

# “Mistakes Were Made”

If you're the nation's top cop, you know it's a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales' ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

## Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We're investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We'll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don't want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I'll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an “astonishingly maladroit...Nixonian...dodge.”<sup>{1}</sup> Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake's press agent announced back then, “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance.”<sup>{2}</sup> Jackson told a press conference, “If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention.”<sup>{3}</sup>

William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: “the past exonerative.”[{4}](#)

## **True Confessions**

What did Gonzales mean? I don't know; I'm still watching. But the “mistakes were made” flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I'm sorry; please forgive me?

That's seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: “I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician.”[{5}](#) Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, “Never apologize, never explain.”[{6}](#) Literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, “No sensible person ever made an apology.”[{7}](#)

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he'd ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn't.”

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

## **Plastic Buckets**

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to ... [God], he

is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. {8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

## Notes

1. "Politics, Pure and Cynical," (Editorial), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/yvnjyd>, accessed March 18, 2007.
2. John M. Broder, "Familiar Fallback for Officials: 'Mistakes Were Made'," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html>, accessed March 18, 2007.
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4. Diane Hartman, "Watching My Language" (Book Review of William Safire's *Watching My Language*), *Denver Post Online*, "September 14" (no year given); <http://extras.denverpost.com/books/book23.htm>, accessed March 18, 2007.
5. Bliwise, loc. cit.
6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. It is unclear from the text whether Munger or Bliwise supplied the Emerson quotation.

8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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## **Giving Can Improve Your Health; Science Says So**

Want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

It really is good to be good, claims Stephen Post, Ph.D., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Science says it is so.

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their recent book, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>{1}</sup> As head of an institute supported by philanthropist Sir John Templeton<sup>{2}</sup>, Post has funded over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities. He's convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in a fragmented society.

Post says research has produced remarkable findings: Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease. If pharmaceutical companies could charge for giving, we might see ads for Give Back instead of Prozac, he speculates. One program, Rx: Volunteer, has some California HMO physicians giving volunteerism prescriptions to their Medicare patients.

## All You Need is Love?

Post and Neimark say around 500 scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied University of California Berkeley data that followed about two hundred people every decade since the 1920s. Giving during high school correlated with good mental and physical health across life spans. Givers experienced these benefits regardless of the warmth of their families, he found.

Other research says that giving correlates with lower teen depression and suicide risk and with lower depression among the elderly. Studies at Stanford and elsewhere found links between frequent volunteering and delaying death. Post says giving even trumps receiving when it comes to reducing mortality.

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." [\[3\]](#)

Illustrations abound of givings personal benefits. Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller's goal was to eliminate poverty housing from the face of the earth. Get rid of shacks!

Today Habitat volunteers have constructed over 225,000 houses, helping over a million people in over 3,000 communities worldwide. Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings.

## From Playmate to Orphan Care

Post and Neimark relate an intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher's childhood helped her connect with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the *Playboy* mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for 2,300 children. "I work long hours," Krabacher notes, "put up with unbelievable sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world."

Post would agree. Do you desire happiness, love, safety, security, loyal friends, true connection, or a benevolent and hopeful world? He has one answer: Give. You'll be happier, healthier, and live longer. Love cures, wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.

### Notes

1. Stephen Post, Ph.D., and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), [www.whygoodthingshappen.com](http://www.whygoodthingshappen.com).
2. Institute for Research on Unlimited Love: [www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org](http://www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org).
3. [Acts 20:35](#) NASB.

# China, The Olympics and Christians

When the 2008 Olympics were awarded to China back in 2001, there was a naive hope that this decision would change China and also lead to an improvement in human rights. It turns out that instead of changing China, it may have changed us.

One example of this can be seen in our country. When the Olympic torch was carried through various cities in the world, it was protected not only by the local authorities but also by the Chinese secret police. So when the torch came to San Francisco, once again the Chinese secret police showed up. Now to be fair, the news reports actually said that they were volunteers from the Special Forces academy of the Peoples Armed Police. But a better description for them would be Chinas secret police.

This organization has been used to protect embassies in Beijing. But it has also been called upon put down protests in Tibet and suppress protests and other forms of expression in China. They were described by the chairman of the 2012 London Olympic committee as thugs. Others described their tactics as aggressive.

It is amazing to me that we allowed these secret police in our country, but it illustrates my point. We thought that these trade overtures and the Olympics would change China. In the long run, they may have a positive impact. But so far it seems like we are the ones who have changed.

There was also the naive hope that bringing the Olympics to China would usher in an era of improved human rights in this communist country. It appears that in some ways the situation is worse. China has invested time and money in preparing for the Olympics. It appears they have also done all they can to rid the nation of anyone who could be seen as a dissident.

For decades, China has been rounding up Christians and other dissidents. They have been beaten and thrown in jail. Some have been killed. Lord David Alton estimates that each year 8,000 executions take place in China. Those who escape this persecution must live in a society where political and religious opinion is repressed, where journalists are jailed, and where the Internet and overseas broadcasts are censored.

The Chinese constitution promises its citizens that they have freedom of religious belief. But we know better. While there is an official state church, most of the growth (and the perceived potential threat to the government) takes place in the underground churches. As we get closer to the Olympics, the government seems bent on doing more to smash the growing home church movement.

As Christians we should be in prayer about what is taking place in China. But a growing debate has centered on what the U.S. government should do. Some have called for President Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies. They believe this would be a strong statement of our repudiation of the practices of the Chinese government. Others have suggested that President Bush go and use the Olympics as a platform to speak out against the Chinese government.

I see merit in either action. What is unacceptable is the current policy of silence. The president, his administration, and even corporate sponsors have been silent about what has been going on for decades. Now even the secular world is calling for action because of China's policy toward Tibet. It is time for all of us (Christians included) to break our



silence and speak out.

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# Myanmar Cyclone Response: Power-Lust and Lost Lives

*As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.*

## Corrupted Power

### Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives “without enough to eat” on a normal basis.<sup>{1}</sup> The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. “Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and

corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems. However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

## **Failure to Allow Rendered Aid**

"The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar's cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food," reports the Associated Press.

It's understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

*Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.*

*Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.*

*Government demands of businesses in the capital to "donate" aid for victims to be distributed through the central government. [\[3\]](#) So much for central "planning." Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.*

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in need the very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling party's priorities.

## **Global Chorus of Criticism**

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.[\[4\]](#)

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.[\[5\]](#)

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is

deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country very quickly, we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he said.[\[6\]](#)

The UN has learned lessons from past dictatorships' abuse of privilege. The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

## **Some Worldview Implications**

The heartlessness of Myanmar's leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldview—neo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for example—would only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or "smart enough" to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dalai Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaigning. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For

Burmese monks and adherents alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, "According to Buddhist belief, man is worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God" [\[7\]](#). While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan's Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism's doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, "Why? From where does this universal reality spring?"

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. "The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand." [\[8\]](#) Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

## **Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity**

"A Christian view of government should...be concerned with human rights...based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but

instead acknowledges these rights as always existing.”{9}

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America’s reaction to Myanmar’s languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world’s stance: the ideals of democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I’m sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. Americas Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

## **Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power**

“While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil.... {10} Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this

traditioninevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.[\[11\]](#)

## **Sanctity of Human Life**

What officials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestige as in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that today's outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as God's image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

## **Biblical Imitation of a Giving God**

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive response however incompetent it may have been from the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Church's centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world,



that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

## Notes

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8. Ibid, May 12, 2008, [www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY\\_DIS.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY_DIS.htm)
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10. Ibid, based on [Romans 13: 1-7](#), NIV.

11. R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government*, Transaction Publishers, 1994, quoted in The Truth Project DVD-based curriculum, Focus on the Family, 2006. For partial online reading: [tinyurl.com/3efqjr](http://tinyurl.com/3efqjr)

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## Clonaid and Eternity

Want to live forever?

Got big bucks?

Clonaid founder Claude Vorilhon, who goes by “Rael,” says you’ll be able to gain eternal life through cloning, but it will cost you plenty. Debates surrounding Clonaid sometimes overlook his stated goal.

“The long-term implication, and this is my mission,” Rael told CNN, “is to give humanity eternal life. Cloning is the key to give us eternal life and to cure all disease on Earth, but eternal life is the ultimate goal.”

Rael says cloning babies is only the first step. Next, he speculates, will come “accelerated growth,” bringing a cloned infant to maturity over a few hours. Phase three transfers the data in your brain to your adult clone.

Your memory and personality then inhabit a new body. Your old body can die while you live on. When your cloned body wears out, presumably you can repeat the process and thus live forever. Hopes of connecting with eternity, of course, touch deep human longings.

Rael, who founded the Raelian religion, says he won't profit directly from the cloning. Clonaid and the Raelian religion seem to be close philosophically but separate financially. Clonaid's website features Rael quite prominently. Rael says he won't shun donations from Clonaid.

Referring to Clonaid president Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, Rael says, "It's a commercial company and her goal is to make as much money as possible, and I hope she will make as much as possible."

Hmmm. A religious leader; big money; questionable promises. Sound fishy?

Rael says he encountered a space alien in 1973 in France who told him that extraterrestrials had created life on Earth through cloning. Rael's mission became to spread the aliens' message and help earthlings live forever.

Rael claims the alien told him he (Rael) was the brother of Jesus. Jesus, of course, said some significant things about eternal life. Among them: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish."

Jesus also said that his own bodily resurrection – one of the best-attested facts in history – would validate his claims. Raelians say that aliens using "an advanced cloning technique" raised Jesus from the dead. One problem with this theory involves Jesus' wounds. To convince his doubting disciple Thomas he had really risen, Jesus showed him the wounds in his hands and side. Thomas believed. Presumably cloning, involving genetic copying, does not reproduce physical wounds.

Jesus and his followers charged nothing for eternal life. It was a "free gift" to all who believed, made possible by his sacrificial death.

Beware of religious leaders promising eternity for a fee.

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## Global Food Crisis Hits Home

Happy with your grocery bills these days? Do those gasoline pump meters seem to whir like Vegas slot machines, except you never hit the jackpot?

The two issues are not unrelated and they're affecting pocketbooks and bellies at home and around the globe. Some Westerners might react with detached shock to stories of food riots in places like Haiti, India, and Cameroon. But when your local Costco and Sams Club start limiting rice purchases (as recently reported), reality creeps in.

Americans seem worried. A USA TODAY/Gallup poll found 73 percent of US consumers concerned about food inflation; almost half said it caused their households hardship. Eighty percent expressed concern about energy prices.[{1}](#)

Food price increases that may cause inconvenience or hardship in affluent nations can be devastating for families in the developing world. Recent food riots in Haiti cost the prime minister his job. *The New York Times* reports that spiraling prices are turning Haitian staples like beans, corn and rice into closely guarded treasures. Some Haitians eat mud patties containing oil and sugar to silence their grumbling stomachs.[{2}](#)

### Silent Tsunami

Economist and special United Nations advisor Jeffrey Sachs says of the global food problem, Its the worst crisis of its

kind in more than 30 years. There are a number of governments on the ropes, and I think there's more political fallout to come. [\[3\]](#)

The UN World Food Program says skyrocketing food prices could create a silent tsunami turning 100 million people toward hunger and poverty. Executive director Josette Sheeran called for large-scale, high-level action by the global community. [\[4\]](#) British Prime minister Gordon Brown asserts, "Tackling hunger is a moral challenge to each of us and it is also a threat to the political and economic stability of nations." [\[5\]](#)

World Vision, one of the world's largest relief and development agencies, announced serious cutbacks, saying they are able to feed 1.5 million fewer people than last year. The well-respected Christian humanitarian organization appealed for international donors, citing swelling food prices and increased food need. Rising fuel costs boost fertilizer and food transportation costs. Corn diverted to make biofuels cannot become lunch, [\[6\]](#) though some feel biofuel is a misplaced whipping boy. [\[7\]](#)

## Your Strategies

Of course folks in the developed world, not threatened with devastating hunger, can employ multiple strategies to stretch their resources. Careful shopping and research is one. (Holy Coupon Clipping, Batman! Just look how much we can save if we time our grocery shopping to the sales rather than our impulses!) Diet adjustment, portion control, and budgetary belt-tightening are others.

And while you're trying to be sure your outgo doesn't exceed your income lest your upkeep become your downfall—may I suggest another wise move? If possible, share some of what you have with the desperately needy. World Vision founder Bob Pierce had as his life theme, "Let my heart be broken by the

things that break the heart of God.” An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{8}

Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively fight poverty and hunger. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof says, Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices. {9} I would add World Relief and the Salvation Army to the list. Your local house of worship may be a good place to start.

As another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, Blessed are those who help the poor. {10}

## Notes

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## Castro's Staying Power

"I threw a rock at Castro!" my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain's queen and Thailand's king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

### Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. [\[1\]](#) Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs

invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching [JFK demand](#) the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel...and humanity...survived.

Several years later my parents' airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

## He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on." [{2}](#)

What reflections are in Castro's future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life's finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one's thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, "I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ)." [{3}](#)

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it's hard to



envision the one who said “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”<sup>{4}</sup> jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

*Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably... This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.*<sup>{5}</sup>

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.”<sup>{6}</sup>

Fidel Castro’s physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

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## What's Happening to Our Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, [The Last Christian Generation](#), where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, ([www.youthtransitionnetwork.org](http://www.youthtransitionnetwork.org)) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak “Christianese” to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: [www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1](http://www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1))

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They don't feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They're not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don't feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. That's a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can't name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don't know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don't believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, don't believe in Satan and don't believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not

new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long [Mind Games Conference](#) will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more fruitful:

- [www.youthtransitionnetwork.org](http://www.youthtransitionnetwork.org): Official site for Youth Transition Network.
- [www.liveabove.com](http://www.liveabove.com) offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.
- [collegel0lseminars.com](http://collegel0lseminars.com) offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.
- [Conversations CD](#) this information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.
- [www.boundless.org/college](http://www.boundless.org/college) contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.
- [TrueU.org](http://TrueU.org) is a general site for students of faith.

# 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.”<sup>{21}</sup> Polls show that Americans would sooner elect a Muslim or homosexual than an acknowledged atheist.<sup>{22}</sup>

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.”<sup>{23}</sup> 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-abortion” 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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# Debt and Credit

## Introduction

We will be discussing the subject of debt from a biblical perspective. But before we begin looking at biblical principles concerning economics and finances, we need to put

the problem of debt in perspective.

You cannot overemphasize the impact of debt on our society. It is the leading cause for divorce and also the reason for many more troubled marriages. It is also one of the causes for depression as well as suicide. People in debt didn't start out to ruin their lives and the lives of their families, but the consequences are often devastating.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about money, and a significant part of these financial warnings concern debt. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender." When you borrow money and put yourself in debt, you put yourself in a situation where the lender has significant influence over you.

Many other verses in Proverbs also warn about the potential danger of debt (Proverbs 1:13-15; 17:18; 22:26-27; 27:13). While this does not mean that we can never be in debt, it does warn us about its dangers.

Romans 13:8 is an often misunderstood verse because it says, "Owe nothing to anyone."

Although some theologians have argued that this verse prohibits debt, the passage needs to be seen in context. This passage is not a specific teaching about debt, but rather a summary of our duty as Christians to governmental authority. We should not owe anything to anyone (honor, taxes, etc.).

The Bible is filled with passages that provide guidelines to lending and borrowing. If debt was always wrong, then these passages would not exist and there would be a clear prohibition against debt. But the implication of Romans 13:8 seems to be that we should pay our debts off as quickly as possible.

At this point, it would be good to make a distinction between debt and credit. Often in our society, the two words are used

interchangeably. To put it simply, debt is something that is owed. The Bible does not prohibit borrowing, but it certainly does not recommend it. Credit is the establishment of mutual trust between a lender and borrower.

At the outset, let me acknowledge that some people end up in debt due to no fault of their own. They may have been swindled in a business. They may have made a good faith attempt to start a business but were unsuccessful because their competitors or suppliers cheated them. They may have been unfairly sued in court. The reasons are many.

## **The Consequences of Debt**

What are the consequences of debt? The Bible describes debt as a form of slavery. Proverbs 22:7 says: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender." The borrower becomes a servant (or slave) to the person who is the lender.

If you look in the Old Testament, you will notice that debt was often connected to slavery. For example, both debts and slavery were cancelled in the years of Jubilee. Sometimes people even put themselves in slavery because of debt (Deut. 15:2, 12).

Today we may not be in actual slavery from debt, but it may feel like it some times. We have all heard the phrase, "I owe, I owe, so it's off to work I go." If you are deep in debt you know that there may be very few days off and perhaps no vacation. Someone in debt can begin to feel like a slave.

How can you know if you are too far in debt? Here are a few questions to ask yourself. Do you have an increasing collection of past-due bills on your desk? Do you drive down the road hoping you will win the lottery? Do you feel stress every time you think about your finances? Do you avoid answering the phone because you think it might be a collection

agency? Do you make only minimum payments on credit cards?

One of the consequences of debt is we often deny reality. In order to realistically deal with the debt in our lives we need to get rid of some of the silly ideas running around in our heads.

For example, you are *not* going to win the lottery. Your debt problem is *not* going to go away if you just ignore it. And a computer glitch in your lender's computer is *not* going to accidentally wipe out your financial records so that you don't have to repay your debt.

Another consequence of debt is a loss of integrity. When we cannot pay, we start saying "the check's in the mail" when it isn't. We not only kid ourselves but we try to mislead others about the extent of our problem with debt.

Sometimes debt even leads to dishonesty. Psalm 37:21 says: "The wicked borrows and does not pay back." We should repay our debts.

A third consequence of debt is addiction. Debt is addictive. Once in debt we begin to get comfortable with cars, consumer goods, furniture, etc., all funded through debt. Once we reach that comfort level, we go into further debt.

A final consequence of debt is stress. Stress experts have calculated the impact of various stress factors on our lives.[\[1\]](#) Some of the greatest are death of a spouse and divorce. But it is amazing how many other stress factors are financially related (change in financial state, mortgage over \$100,000). When we owe more than we can pay, we worry and feel a heavy load of stress that wouldn't exist if we lived debt free.



# Credit Card Debt

To listen to the news reports, you would think that Americans are drowning in debt, but the story is not that simple. The latest economic statistics say that the average U.S. household has more than \$9,000 in credit card debt. The average household also spends more than \$1,300 a year in interest payments.

While these numbers are true, they are also misleading. The average debt per American household with at least one credit card is \$9,000. But nearly one-fourth of Americans don't even own credit cards.

An even more telling fact is that more than thirty percent of American households paid off their most recent credit cards bills in full. So actually a majority of Americans owe nothing to credit card companies. Of the households that do owe money on credit cards, the median balance was \$2,200. Only about 1 in 12 American households owe more than \$9,000 on credit cards.

The \$9,000 figure comes from CardWeb. It takes the outstanding credit card debt in America and divides it by the number of households that have at least one credit card. While the average is accurate, it is misleading.

Liz Pulliam Weston, writing for MSN Money, explains: "The example I usually give to illustrate the fallacy of averages is to imagine that you and 17 of your friends were having dinner with Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. The average net worth of a person at that table would be about \$5 billion. The fact that everybody else's personal net worth was a lot less wouldn't affect the average that much because Bill and Warren are so much wealthier than the rest of us." [\[2\]](#)

Yes, Americans are in debt. And some Americans are really in debt. If you are one of those individuals, you should apply

the biblical principles we are discussing to your situation. If you are not in debt, learn a vicarious lesson about what can happen if you don't pay attention to debt.

Here are some principles for dealing with credit card debt. First, realize that the problem is not the credit card in your hand. The problem may be with the person holding the credit card. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naïve go on, and are punished for it."

Second, never use credit cards except for budgeted purchases. Impulse shopping with credit cards is one of the major reasons people find themselves in debt.

Third, pay off your credit cards every month. If you cannot pay off your credit card bill, don't use your credit card again until you can pay your bill.

## **Home Mortgage**

Most Christian financial counselors put a home mortgage in a different category than other debt. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, a home loan is secured by the equity in the home. After an initial down payment, a loan schedule (of principle and interest) is applied to the balance of the home expense. If a homeowner faces a financial crisis, he or she can sell the house and use that amount to retire the loan.

Second, a home is often an appreciating asset. In many housing markets, the price of a home increases every year. This makes it an even less risky financial investment. But of course, what goes up can also go down. Some homeowners have seen the value of their home decrease significantly. That affects their ability to repay their home loan if they need to sell their house.

Third, a home mortgage is a tax deduction and thus provides a small financial benefit to homeowners that they would not have if they were renting. At the same time, eager home buyers shouldn't over-estimate the value of this and justify buying a home that is beyond their means.

Fourth, the interest in a home loan is usually within a few percentage points of the prime rate. This means that the interest rate in a typical home loan is about one third the interest rate of a typical credit card.

While a home mortgage may be different from other forms of debt, that doesn't mean there aren't dangers and pitfalls. As we have already mentioned, people buy homes assuming that they will appreciate in value. But many find that the house prices stagnate or even decline. After paying closing costs, they may owe more on their home loan than they received from the sale of their house.

Another concern about a home mortgage is that many homeowners end up buying more house than they can really afford. Just because they qualify for a particular house doesn't mean they should buy a house that will stretch them financially.

Changing financial circumstances may surprise a couple that qualifies for a house mortgage. For example, the wife may get pregnant and no longer be able to work and provide the income necessary to make the monthly mortgage payment. Either partner might get laid off from work and not provide the necessary income. And there are always unexpected expenses for homeowners (new furnace, hot water heater, etc.) that couples may not have budgeted for when they purchased a home.

One formula that is often used in considering a home mortgage is to buy a home that is less than two and a half times a family's annual gross income. Another is to consider what you can currently pay in rent and compare that amount to the home mortgage (plus the additional expenses such as insurance,

taxes, etc.). The two amounts should be similar.

## **Getting Out of Debt**

Let's conclude by talking about how to get out of debt. If you are already in debt, you need to break the debt cycle with discipline applied over time.

First, establish the right priorities. God owns it all. Unfortunately, we often believe that we own it all. We need to mentally transfer ownership of all our possessions to God (Psalm 8). This would also include giving the Lord His part and honoring Him with your giving (even if it is a small amount).

Second, stop borrowing. If a pipe broke in your house, the first thing to you would do is shut off the water before you started to mop up the water. Before you do anything else, "shut off" the borrowing. Don't use your credit card. Don't take out a bank loan.

Third, develop a budget. This is something you might do by yourself or with the help of many online ministries and financial services that provides guidelines. Or you may consult with a financial expert who can give you guidelines.

You would begin by making a list of all of your monthly expenses (mortgage or rent, utilities, groceries, car payments, credit card bills, etc.). Then you need to establish a priority for the loans that you have that are outstanding. This should include information about the amount owed and the interest rates. Then you need to set aside a realistic budget that allows you to have enough money to pay off the loans in a systematic way.

Write to each creditor with a repayment plan based upon this realistic budget. It might be good to even include a financial statement and a copy of your budget so they can see that you

are serious about getting out of debt.

Fourth, begin to retire your debt. If you can, pay extra on the debts with the highest interest rates. If all of them have comparable interest rates, you might instead pay extra on the smallest balance. By paying that off first, you will have a feeling of accomplishment and then free up some of your income to tackle your next debt.

Fifth, develop new spending habits. For example, if you generate extra income from working overtime or at an extra job, use that to retire your debt faster. Don't assume that because you have some extra discretionary income you can use that to spend it on yourself.

Before you buy anything, question yourself. If an item isn't in your budget, ask yourself if you really need it and how much use you will get out of it. We often spend because we are used to spending. Change your spending habits.

Debt is like a form of slavery. Do what you can to be debt free. If you follow these steps faithfully, that can take place in a few years. Debt freedom will reduce your stress and free you up to accomplish what God intends for you to do.

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