election, made eligible to all offices and invested with equal influence in all public affairs. All are allowed to worship as they please, or not to worship at all, if they see fit... No man is required to profess any form of faith... More than this cannot reasonably be demanded.[{11}](#)

Theologian Richard J. Mouw explored the possibility of evangelical politics that doesn’t compromise and at the same is time highly tolerant of other views. Not “anything-goes relativism,” but rather confidence that comes from God’s

guidebook for life, tempered by fair-minded ways of dealing with people. He wrote, "This humility does not exclude Christians advocating social and political policies that conflict with the views and practices of others. It does mean we should do so in a way that encourages reasonable dialogue and mutual respect."[\[12\]](#)

Believers need to consider the words of Bernard Crick: "Politics is a way of ruling in divided societies without undue violence... Politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good." Kenyans victimized by recent mob killings that erupted after disputed elections could testify that when the political process fails it can be devastating.

The founders, even as they envisioned pluralism, did not themselves have to deal deeply with it. It requires a keen worldview for voting and activism in today's truly pluralistic America. Our nation is based on an unmistakable Christian foundation, but that of course doesn't mean you *have to* be a Christian or even believe in God to participate.

Political Might and the Religious Right: Does God Take Sides?

Ever since Jimmy Carter ran for President based partly on his evangelical faith in the 1970s, and then the Moral Majority took the nation by storm in the '80s, there has been a non-stop discussion in America surrounding faith and politics.

Political power's seduction blinded believers, claim former movers and shakers like Ed Dobson. "One of the dangers," he said, "of mixing politics and religion is that you begin to think the only way to transform culture is by passing another law. Most of what we did in the Moral Majority was aimed at getting the right people elected so that we would have enough votes to pass the right laws."[\[13\]](#)

In those days, Christians seemed to believe they could legislate and administrate God's kingdom into full flower. However, core issues like gay unions and abortion remain largely unchanged or even worse today.

"History has shown us we can't rely totally on laws," continued Dobson.[{14}](#) A good example is Prohibition. The harder the government cracked down on alcohol, the more ways people found to get around the law. One result was increased crime. Laws don't change hearts; they are meant to restrain evil.

Sidling up to political power brokers even for commendable causes can prove disillusioning. Recently, conservative Christians hoped for fair and full consideration from the administration of the boldly evangelical George Bush. According to former White House deputy director for faith-based initiatives David Kuo, administration operators used and mocked evangelicals who were trying to do compassionate work partly funded through the government. But as Kuo asks, "What did they expect from politicians?" Good question for all of us. Jeremiah the prophet warned, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man."[{15}](#) That would seem to include man's politics.

Committed evangelical Bill Armstrong shared prophetically as a Senator back in 1983, "There is a danger when believers get deeply involved in political activity that they will try to put the mantle of Christ on their cause . . . to deify that cause and say, 'Because I'm motivated to run for office for reasons [of] faith, a vote for me is a vote for Jesus'."[{16}](#)

Ed Dobson often joked about God not being a Democrat or Republican—but *certainly not* a Democrat. But, he asked, "Is God the God of the religious and political left with its emphasis on the environment and the poor, or is he the God of the religious and political right with its emphasis on the unborn and the family? Both groups claim to speak for God."[{17}](#)

The Lord appeared to Joshua before a battle. He discovered that the issue wasn't whether God was on his side or his enemy's, but whether the people were on *God's* side. The religious and political Left casts itself as champion of the poor and the environment while the Right emphasizes the unborn and the family. Both say they speak for God. Seeking God's priorities and using His wisdom for our particular times is critical. However, "God's side" is not always easy to find.

So what's a Christian citizen's role? Armstrong and others believe Christians have been commanded by Christ to be involved. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" means more than paying taxes. Some basic biblical principles:

- *All political power comes from God;*
- *Government has a God-ordained role to play in society;*
- *Christians have a God-ordained responsibility to that government: to pray, submit to and honor government leaders and, of course, to pay our taxes.*[{18}](#)

The late Christian political activist, pastor, and author D. James Kennedy warned in the heady early days of "the Reagan Revolution" not to trust in the man Ronald Reagan but in God. "After victory," he writes, "many people give up the struggle and later discover they had won only a battle, not the war. Are you working less, praying less, giving less, trusting less? Maybe there is a bit of the humanist in all of us."[{19}](#) He continues, "The government . . . should be a means to godly ends. Ronald Reagan is but a stone in the sling, and you do not trust in stones; you trust in the living rock, Jesus Christ."[{20}](#)

Thus, voters, campaigners *and* officeholders need to heed the humility of experience in a fallen world and the understanding of the Founders that power corrupts and should be divided up, placing final trust in the Almighty.

Should We Elect a Christian When Given the Chance?

Talk show host Larry King asked pastor and author Max Lucado if religion should matter in an election campaign. I love his answer: “Well, genuine religion has to matter. We elect character. We elect a person’s worldview. Faith can define that worldview... [Within the] American population 85 percent of us say that religion matters to us. 72 percent of us say that the religion of a president matters.”[\[21\]](#) Polls show that Americans would sooner elect a Muslim or homosexual than an acknowledged atheist.[\[22\]](#)

Philosopher and early church father Augustine dealt with a culture war among the Romans. In his classic book *The City of God* he taught that “The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.”[\[23\]](#) Of course, a Christian will want to vote for a citizen of God’s city if there is a clear choice between him and a rank sinner. That choice is seldom so clear in elections. But understanding this dual citizenship of the Christian voter herself in the City of Man and The City of God is essential to dissecting complicated, sometimes competing priorities.

In the tangled vines surrounding campaign messages, it’s not so simple to discern a candidate’s worldview and decide who best matches our own, but that’s what wisdom and good stewardship require (and as recent scandals like Senator Larry Craig’s alleged homosexual improprieties shows, a politician’s stated views and behavior don’t always match). Seems like the Christian citizen’s top priority, then, is to have a biblical worldview to start with (something that Probe can help with greatly).

Given that, how does the average Christian voter decide on parties, platforms, and candidates? They do it based on principles of biblical ethics, godly values, simple logic and a discerning ear.

Remember, America is a republic, not a democracy. And in a republic we are to elect representatives who will rise above the passions of the moment. They are to be men and women of character and virtue, who will act responsibly and even nobly as they carry out the best interests of the people. No, we don't want leaders we can love because they remind us of our own darker side. We want leaders we can look up to and respect. [{24}](#)

Should we elect a person who claims to be a Christian, like former pastor Mike Huckabee? It depends. Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney received a standing ovation when said, "We need a person of faith to lead the country." A contributor to the blog run by Left-wing evangelical Jim Wallis responded, "But that statement is nearly meaningless, for even Sam Harris is a person of faith. Strident, angry, atheistic faith." [{25}](#) Good point: all have faith, but *faith in what or who?*

On the other hand, former Senator Bill Armstrong states, "God was able to make sons of Abraham out of stone. Certainly that means he can make a good legislator out of somebody who isn't necessarily a member of our church or maybe not even a Christian or maybe an atheist. So I don't think we ought to limit God by saying 'only Christians' deserve our support politically." [{26}](#)

The politically influential Dr. James Dobson caused a stir when he critiqued one candidate for not regularly attending church. Dr. Richard Land responded that this is not a deciding factor for him. He said that as a Baptist minister he would never have voted for the church-attending Jimmy Carter but did vote twice for the non-attending Ronald Reagan. This, like so

many others, seems to be an issue of individual conscience for voters.

Evangelical Mark DeMoss writes in support of Romney, a devout Mormon. “For years, evangelicals have been keenly interested to know whether a candidate shared their faith. I am now more interested in knowing that a president represents my values than I am that he or she shares my theology.”[{27}](#) After all, we’ve worked together on issues like abortion, pornography, and gambling. Can’t we be governed well by someone who shares most of our values, he reasons? As columnist Cal Thomas says, I care less about where the ambulance driver worships than if he knows where the hospital is.

Taking the high road of choosing good candidates, not necessarily ones whose theology one agrees with all down the line, makes voting and party affiliation complex for believers. We’d prefer a clean, easy set of choices. But, it appears that even voting and civic engagement is under the “sweat of the brow” curse of Genesis—nothing comes easy.

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias reminds us that we’re NOT electing a minister or church elder. He said:

I think as we elect, we go before God and [choose] out of the candidates who will be the best ones to represent [sanctity of life] values and at the same time be a good leader . . . whose first responsibility [is] to protect citizens.

What we want is a politician who will understand the basic Judeo-Christian worldview, and on the basis of that the moral laws of this nation are framed, and then run this country with the excellence of that which is recognized in a pluralistic society: the freedom to believe or to disbelieve, and the moral framework with which this was conducted: the sanctity of every individual life.[{28}](#)

Vote your conscience. Many issues are disputable matters, as

the Apostle Paul put it. Avoid the temptation to *unreflectively* limit your view to a few pet issues. If over time you prayerfully believe that stewardship of the environment is critical, balanced against all considerations, vote accordingly. If sanctity of life issues like abortion and stem cell research are paramount to you, by all means vote that way. However, realize that trade-offs are inevitable; there won't be a perfect candidate who falls in line on all our values and priorities.

Politics, Religion, and Values

As the old saw goes, “never talk about politics and religion.” That may be wise advice when Uncle Harry is over for Thanksgiving dinner. But as a rule of life, it breeds ignorance and passivity in self-government. “Only if we allow a biblical worldview and a biblically balanced agenda guide our concrete political work can we significantly improve the political order,” according to a statement by the National Association of Evangelicals.[{29}](#) That means dialogue, and that's not easy.

Some prefer a public square where anything goes *but* religion. That would be wrong. Likewise, a so-called “sacred public square,” with religious values imposed on everyone, would be unfair. Christians should support a “*civil* public square” with open, respectful debate.[{30}](#)

But, you often hear people make statements like, “Christians shouldn't try to legislate morality.” They might simply mean you can't make people good by passing laws. Fair enough. But *all law*, divine and civil, involves imposing right and wrong. Prohibitions against murder and rape are judgments on good and bad. The question is not whether we *should* legislate morality but rather, “*What kind* of morality we should legislate?”[{31}](#)

Yet tragically, as *iVoteValues.com* discovered, “many believers

don't even consider their values when voting," often choosing candidates whose positions are at odds with their own beliefs, convictions, and values. A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study found that *nearly two-thirds* of Americans say their faith has little to do with their voting decisions!{32} Many believers are missing a chance to be salt and light to the watching world.

What about when the field of candidates offers only "the lesser of two evils"? Like when only one candidate is anti-abortion yet she holds to other troubling positions? That requires thoughtful distinctions. If the reason you vote for candidate X is only to avoid the graver consequences of voting for candidate Y, you're not formally cooperating with evil. In this case, whatever evil comes from the anti-abortion candidate you helped elect due to your convictions would be unintended. Same as if you were a bank teller and the robber demanded, "Give me all the money or I'll blow this guy's brains out." You cooperate to avoid the greater evil, but your intent was not to enable the robbery.{33} It's hard to argue against this reasoning in a fallen world where even God allows evil for greater purposes.

What about cases when the field of candidates offers only "the lesser of two evils"? For instance, you can't decide between the more pro-abortion candidate who's otherwise highly qualified *and* the anti-abortion person who has some real flaws.

Some believe that if you vote for the pro-abortion person for other important reasons, then you are not responsible for abortions that might result, as briefly illustrated above. Others see a necessary connection—vote for a "pro-abort" and you are guilty. Study and pray hard on such issues as God gives freedom of conscience.

Sometimes it comes down to choices we'd rather not make. Only rarely, perhaps, can we say that to abstain from voting is the

only way. Notable Christian author Mark Noll believes this is such a time for him.[\[34\]](#)

Others warn that this only helps elect the candidates with unbiblical values. One commentator wrote, "Voters should not spend their franchise on empty gestures... No successful politician is as strong on every issue as we would like. Our own pastors and parents can't pass this test in their much smaller contexts. Rather than striking a blow for purity, we risk giving up our influence altogether when we follow a man with only one or two 'perfect' ideas."[\[35\]](#)

Hold this kind of issue with an open hand. Many change their minds as they age and lose unrealistic youthful idealism. But if God gives a clear conviction, again, stick with that value or candidate. Only seek the difference between legalism and God's leading.

Some more left-leaning evangelicals like Ron Sider and Jim Wallis value helping the poor and dispossessed through government, while critics claim that as the Church's exclusive role. The retort: the Church is failing in its duty and it's a fulfillment of the Church's duty to advocate for government intervention. Others focus on sanctity of life issues not only as a higher priority, but as part of the government's biblically mandated task of protecting its citizenry. What is your conviction? Best be deciding if you don't know yet.

The purple ink-stained fingers of Iraqi citizens who voted at their own risk for the first time in decades testify to the precious privilege of voting in a free society. Americans gave blood and treasure to free them. Don't let the same sacrifice made by our ancestors on our behalf go to waste. Inform yourself. "Study to show yourself approved" not only regarding Scripture, but as a citizen of The Cities of Man and of God.

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Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and

wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound),” Newton wrote, “That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”[\[1\]](#) He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton’s song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It’s loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.[\[2\]](#) My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.[\[3\]](#) Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject’s. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He’s now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton’s journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical “bad boy.” His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, “I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it.”^{4} At times, “I pretended to talk of virtue,” he wrote, “yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness.”^{5} He espoused a “freethinking” rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.^{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.^{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, “I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.”^{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.^{9} Life was good, he recalled. “We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied.”^{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.^{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, “to pass away the time”—an edition of Thomas à Kempis’ classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, “What if these things were true?” Dismayed, he “shut the book quickly.”^{12} Newton called himself a terrible “blasphemer” who had rejected God completely.^{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so

often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”[{14}](#)

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”[{15}](#)

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we’ll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.[{16}](#)

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.[{17}](#)

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn’t excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. [I](#)

[concluded](#) that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."[\[18\]](#)

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.[\[19\]](#)

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.[\[20\]](#) Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.[\[21\]](#)

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.[\[22\]](#) Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering

the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.[{23}](#) His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.[{24}](#)

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.[{25}](#) During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."[{26}](#)

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."[{27}](#) His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.[{28}](#) Jonathan

Aitken says, “Newton’s testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause.”[{29}](#)

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered “many dangers, toils, and snares” on his life’s voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don’t always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, “Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet.”

Humility became a hallmark of Newton’s approach to life. He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: “What cause have I for humiliation!” he exclaimed. “Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!”[{30}](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”[{31}](#)

Newton related Jesus’ message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and

friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[{32}](#)

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[{33}](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[{34}](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[{35}](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."[{36}](#)

Notes

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5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 34.
7. *Ibid.*, 34-37; 40-41.
8. *Ibid.*, 44-45.
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12. Newton, op. cit., 69.
13. Ibid., 65, 68.
14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.
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18. Ibid., 112.
19. Ibid., 125-126.
20. Ibid., 127-137.
21. Ibid., 140-141.
22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.
23. Ibid., 304.
24. Ibid., 299-308.
25. Ibid., 310 ff.
26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.
27. Ibid., 319.
28. Ibid., 319-328.
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30. Ibid., 243.
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36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

William Wilberforce and Abolishing the Slave Trade: How True Christian Values Ended Support of Slavery

Rusty Wright provides an insightful summary of the journey which led William Wilberforce from unbelief to Christ and to leading the fight to abolish the slave trade in Britain. He clearly shows how true Christian values were key in inspiring Wilberforce's persistent effort to rid Britain of this shameful scourge, the slave trade.

Slavery's Scourge

What do you think of slavery? Are you for it or against it?

I suspect most readers would immediately denounce slavery as a scourge on humanity. But in the eighteenth century, much of western society accepted slavery and the slave trade. It took heroic efforts by dedicated leaders to turn the tide.

William Wilberforce, the famous British parliamentarian, helped lead a grueling but bipartisan twenty-year struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. His inspiring story has many lessons for today's leaders.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged Wilberforce's significant role in abolition.^[1] Nelson Mandela, addressing the British Parliament in 1996 as South Africa's president, declared, "We have returned to the land of William Wilberforce who dared . . . to demand that the slaves in our country should be freed."^[2]

The task was formidable. Eighteenth-century Britain led the world in slave trading. A pillar of colonial economy, the

trade was legal, lucrative, and brutal. In one notorious episode, a ship's captain threw 132 slaves overboard, claiming illness and water shortage. British law protected the ship's owners, considering slaves property (like "horses," ruled one judge).[{3}](#)

African tribal chiefs, Arab slave dealers, and European traders rounded up Africans, stuffed them into ships' holds, and delivered them to colonial auctions for sale and forced servitude. The "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic was especially horrific. Slaves typically lay horizontal, shackled and chained to each other, packed like sardines. The air was stale and the sanitation putrid.

Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave, said the "stench of the hold," the heat, and the cramped quarters brought sickness and much death. The deceased, Equiano explained, fell "victims to the improvident avarice . . . of their purchasers." He wrote, "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable." Some slaves, when taken up on deck, jumped overboard, preferring death to their misery.[{4}](#)

Enter William Wilberforce, young, silver-tongued, popular, ambitious, seemingly destined for political greatness. Then, a profound change led him on a path that some say cost him the prime ministership, but helped rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Wilberforce's "Great Change"

The transatlantic slave trade was filled with horror stories about human inhumanity. John Newton, a former slave trader, told of a shipmate "who threw a child overboard because it moaned at night in its mother's arms and kept him awake."[{5}](#)

William Wilberforce grew up among Britain's privileged, far from these horrors. Heir to a fortune, he was a slacker and

socialite at Cambridge. Sporting an adept sense of humor, he loved partying and playing cards more than schoolwork. His superior intellect frequently covered for his lax academic habits. His keen mind, delightful wit, and charming personality kept many doors open.[{6}](#)

At Cambridge, he befriended William Pitt the Younger, who would become Britain's youngest Prime Minister. Both were elected to Parliament in their twenties. Wilberforce became Pitt's bulldog, using his oratorical and relational skills to advance Pitt's legislative agenda.

From 1784 to 1786, what he later called his "Great Change" would forever reshape his life's work. It began innocently enough when he invited his friend, Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, to accompany him on a journey to France. Milner was a brilliant scientist who eventually became vice chancellor of Cambridge. (That's similar to a university president in the U.S.) As they conversed during the trip, Wilberforce was surprised to hear Milner speak favorably of biblical faith. Wilberforce was a skeptic and wanted nothing to do with ardent believers to whom he had been exposed in his youth.

During their travels, Milner and Wilberforce spent long hours discussing faith and the Bible. His doubts receded as Milner answered his objections. Initial intellectual assent to Christian faith morphed into deeper conviction and a personal relationship with God.[{7}](#)

Back in England, he reluctantly consulted John Newton, slave trader turned pastor and writer of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton had been Wilberforce's minister for a time during his youth, before his spiritual interest waned. Wilberforce wrote that after his meeting with Newton, "My mind was in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, looking more devoutly up to God."[{8}](#) Newton encouraged Wilberforce that God had raised him up "for the good of the nation."[{9}](#)

In time, Wilberforce grew to consider “the suppression of the slave trade” part of his God-given destiny.^{10} At first he thought abolition would come quickly, but he guessed incorrectly, as we will see.

The Battle in Parliament

When William Wilberforce first introduced anti-slave-trade legislation into Parliament, he had high hopes. He quickly learned that opposition would be fierce.

Financial stakeholders howled. Significant elements of British economy relied on slavery. Businesspersons didn't want to sacrifice profit. Their elected representatives didn't want to sacrifice votes. Some claimed slavery benefited slaves since it removed them from barbarous Africa. The Royal Family opposed abolition. Even Admiral Lord Nelson, Britain's great hero, denounced “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.”^{11}

Wilberforce and the Abolitionists repeatedly introduced legislation. Apathy, hostility and parliamentary chicanery dragged out the battle. Once, his opponents distributed free opera tickets to some abolition supporters for the evening of a crucial vote, which the Abolitionists then lost. Enough supporting members of Parliament were at the opera to have reversed the outcome.^{12} Twice West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce's life. His health faltered.^{13}

Buoyed by friends and faith, Wilberforce persisted. He believed God viewed all humans as equal,^{14} citing Acts 17:26, “[God] has made from one blood every nation of men.” Methodism founder John Wesley encouraged perseverance, writing, “If God is with you, who can be against you? . . . Be not weary in well-doing. Go on . . . till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away.”^{15} John Newton wrote and testified in Parliament about his experiences as a

slave trader, “a business at which my heart now shudders,” he explained.[{16}](#)

Finally, in 1807, twenty years after beginning, Wilberforce prevailed. Parliament erupted in cheering as the slave trade abolition bill passed.

Of course, outlawing the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807 did not immediately eradicate the trade. In fact, it continued, practiced illegally for a while by British subjects and for decades among other nations like France, Spain and Portugal. Alas, African tribal chiefs and Arab slave-dealers continued to supply captured Africans for the system.[{17}](#)

But outlawing the slave trade proved the impetus for a host of social improvements, including prison reforms, child labor laws, and abolition of slavery itself in 1833, of which Wilberforce learned only a few days before his death.

Wilberforce's Methods: Lessons for Today

The esteemed historian W.E.H. Lecky ranked the British anti-slavery movement “among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages . . . in the history of nations.”[{18}](#) While, of course, Wilberforce and his Abolitionist colleagues were not perfect, their historic effort left many lessons for today. Consider a few that could enhance your own interaction in the workplace, academia, politics, cross-cultural engagement, in your neighborhood or family.

The value of friendships and teamwork. Many of the Abolitionists lived for several years in the same community. They and their families enjoyed one another's friendship and moral support. This camaraderie provided invaluable encouragement, ideas, and correction.

Bipartisan cooperation was essential to Wilberforce's success. He set aside differences on certain issues to collaborate for

the greater good. Both political liberals and conservatives joined the abolition cause. Quakers mobilized support. Wilberforce partnered with Jeremy Bentham founder of Utilitarianism on abolition and prison reform.[{19}](#) Utilitarianism, of course, favors the end justifying the means, hardly a biblical value.[{20}](#) Yet the two could work together.

Wilberforce sought to make civil discourse civil. Biographer Kevin Belmonte notes, “After his Great Change Wilberforce was nearly always able to dissent from the opinions of others with tact and kindness. This trait grew gradually within him; it was not instantaneous, nor did he always act as charitably as he might have wished on some occasions. But he kept trying.”[{21}](#) He aimed to disagree without being disagreeable.

Wilberforce attempted to establish common ground with his opponents. In his opening speech on abolition before Parliament, he was especially gracious. “I mean not to accuse anyone,” he explained, “but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others.”[{22}](#)

William Wilberforce was not perfect. He had fears, flaws and foibles like anyone. You likely would not agree with all his political views. But he did possess dedication to principle and to God, close friends of many stripes, a penchant for bipartisan cooperation, and steadfast commitment to right terrible injustice. A fine example for life and work today.

Wilberforce’s Motivation: Lessons for Today

Have you ever been tempted by opposition to abandon a good

cause? What motivated William Wilberforce to persevere in pursuing abolition for twenty agonizing years?

After discovering faith, Wilberforce viewed the world through different lenses-biblical lenses. He authored a popular book to explain faith's implications. Famous parliamentarian Edmund Burke, who found solace in it during his last two days of life, said, "If I live, I shall thank Wilberforce for having sent such a book into the world."[{23}](#)

Wilberforce's book, *Real Christianity*,[{24}](#) emphasized personal, life-changing faith, not mere nominal assent. He wrote, "God loved the world so much and felt such tender mercy for us that He gave His only Son Jesus Christ for our redemption."[{25}](#) He felt all humans have an innate flawself-centeredness or sin that inhibits true generosity, "clouds our moral vision and blunts our moral sensitivity."[{26}](#) He called selfishness "the mortal disease of all political communities"[{27}](#) and humbly admitted his own "need and imperfection."[{28}](#)

Wilberforce believed Jesus suffered "death on the cross . . . for our sake" so those accepting His pardon "should come to Him and . . . have life that lasts forever."[{29}](#) Don't get the cart before the horse, he warned. Good behavior doesn't earn God's acceptance; it should be a result of "our reconciliation with God."[{30}](#) Wilberforce encouraged his reader to "Throw yourself completely . . . on [God's] undeserved mercy. He is full of love, and He will never reject you."[{31}](#)

Wilberforce aspired to the Golden Rule: "doing to others as we would have them do to us."[{32}](#) He believed the faith was intellectually credible and advocated teaching its supporting evidences,[{33}](#) but cautioned that "a lack of faith is in general a disease of the heart more than of the mind."[{34}](#)

Wilberforce asked penetrating questions: "Do we love our

enemies? Are we gentle even when we are provoked? Are we ready to forgive and apt to forget injuries? . . . Do we return evil with good . . . ? Can we rejoice in our enemy's good fortune, or sympathize with their distresses?"[\[35\]](#) Sound convicting? Join the club.

An inscribed tribute to Wilberforce at Westminster Abbey where he is buried commends his efforts, "Which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: . . . he relied, not in vain, on God."[\[36\]](#)

Wilberforce's legacy of faith and service persists. What will your legacy be?

*Parts of this essay are adapted from Rusty Wright, "['Amazing Grace' Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians](#)," Copyright Rusty Wright 2007, and are used by permission.

Notes

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7. Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 2007), 21, 69-81 ff.; Lean, op. cit., 32-40.

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10. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 97.

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27. Ibid., 243 ff.; 246.

28. Ibid., 256-257.

29. Ibid., 50-51.

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33. Wilberforce, op. cit., 18; 221-222; 285-293.

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Marriage, Family, and Political Views

Does our view of marriage and family affect our worldview? Obviously it does. But most people have probably never thought about the fact that marriage and family also affect voting patterns.

We are a year away from the November 2008 elections, but some trend watchers are starting to see interesting patterns that will affect elections in the next few decades. In particular,

they are finding a marriage gap and a fertility gap.

Marriage Gap

An article in *USA Today* pointed out how a wedding band could be crucial in future elections. House districts held by Republicans are full of married people. Democratic districts are stacked with people who have never married.[{1}](#)

Consider that before the 2006 Congressional elections, Republicans controlled 49 of the 50 districts with the highest rates of married people. On the other hand, Democrats represented all 50 districts that had the highest rates of adults who have never married.

If you go back to the 2004 presidential election, you see a similar pattern. President George Bush beat Senator John Kerry by 15 percentage points among married people. However, Senator Kerry beat President Bush by 18 percentage points among unmarried people.

Married people not only vote differently from unmarried people, they tend to define words like family differently as well. And they tend to perceive government differently. But an even more significant gap in politics involves not just marriage but fertility.

Fertility Gap

When you look at the various congressional districts, you not only see a difference in marriage but in fertility. Consider these two extremes. House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, a Catholic mother of five from San Francisco, has fewer children in her district than any other member of Congress: 87,727. Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, a Mormon father of eight, represents the most children: 278,398.[{2}](#)

This stark demographic divide illustrates the difference in perspectives found in Congress. Republican members of Congress

represented 39 million children younger than 18. This is 7 million more children than are represented in districts with Democratic members of Congress. And it is also true that children in Democratic districts are far more likely to live in poverty and more likely to have a single parent than children in Republican districts.

This fertility gap explains the differences in worldview and political perspective. When you consider the many political issues before Congress that affect children and families, you can begin to see why there are often stark differences in perspectives on topics ranging from education to welfare to childcare to child health insurance.

Future of the Fertility Gap

So far we have been looking at the past and the present. What about the future? Arthur Brooks wrote about the fertility gap last year in the *Wall Street Journal*. He concluded that liberals have a big baby problem: They're not having enough of them . . . and their pool of potential new voters is suffering as a result. [\[3\]](#)

He noted that, if you picked 100 unrelated politically liberal adults at random, you would find that they had, between them, 147 children. If you picked 100 conservatives, you would find 208 kids. That is a fertility gap of 41 percent.

We know that about 80 percent of people with an identifiable party preference grow up to vote essentially the same way as their parents. This fertility gap translates into lots more little conservatives than little liberals who will vote in future elections.

So what could this mean for future presidential elections? Consider the key swing state of Ohio which is currently split 50-50 between left and right. If current patterns continue, Brooks estimates that Ohio will swing to the right. By 2012 it

will be 54 percent to 46 percent. And by 2020, it will be solidly conservative by a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent.

Now look at the state of California that tilts in favor of liberals by 55 percent to 45 percent. By the year 2020, it will swing conservative by a percentage of 54 percent to 46 percent. The reason is due to the fertility gap.

Of course most people vote for politicians, personalities, and issues not parties. But the general trend of the fertility gap cannot be ignored. I think we can see the impact that marriage and family have on worldview and political views. And as we can see from these numbers, they will have an even more profound impact in the future.

Notes

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2. Dennis Cauchon, Fertility gap helps explain political divide, *USA Today*, 27 September 2006.
3. Arthur Brooks, The Fertility Gap, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 August 2006.

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Veep Logic?

When you're the Vice President of the United States and your office uses farfetched arguments to defend your policies, maybe it's time to review your logic.

Dick Cheney's aides have supported his office's refusal to comply with an executive order because, they've said, the Veep is not part of the government's executive branch. Huh? Seems

his duties as president of the Senate, part of the legislative branch, exempt him from executive orders.

The White House now has backed off Cheney's approach and welcomed him back into the executive branch—but he still doesn't have to comply.

Confused? Amused? Disturbed?

Civics Lesson

I've forgotten more of my early education than I care to admit, but I do remember junior high school civics class: Executive, legislative, and judicial. President and VP are executive branch, Congress is legislative, Supreme Court is judicial.

In 2003, President Bush amended an existing executive order about classified information in light of post-9/11 security concerns. Executive branch entities are to report to an oversight agency about how they handle classified material.

Bush's order applies to executive agencies and any other entity within the executive branch that comes into the possession of classified information. [{1}](#) You would think that includes the Office of the Vice President, but Cheney's office has refused since 2003 to comply.

Logical problems with the dual-role argument are legion. Cheney in the past has invoked executive privilege to maintain secrets. Surely having legislative branch duties does not negate one's executive branch status. Can a student disobey school rules because s/he also participates in community service projects?

Cheney's Gift to Jon Stewart

Recently the dual-role logic made headlines. Administration critics howled. Humorists roared. "Cheney's gift to Jon

Stewart,” remarked one journalist friend. The Comedy Central’s *Daily Show* TV anchor joked that Cheney was establishing himself as the fourth branch of government. [{2}](#)

Congressman Rahm Emanuel of Illinois proposed cutting funding for Cheney’s office and home. “He’s not part of the executive branch. We’re not going to fund something that doesn’t exist,” said Emanuel according to the *Chicago Tribune*. “I’m following through on the vice president’s logic, no matter how ludicrous it might be.” [{3}](#) The funding cut narrowly failed in the House.

The Washington Post noted that Emanuel also opposed Cheney’s participation in the congressional baseball game because “he would remake the rules to his liking.” [{4}](#)

Now a White House spokesman says the dual-role argument is not necessary. He says the executive order explicitly gives Cheney the same standing in the matter as Bush, who issued and enforces the order, so the subordinate oversight agency has no authority to investigate Cheney. [{5}](#)

That huge sigh you hear is America relieved that a constitutional crisis has been averted. The internal dispute was passed on to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, who, of course, [has his own critics](#).

The Question Remains

But the question remains, what are we to make of a high government office that would use such unreasonable reasoning in the first place? Are its leaders naive? Desperate? Covering up something? Blind to the obvious?

The entire episode hints of George Orwell’s [Animal Farm](#): All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

Cheney’s distorted logic involves focusing on his lesser

legislative responsibility and minimizing his major executive responsibilities. Another adept social critic, Jesus of Nazareth, once rebuked some legalistic leaders for majoring on the minors and minimizing what's important. "Blind guides!" he called them. "You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat; then you swallow a camel!" {6}

Cheney seems to—or seems to want us to—strain the gnat and swallow the camel. Is it a wonder such tenuous logic makes observers suspicious?

Notes

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3. Leora Falk, "Emanuel seeks to cut funding for Cheney's office, home," Chicago Tribune, June 26, 2007; tinyurl.com/2mmdzt; accessed June 29, 2007.
4. Dana Milbank, "The Cheese Stands Alone," The Washington Post, June 26, 2007, A02; tinyurl.com/ywffjo; accessed June 29, 2007.
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6. Matthew 23:24 NLT.

God in Our Nation's Capital

U.S. Capitol Building

In our minds, let's take a walking tour through America's capital city, Washington, DC. What we will be seeing in our minds eye comes from the book *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nations History and Future*.^{1} As we consider what religious symbols are found in the buildings and monuments, I think we will gain a fresh appreciation for the role of religion in the public square.

We will begin with the U.S. Capitol Building. No other building in Washington defines the skyline like this one does. It has been the place of formal inaugurations as well as informal and spontaneous events, such as when two hundred members of Congress gathered on the steps on September 12, 2001, to sing God Bless America.

President George Washington laid the cornerstone for the Capitol in 1793. When the north wing was finished in 1800, Congress was able to move in. Construction began again in 1803 under the direction of Benjamin Latrobe. The British invasion of Washington in 1812 resulted in the partial destruction of the Capitol. In 1818, Charles Bulfinch oversaw the completion of the north and south wings (including a chamber for the Supreme Court).^{2}

Unfortunately, the original design failed to consider that additional states would enter the union, and these additional representatives were crowding the Capitol. President Millard Fillmore chose Thomas Walter to continue the Capitol's construction and rehabilitation. Construction halted during the first part of the Civil War, and it wasn't until 1866 that

the canopy fresco in the Rotunda was completed.

The religious imagery in the Rotunda is significant. Eight different historical paintings are on display. The first is the painting *The Landing of Columbus* that depicts the arrival on the shores of America. Second is *The Embarkation of the Pilgrims* that shows the Pilgrims observing a day of prayer and fasting led by William Brewster.

Third is the painting *Discovery of the Mississippi by DeSoto*. Next to DeSoto is a monk who prays as a crucifix is placed in the ground. Finally, there is the painting *Baptism of Pocahontas*.

Throughout the Capitol Building, there are references to God and faith. In the Cox Corridor a line from America the Beautiful is carved in the wall: America! God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea!{3}

In the House chamber is the inscription, In God We Trust. Also in the House chamber, above the Gallery door, stands a marble relief of Moses, the greatest of the twenty-three law-givers (and the only one full-faced). At the east entrance to the Senate chamber are the words *Annuit Coeptis* which is Latin for God has favored our undertakings. The words In God We Trust are also written over the southern entrance.

In the Capitol's Chapel is a stained glass window depicting George Washington in prayer under the inscription In God We Trust. Also, a prayer is inscribed in the window which says, Preserve me, God, for in Thee do I put my trust.{4}

The Washington Monument

The tallest monument in Washington, DC, is the Washington Monument. From the base of the monument to its aluminum capstone are numerous references to God. This is fitting since

George Washington was a religious man. When he took the oath of office on April 30, 1789, he asked that the Bible be opened to Deuteronomy 28. After the oath, Washington added, So help me God and bent forward and kissed the Bible before him. {5}

Construction of the Washington Monument began in 1848, but by 1854 the Washington National Monument Society was out of money and construction stopped for many years. Mark Twain said it had the forlorn appearance of a hollow, oversized chimney. In 1876, Congress appropriated money for the completion of the monument which took place in 1884. In a ceremony on December 6, the aluminum capstone was placed atop the monument. The east side of the capstone has the Latin phrase *Laus Deo*, which means Praise be to God.

The cornerstone of the Washington Monument includes a Holy Bible, which was a gift from the Bible Society. Along with it are copies of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

If you walk inside the monument you will see a memorial plaque from the Free Press Methodist-Episcopal Church. On the twelfth landing you will see a prayer offered by the city of Baltimore. On the twentieth landing you will see a memorial offered by Chinese Christians. There is also a presentation made by Sunday school children from New York and Philadelphia on the twenty-fourth landing.

The monument is full of carved tribute blocks that say: Holiness to the Lord; Search the Scriptures; The memory of the just is blessed; May Heaven to this union continue its beneficence; In God We Trust; and Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

So what was George Washington's faith? Historians have long debated the extent of his faith. But Michael Novak points out that Washington's own step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis, thought his words and actions were so plain and obvious that she could

not understand how anybody failed to see that he had always lived as a serious Christian.{6}

During the first meeting of the Continental Congress in September 1774, George Washington prayed alongside the other delegates. And they recited Psalm 35 together as patriots.

George Washington also proclaimed the first national day of thanksgiving in the United States. In 1795 he said, When we review the calamities which afflict so many other nations, the present condition of the United States affords much matter of consolation and satisfaction. He therefore called for a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. He said, In such a state of things it is in an especial manner our duty as people, with devout reverence and affectionate gratitude, to acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God and implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience.{7}

The Lincoln Memorial

The idea of a memorial to the sixteenth president had been discussed almost within days after his assassination, but lack of finances proved to be a major factor. Finally, Congress allocated funds for it during the Taft administration. Architect Henry Bacon wanted to model it after the Greek Parthenon, and work on it was completed in 1922.

Bacon chose the Greek Doric columns in part to symbolize Lincolns fight to preserve democracy during the Civil War.{8} The thirty-six columns represented the thirty-six states that made up the Union at the time of Lincolns death.

Daniel Chester French sculpted the statue of Abraham Lincoln to show his compassionate nature and his resolve in preserving the Union. One of Lincolns hands is tightly clenched (to show his determination) while the other hand is open and relaxed (to show his compassion).

Lincolns speeches are displayed within the memorial. On the left side is the Gettysburg Address (only 267 words long). He said, We here highly resolved that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.

On the right side is Lincolns second inaugural address (only 703 words long). It mentions God fourteen times and quotes the Bible twice. He reflected on the fact that the Civil War was not controlled by man, but by God. He noted that each side looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.

He concludes with a lament over the destruction caused by the Civil War, and appeals to charity in healing the wounds of the war. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

It is fitting that one hundred years after Lincolns second inaugural, his memorial was the place where Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his most famous speech, I have a dream. An inscription was added to the memorial in 2003 that was based upon Isaiah 40:4-5: I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

At a White House dinner during the war, a clergyman gave the benediction and closed with the statement that The Lord is on the Unions side. Abraham Lincoln responded: I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on

the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lords side.[{9}](#)

The Jefferson Memorial

Thomas Jefferson was Americas third president and the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, so it is surprising that a memorial to him was not built earlier than it was. In 1934, Franklin Delano Roosevelt persuaded Congress to establish a memorial commission to honor Jefferson. After some study the commission decided to honor Pierre L'Enfants original plan, which called for the placement of five different memorials that would be aligned in a cross-like manner.[{10}](#)

The architect of the memorial proposed a Pantheon-like structure that was modeled after Jeffersons own home which incorporated the Roman architecture that Jefferson admired. The original design was modified, and the memorial was officially dedicated in 1943.

When you enter the Jefferson Memorial you will find many references to God. A quote that runs around the interior dome says, I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the minds of man.

On the first panel, you will see the famous passage from the Declaration of Independence: We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

On the second panel is an excerpt from A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1777. It was passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1786. It reads: Almighty God hath created the mind free. . . . All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion. . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or

ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions of belief, but all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.

The third panel is taken from Jefferson's 1785 Notes on the State of Virginia. It reads: God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.

The Supreme Court

Of the three branches of government, the Supreme Court was the last to get its own building. In fact, it met in the Capitol building for over a hundred years. During that time, it met in many different rooms of the capitol until it finally settled in the Old Senate Chamber in 1860.

Supreme Court Justice William Howard Taft (who also had served as president) persuaded Congress to authorize funds for the Supreme Court building. It was modeled after Greek and Roman architecture in the familiar Corinthian style and dedicated in 1935.

It is ironic that the Supreme Court has often issued opinions which have stripped religious displays from the public square when these opinions have been read in a building with many religious displays. And it is ironic that public expressions of faith have been limited when all sessions of the court begin with the Courts Marshal announcing: God save the United States and this honorable court.

In a number of cases, the Supreme Court has declared the posting of the Ten Commandments unconstitutional (in public school classrooms and in a local courthouse in Kentucky). But this same Supreme Court has a number of places in its building where there are images of Moses with the Ten Commandments. These can be found at the center of the sculpture over the east portico of the Supreme Court building, inside the actual courtroom, and finally, engraved over the chair of the Chief Justice, and on the bronze doors of the Supreme Court itself.[{11}](#)

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has often ruled against the very kind of religious expression that can be found in the building that houses the court. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich says in his book *Rediscovering God in America*, that we see a systematic effort . . . to purge all religious expression from American public life. He goes on to say that for the last fifty years the Supreme Court has become a permanent constitutional convention in which the whims of five appointed lawyers have rewritten the meaning of the Constitution. Under this new, all-powerful model of the Court, and by extension the trail-breaking Ninth Circuit Court, the Constitution and the law can be redefined by federal judges unchecked by the other two coequal branches of government.[{12}](#)

This is the state of affairs we find in the twenty-first century. If five justices believe that prayer at a public school graduation is unconstitutional, then it is unconstitutional. If five justices believe that posting the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional, it is unconstitutional.

If the trend continues, one wonders if one day they may rule that religious expression on public monuments is unconstitutional. If that takes place, then you might want to invest in sandblasting companies in the Washington, DC, area. There are lots of buildings and monuments with words about God, faith, and religion. It would take a long time to erase all of these words from public view.

The next time you are in our nations capital, make sure you take a walking tour of the buildings and monuments. They testify to a belief in God and a dynamic faith that today is often under attack from the courts and the culture.

Notes

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3. Ibid., 81.

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Ibid., 35.

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9. Ibid., 54.

10. Ibid., 44.

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12. Ibid., 132.

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Ten Commandments in America (Radio)

The ongoing debate about the posting the Ten Commandments in public places has certainly been controversial for the last few decades. But as we will see this week, there was a time not so long ago when politicians and citizens alike saw the Ten Commandments as the very foundation of our society.

In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled against the posting of the Ten Commandments in the public schools in the case of *Stone v. Graham*. They ruled that the preeminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature.

The justices even worried what would happen if students were to read the Ten Commandments on their classroom wall: If the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are to have any effect at all, it will be to induce the schoolchildren to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and obey, the Commandments. However desirable this might be as a matter of private devotion, it is not a permissible state objective under the Establishment Clause.[{1}](#)

In 2005, the Supreme Court revisited this decision because of cases from Kentucky and Texas. A divided court struck down displays in two Kentucky courthouses, but ruled a Ten Commandments monument on state government land in Texas was acceptable. Anyone looking for a clear line of reasoning that provides guidance for future cases will not find them.

In the Kentucky cases, two counties posted copies of the Ten Commandments on the walls of their courthouse. These framed copies of the Ten Commandments hung alongside documents such as the Bill of Rights, the Star-Spangled Banner, and a version of the Congressional Record declaring 1983 the Year of the Bible. These were considered unconstitutional.

The Texas case involved a six foot granite monument on the grounds of the Texas Capitol. It was deemed acceptable because it is one of seventeen historical displays on the twenty-two-acre lot. Although this was considered constitutional, some justices couldn't even accept that. Justice John Paul Stevens said, The monument is not a work of art and does not refer to any event in the history of the state, he wrote. The message transmitted by Texas chosen display is quite plain: This state endorses the divine code of the Judeo-Christian God.[{2}](#)

Other justices noted that one monument among many others is hardly an endorsement of religion. You can stop to read it, you can ignore it, or you can walk around it. Chief Justice William Rehnquist argued that the monuments placement on the grounds among secular monuments was passive, rather than confrontational. Justice Antonin Scalia listed various ways in which higher beings are invoked in public life, from so help me God in inaugural oaths to the prayer that opens the Supreme Courts sessions. He asked, With all of this reality (and much more) staring it in the face, how can the court possibly assert that the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality?

The framers of the Constitution didnt try to mandate neutrality. They understood that ultimately law must rest upon a moral foundation. One of those foundations was the Ten Commandments.

Ten Commandments in American History

When we look at the Founding Fathers, we see they were anything but neutral when it came to addressing the influence of the Ten Commandments on our republic. For example, twelve of the original thirteen colonies incorporated the entire Ten Commandments into their civil and criminal codes. [{3}](#)

John Quincy Adams stated, The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal as well as a moral and religious code. These are laws essential to the existence of men in society and most of which have been enacted by every nation which ever professed any code of laws. He added that: Vain indeed would be the search among the writings of [secular history] . . . to find so broad, so complete and so solid a basis of morality as this Decalogue lays down. [{4}](#)

John Witherspoon was the president of what later came to be known as Princeton University and was a signer of the

Declaration of Independence. He said that the Ten Commandments are the sum of the moral law.[{5}](#)

John Jay was one of the authors of *The Federalist Papers*. He later became the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. He said, The moral or natural law, was given by the sovereign of the universe to all mankind.[{6}](#)

On September 19, 1796, in his Farewell Address, President George Washington said, Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.[{7}](#)

William Holmes McGuffey, considered the Schoolmaster of the Nation, once said, The Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus are not only basic but plenary.[{8}](#)

The founders of this country also wanted to honor Moses as the deliverer of the Ten Commandments. After separating from England, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were responsible for designing a symbol of this newly formed nation. Franklin proposed Moses lifting his wand and dividing the Red Sea.[{9}](#)

In the U.S. Capitol, there are displays of the great lawgivers (Hammurabi, Justinian, John Locke, William Blackstone, etc). All are profiles of the lawgivers except for one. The relief of Moses is full faced rather than in profile and looks directly down onto the House Speakers rostrum.

Anyone who enters the National Archives to view the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution must first pass by the Ten Commandments embedded in the entry way of the Archives. Likewise, there are a number of depictions of the Ten Commandments. One is on the entry to the Supreme Court Chamber, where it is engraved on the lower half of the two large oak doors.

Another is engraved in the stone above the head of the Chief

Justice with the great American eagle protecting them. And Moses is included among the great lawgivers in the sculpture relief on the east portico.

Chief Justice Warren Burger noted the irony of this in the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Lynch v. Donnelly*. The very chamber in which oral arguments on this case were heard is decorated with a notable and permanent not seasonal symbol of religion: Moses with the Ten Commandments. [{10}](#)

The Commandments in Civil Law

Let's see how the Ten Commandments were expressed in American civil law. It may surprise you to find out that all of the commandments were written into law in some way. [{11}](#)

These illustrations are descriptive, not normative. I am not arguing that we must return to these legal formulations in every case cited. We may certainly disagree to what extent the Ten Commandments should be part of our legal structure. But there should be no disagreement that at one time the Ten Commandments were the very foundation of the civil laws of America.

The Ten Commandments can be summarized in this way: (1) Have no other gods, (2) Have no idols, (3) Honor God's name, (4) Honor the Sabbath, (5) Honor your parents, (6) Do not murder, (7) Do not commit adultery, (8) Do not steal, (9) Do not commit perjury, (10) Do not covet. The Ten Commandments might be called rules of (1) religion, (2) worship, (3) reverence, (4) time, (5) authority, (6) life, (7) purity, (8) property, (9) tongue, and (10) contentment.

The first commandment is: You shall have no other gods before Me (Ex. 20:3). There were a number of early colonial laws that addressed this command.

A law passed in 1610 in the Virginia colony declared that since

we owe our highest and supreme duty, our greatest and all our allegiance to Him from whom all power and authority is derived . . . I do strictly command and charge all Captains and Officers . . . to have a care that the Almighty God be duly and daily served.{12}

A 1641 Massachusetts law stated: If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other god but the Lord God, he shall be put to death. Deut. 13:6,10; Deut 17:2,6; Ex. 22:20.{13}

The second commandment is: You shall not make for yourself an idol (Ex. 20:4). A 1680 New Hampshire law declared: It is enacted by ye ssembly and ye authority thereof, yet if any person having had the knowledge of the true God openly and manifestly have or worship any other gods but the Lord God, he shall be put to death. Ex. 22:20; Deut. 13:6 and 10.{14}

The third commandment is: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain (Ex. 20:7). Laws to obey this commandment came in two forms. Some were laws prohibiting blasphemy and others were laws against profanity. Noah Webster discussed both of these categories in relation to the third commandment in one of his letters:

When in obedience to the third commandment of the Decalogue you would avoid profane swearing, you are to remember that this alone is not a full compliance with the prohibition which [also] comprehends all irrelevant words or action and whatever tends to cast contempt on the Supreme Being or on His word and ordinances.{15}

Nearly all of the colonies had anti-blasphemy laws. This includes Connecticut, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

As Commander-in-Chief, George Washington issued numerous military orders during the American Revolution that prohibited swearing. This is one of his orders issued on July 4, 1775:

The General most earnestly requires and expects a due observance of those articles of war established for the government of the army which forbid profane cursing, swearing, and drunkenness; and in like manner requires and expects of all officers and soldiers not engaged on actual duty, a punctual attendance on Divine Service to implore the blessings of Heaven upon the means used for our safety and defense. [{16}](#)

After the Declaration of Independence, George Washington issued similar orders to his troops during the Revolutionary War. And similar prohibitions against blasphemy and profanity were issued throughout the rest of the Eighteenth century and into the Nineteenth century.

The fourth commandment is: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8). Each of the colonies and states had laws dealing with the Sabbath. Even the U.S. Constitution has a provision stipulating that the president has 10 days to sign a law, Sundays excepted. This clause was found in state constitutions and thus incorporated into the U.S. Constitution.

An 1830 New York law declared that: Civil process cannot, by statute, be executed on Sunday, and a service of such process on Sunday is utterly void and subjects the officer to damages. [{17}](#) Many other states had similar laws.

During the American Revolution, George Washington issued military orders directing that the Sabbath be observed. Here is his order of May 2, 1778 at Valley Forge:

The Commander in Chief directs that Divine Service be performed every Sunday at 11 o'clock in those brigades to

which there are chaplains; those which have none to attend the places of worship nearest to them. It is expected that officers of all ranks will by their attendance set an example to their men.[{18}](#)

The fifth commandment is: Honor your father and your mother (Ex. 20:12). A 1642 Connecticut law dealt with this commandment and cited additional verses:

If any child or children above sixteen years old, and of sufficient understanding shall curse or smite their normal father or mother, he or they shall be put to death; unless it can be sufficiently testified that the parents have been very unchristianly negligent in the education of such children or so provoke them by extreme and cruel correction that they have been forced thereunto to preserve themselves from death [or] maiming. Ex. 21:17, Lev. 20, Ex. 20:15.[{19}](#)

The sixth commandment is: You shall not murder (Ex. 20:13). The earliest laws in America illustrate that punishment for murder was rooted in the Ten Commandments. A 1641 Massachusetts law declared:

4. Ex. 21:12, Numb. 35:13-14, 30-31. If any person commit any willful murder, which is manslaughter committed upon premeditated malice, hatred, or cruelty, not in a mans necessary and just defense nor by mere casualty against his will, he shall be put to death.

5. Numb. 25:20-21, Lev. 24:17. If any person slayeth another suddenly in his anger or cruelty of passion, he shall be put to death.

6. Ex. 21:14. If any person shall slay another through guile, either by poisoning or other such devilish practice, he shall be put to death.[{20}](#)

The seventh commandment is: You shall not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14). Most colonies and states had laws against adultery. Even in the late Nineteenth century, the highest criminal court in the state of Texas declared that its laws came from the Ten Commandments:

The accused would insist upon the defense that the female consented. The state would reply that she could not consent. Why? Because the law prohibits, with a penalty, the completed act. Thou shalt not commit adultery is our law as well as the law of the Bible. [{21}](#)

The eighth commandment is: You shall not steal (Ex. 20:15). All colonies and states had laws against stealing based upon the Ten Commandments. In 1940, the Supreme Court of California acknowledged:

Defendant did not acknowledge the dominance of a fundamental precept of honesty and fair dealing enjoined by the Decalogue and supported by moral concepts. Thou shalt not steal applies with equal force and propriety to the industrialist of a complex civilization as to the simple herdsman of ancient Israel. [{22}](#)

The Louisiana Supreme Court in 1951 also acknowledged: In the Ten Commandments, the basic law of all Christian countries, is found the admonition Thou shalt not steal.

The ninth commandment is: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Ex. 20:16). The colonies and states had laws against perjury and bearing false witness. In modern times, the Oregon Supreme Court declared that: No official is above the law. Thou shalt not bear false witness is a command of the Decalogue, and that forbidden act is denounced by statute as a felony. [{23}](#)

The tenth commandment is: You shall not covet (Ex. 20:17).

Many of the founders and framers saw this commandment as a foundation for others. William Penn of Pennsylvania declared that he that covets can no more be a moral man than he that steals since he does so in his mind.[{24}](#) John Adams argued that: If Thou shalt not covet and Thou shalt not steal were not commandments of Heaven, they must be made inviolable precepts in every society before it can be civilized or made free.[{25}](#)

Notes

1. *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980).
2. John Paul Stevens, dissenting, *Van Orden v. Perry*, 545 U.S. ___ (2005).
3. Matthew Staver, "The Ten Commandments Battle Continues To Gain Steam," *National Liberty Journal*, December 2001.
4. John Quincy Adams, *Letters of John Quincy Adams, to His Son, on the Bible and Its Teachings* (Auburn: James M. Alden, 1850), 61.
5. John Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon* (Edinburgh: J. Ogle, 1815), 95.
6. John Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), 403.
7. George Washington, Farewell Address (Philadelphia), September 17, 1796.
8. William Holmes McGuffey, *Eclectic Reader* in D. James Kennedy, "What's Happening to American Education" in Robert Flood, *The Rebirth of America* (Philadelphia: Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, 1986), 122.
9. John Adams, *Letters of John Adams Addressed to His Wife* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1841), 152.
10. *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 677 (1984).
11. The primary document for the following material can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/lkxnv>
12. "Articles, Laws, and Orders, Divine, Politic and Martial for the Colony of Virginia," *Colonial Origins* (1610-1611), 315-316.

13. "Massachusetts Body of Liberties," *Colonial Origins* (1641), 83.
14. "General Laws and Liberties of New Hampshire," *Colonial Origins* (1680), 6.
15. Noah Webster, *Letters to a Young Gentleman*, 8.
16. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), Vol. III, 309.
17. George C. Edwards, *Treatise of the Powers and Duties of the Justices of the Peace and the Town Officers in the State of New York* (Nashville: J.C. Mitchell and C.C. Norvell, 1834), 38, "General Rules Applicable to a Summons, Warrants of Attachment," Rev. Stat. 675.
18. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. III, 342.
19. "Capital Laws of Connecticut," *Colonial Origins* (1642), 230.
20. Ibid.
21. *Hardin v. State*, 46 S.W. 803, 808 (Tex. Crim. App. 1898).
22. *Hollywood Motion Picture Equipment Co. v. Furer*, 105 P.2d. 299, 301 (Cal. 1940).
23. *Watts v. Gerking*, 228 P. 135, 141 (Oregon 1924).
24. William Penn, *Fruits of Solitude, In Reflections and Maxims Relating To The Conduct of Human Life* (London: James Phillips, 1790), 132.
25. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), Vol. Vi, 9.