

Capitalism and Socialism

Kerby Anderson writes that recent polls show that a mere majority of Americans believe in capitalism. And those under the age of 30 are essentially evenly divided about capitalism and socialism. Is there a war on capitalism? And are there answers to the typical criticisms of capitalism?

Poll About Capitalism

Americans traditionally have supported capitalism over socialism, but there is growing evidence that might be changing. The latest Rasmussen poll showed that a mere majority of Americans (fifty-three percent) say capitalism is better than socialism.[\[1\]](#) And one in five (twenty percent) say that socialism is better than capitalism. America may not be ready to reject capitalism for socialism, but this poll does show less enthusiasm than in the past.



Age is a significant component. If you look at adults under the age of thirty in the poll, you find they are essentially evenly divided. More than a third of young people (thirty-seven percent) prefer capitalism, another third (thirty-three percent) embrace socialism, and the rest (thirty percent) are undecided.

What are we to make of this? First, the terms capitalism and socialism weren't defined in the poll. I suspect that if the pollsters explained the various tenets of socialism that the percentages would change. Defining capitalism would also be important since many would not necessarily associate it with a free market but instead might have visions of an evil, greedy capitalist. After all, that is how many businessmen are

portrayed in the media.

How should we define capitalism and socialism? Here are some brief definitions of these two economic systems. Capitalism is an economic system in which there is private property and the means of production are privately owned. In capitalism, there is a limited role for government. Socialism is an economic system in which there is public or state ownership of the means of production and the primary focus is on providing an equality of outcomes. In socialism, the state is all-important and involved in central planning.

Another question surfacing from the Rasmussen poll concerns those under the age of thirty. They are probably the least likely to associate socialism with Soviet-style repression. Instead, they may have in their minds the current government push toward European socialism and find that more attractive. Also, they are less likely to have “skin in the game.” When you ask investors this same question about capitalism and socialism, they favored capitalism by a five-to-one margin.

Political affiliation is another determinant of support for capitalism. Republicans favor capitalism over socialism by an eleven-to-one margin. By contrast, Democrats are more closely divided. They barely favor capitalism (thirty-nine percent) over socialism (thirty percent).

In what follows I’ll look at the debate between capitalism and socialism and provide a biblical critique. [{2}](#)

The War Over Capitalism

I noted that fifty-three percent of Americans say capitalism is better than socialism. While that is a majority, it is a mere majority and hardly a strong endorsement of free market economics.

We might wonder if the percentages of support for these

economic systems might change if different words were used. A survey taken in 2007 came to a different conclusion. The Pew Research Center asked people if they were better off “in a free market economy even though there may be severe ups and downs from time to time.” In that case seventy percent agreed, versus twenty percent who disagreed.[\[3\]](#) This might suggest that Americans like terms like “free market” more than “capitalism.”

These polls illustrate that we are in the midst of a cultural conflict over capitalism. That is the conclusion of Arthur Brooks. His op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* argues that “The Real Culture War is Over Capitalism.”[\[4\]](#) He notes that President Obama’s tax plan will increase the percentage of American adults who pay no federal income tax from forty percent to forty-nine percent (and another eleven percent will pay less than five percent of their income in tax). This has the potential to change attitudes about taxes since half of America won’t be paying taxes.

Brookes says, “To put a modern twist on the old axiom, a man who is not a socialist at 20 has no heart; a man who is still a socialist at 40 either has no head, or pays no taxes. Social Democrats are working to create a society where the majority are net recipients of the ‘sharing economy.’ They are fighting a culture war of attrition with economic tools.”[\[5\]](#)



CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING
HOUSE & PROBE MINISTRIES

CHRISTIANS AND ECONOMICS A Biblical Point of View



KERBY ANDERSON

For the love of money is a root of all
sorts of evil.—1 Tim. 6:10, NASB.

These various polls, as well as the current debate about the role of government in the economy, illustrate why we need to educate adults and young people about economics and the free market system (in my book, *Making The Most of Your Money in Tough Times*, I devote a number of chapters to economics and economic systems). How can we use biblical principles to evaluate economic systems like capitalism and socialism? The Bible does not endorse a particular system, but it does have key principles about human nature, private property rights, and the role of government. These can be used to evaluate economic systems.

The Bible warns us about the effects of sinful behavior in the world. Therefore, we should be concerned about any system that would concentrate economic power and thereby unleash the ravages of sinful behavior on the society. We should reject socialism and state-controlled economies that would concentrate power in the hands of a few sinful individuals.

Economic Criticisms of Capitalism

People often reject the idea of capitalism because they believe one of the *economic* criticisms of capitalism. Here are two of these criticisms.

The first economic criticism is that capitalism leads to monopolies. These develop for two reasons: too little government, and too much government. Monopolies have occurred in the past because government has not been willing to exercise its God-given authority. Government finally stepped in and broke up the big trusts that were not allowing the free enterprise system to function correctly.

But in recent decades, the reason for monopolies has often been too *much* government. Many of the largest monopolies today are government-sanctioned or -sponsored monopolies that prevent true competition from taking place. The solution is for government to allow a freer market where competition can take place.

Let me add that many people often call markets with limited competition “monopolies” when the term is not appropriate. For example, the major car companies may seem like a monopolies or oligopolies until you realize that in the market of consumer durables the true market is the entire western world.

The second criticism of capitalism is that it leads to pollution. In a capitalistic system, pollutants are considered externalities. The producer will incur costs that are external to the firm so often there is no incentive to clean up the pollution. Instead, it is dumped into areas held in common such as the air or water.

The solution in this case is governmental regulation. But this need not be a justification for building a massive bureaucracy. We need to find creative ways to direct self-interest so that people work towards the common good.

Sometimes when speaking on the topic of government and the environment, I use a thought experiment. Most communities use the water supply from a river and dump treated waste back into the water to flow downstream. Often there is a tendency to cut corners and leave the waste treatment problem for those downstream. But imagine if you required that the water intake pipe be downstream and the waste pipe be upstream. If you did require this (and this is only a thought experiment) you would instantly guarantee that you would have less of a problem with water pollution. Why? It is now in the self-interest of the community to clean the wastewater being pumped back into the river.

We can acknowledge that although there are some valid economic criticisms of capitalism, these can be controlled by limited governmental control. And when capitalism is wisely controlled, it generates significant economic prosperity and economic freedom for its citizens.

Moral Criticism of Capitalism

Another reason people often reject the idea of capitalism is because they believe it is *immoral*.

One of the moral arguments against capitalism involves the issue of greed. And this is why many Christians feel ambivalent towards the free enterprise system. After all, some critics of capitalism contend that this economic system makes people greedy.

To answer this question we need to resolve the following question: Does capitalism make people greedy or do we already have greedy people who use the economic freedom of the capitalistic system to achieve their ends? In light of the biblical description of human nature, the latter seems more likely.

Because people are sinful and selfish, some are going to use

the capitalist system to feed their greed. But that is not so much a criticism of capitalism as it is a realization of the human condition. The goal of capitalism is not to change people but to protect us from human sinfulness.

Capitalism is a system in which bad people can do the least harm, and good people have the freedom to do good works. Capitalism works well if you have completely moral individuals. But it also functions adequately when you have selfish and greedy people.

Important to this discussion is the realization that there is a difference between self-interest and selfishness. All people have self-interests that can operate in ways that are not selfish. For example, it is in my self-interest to get a job and earn an income so that I can support my family. I can do that in ways that are not selfish.

Capitalism was founded on the observation that all of us have self-interest. Rather than trying to change that, economists saw that self-interest could be the motor of the capitalist system.

By contrast, other economic systems like socialism ignore the biblical definitions of human nature. Thus, they allow economic power to be centralized and concentrate power in the hands of a few greedy people. Those who complain of the influence major corporations have on our lives should consider the socialist alternative of how a few governmental bureaucrats control every aspect of their lives.

Greed certainly occurs in the capitalist system. But it does not surface just in this economic system. It is part of our sinfulness. Capitalism may have its flaws as an economic system, but it can be controlled to give us a great deal of economic prosperity and economic freedom.

Capitalism and the Zero-Sum Myth

There is a myth that is often at the very foundation of many of the criticisms of capitalism. We can call it the zero-sum myth. By zero-sum, I mean that one person wins and another person loses. Most competitive games are zero-sum games. One team or person wins; the other loses.

In most cases, the free market can be a win-win scenario rather than a win-lose scenario. In his book, *Money, Greed, and God*, Jay Richards uses a fun example from his childhood to illustrate this point.[\[6\]](#)

In the sixth grade, his teacher had them play the “trading game.” She passed out little gifts to all of the students: a ten-pack of Doublemint gum, a paddleboard with a rubber ball, a Bugs Bunny picture frame, an egg of Silly Putty, a set of Barbie trading cards, etc.

She then asked the students to rate how much they liked their gift on a scale from one to ten. Then she compiled the score and put it on the board. Then she divided the class into five groups of five students and told them they could trade their gift with anyone in the group. Jay traded the Barbie trading cards he had with a girl in his group who had the paddleboard.

Then the teacher asked them to rate how much they liked their gifts. And she put that number on the board. The total score went up.

Then she told the students they could trade with anyone in the room. Now they had twenty-four possible trading partners rather than just the four in their group. The trading really began to take off. Once again, the teacher asked them to rate their gifts. When she put the number on the board, the total score went up again.

Almost everyone ended up with a toy he or she liked more than when the trading began. In fact, the only individual scores

that did not go up were from students who really liked the gift they received initially from the teacher.

The students that day learned some valuable lessons about a free economy. When people are free to trade, they can add value to the traded item even though it remained physically unchanged. And they saw the value of having more trading partners (in this case twenty-four rather than four). Most of all, they learned that the free exchange can be a win-win proposition.

We can certainly admit that sometimes capitalism is not a win-win proposition. When there are limited resources and an individual or corporation is able to manipulate the political system in their favor, it is a win for the manipulator but a loss for Americans who did not have such political access. However, that is not a flaw in capitalism, but what results when government is corrupt or is corrupted by those who manipulate the system

Notes

1. "Just 53% Say Capitalism Better Than Socialism," Rasmussen Reports, 9 April 2009.
2. If you would like more information about this topic or would like to order my book, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*, visit our website [store](http://www.probe.org/store) at www.probe.org for more information.
3. "World Publics Welcome Global Trade – But Not Immigration," Pew Research Center, 4 October 2007.
4. Arthur Brooks, "The Real Culture War is Over Capitalism," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 April 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. Jay Richards, *Money, Greed, and God* (NY: Harper One, 2009), 60-61.

Health Care Concern: Government Utilitarianism & the Hippocratic Oath

Written by Heather Zeiger

The government doesn't take the Hippocratic Oath, but maybe it should.

As I was researching for this article, I easily found the over 2,000-page House bill on health care (H.R. 3962), and downloaded it over our high-speed Internet connection without a problem. I glanced at the Table of Contents, made some notes, and tried to go back to the previous page when my browser came crashing down. It could be that the size of the file gave Firefox some problems. Actually, it was fine at first, but when I realized that this monster was too cumbersome, I tried to get back to a page that was easier to navigate only to find that going back within this huge bill is not as easy as downloading it.

If I can use my experience in retrieving this bulky bill as being symbolic of anything, it would be that if passed, we will find the changes to our health care system confusing and unwieldy. And like my problems with trying to go back to an easier page, once we've realized what we've gotten ourselves into, it may not be easy to undo what has been done. There are many areas of concern in this legislation that raise ethical red flags, but I want to address a very fundamental issue in health care—that of authority and accountability.

The health care reform bill that has been passed by the House and its Senate counterpart (deliberations began November 30),

both bring to light several key bioethical issues: government funding for abortion, defining end-of-life care, who makes rationing decisions, and our obligation to the weak and infirm, to name a few. Many aspects of our lives can fall under the umbrella of health care, so this bill has the potential to affect almost every aspect of society. Another contentious (and constitutionally questionable) feature of the bill is the government requirement that everyone purchase health insurance, which marks the first time in history that the federal government has required everyone in society to enter a particular marketplace (car insurance is state-, not federally regulated).

I want to address the nature of health care specifically. Generally, the person administering health care is dealing with someone who finds themselves in a vulnerable state. That is why people, Christian or not, resonate with the idea that doctors take an oath to "Do No Harm." The essence of the Hippocratic Oath, even before it was Christianized, is that of a covenantal relationship between the physician, the patient, and God (or, in 400 BC, the Greek gods){1}. This recognition of a deep obligation of the physician to the patient in his or her time of vulnerability has been a vocational standard for the industry for centuries. Granted, after the 1950's these standards began to change into something far more utilitarian and consumer-driven and the Oath is rarely recited at medical graduations anymore. Nonetheless, doctors and patients today still operate under the assumptions of the Hippocratic Oath that the doctor is to "do no harm."

But back to the point of the recently passed House bill and the ongoing debate on the Senate bill . If both of these bills pass and are approved by President Obama in their current form, the government is going to exercise a large amount of fiscal and, therefore, regulatory control over the health industry. The Hippocratic Oath was a vocational agreement, but now the government is in the position of holding an

individual's health in its hands. The government makes no such promise to "do no harm" to the individual patient.

In actuality, the very idea of health care for all represents a distinct and debatable worldview. The language being used to argue these bills represents, at best, an attempt to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It no longer speaks on an individual level, but on a societal level. And while individual doctors agree to avoid harming patients, the government views its job as seeking what is best for society at large. That is a very different commitment at a fundamental level. In the United States, the governmental commitment is contractual,{2} while in the Hippocratic tradition, the doctor-patient relationship is covenantal. (See the wording for the Oath of Office and the Hippocratic Oath, below.)

Doing what seems best for society on the whole is fine when we are talking about national security and protecting our borders, or when we are talking about how best to implement and regulate interstate commerce, or even in creating boards that enforce common standards for pharmaceuticals, such as the FDA. This protects society, and protects the individuals within that society. But when it comes to an individual making a decision for his personal health or for his dependents, what is best for society as a whole is not the appropriate ethic. This is called *utilitarianism*, which is generally defined as an ethic that prioritizes "the greatest good for the greatest number of people." {3}

Utilitarianism has a limited place, but seeking the greatest good for society should not be the highest calling. This view elevates society and social good to a higher level than the individual, meaning that what is best for the greatest number of people, or society as an aggregate, may be at the expense of certain individuals. However, medicine deals with helping the weak, the infirm, and the vulnerable, which concerns the individual. Hence, the covenantal nature of the doctor/patient relationship. This care for the individual springs from the

idea that all people are made in the image of God. Therefore we cannot value some individuals more than others, even if we (fellow human beings) deem them more or less useful to society.

As Dr. Kathy McReynolds, a bioethicist and professor at Biola University and public policy director for the Christian Institute on Disability says about the health care bill, "I am concerned that decisions regarding patient care will be made by someone other than the patient and physician working together. A disinterested politician is not going to have a connection to that patient or be able to identify intrinsic factors about that person's disability."^{4}

Link: Senate Healthcare bill: help.senate.gov/BAI09A84_xml.pdf

House Bill: The bill, the [Affordable Health Care for America Act–H.R. 3962](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_classical.html)

www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_classical.html

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art—if they desire to learn it—without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from

harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself, holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

Importantly, the major feature of the traditional version of the Hippocratic Oath is that the doctor recognizes that he is dealing with a patient at a vulnerable time and will do everything with the patient's best interest in mind. He enters into a covenantal agreement between himself, the patient, and the deity.^{5}

Oath of Office:

www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Oath_Office.htm

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies,

foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

The distinguishing feature of the Oath of Office is that of protection of those principles found in the Constitution of the United States. While this may protect the citizens of the U.S., this is not a personal obligation towards an individual with the individual's best interest in mind. In this sense it is a contractual relationship between the citizens of the U.S. and their representatives or armed forces.

Notes

1. Cameron, Nigel M. de S., *The New Medicine: Life and Death after Hippocrates*, 1991, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL.
2. For some foundational philosophy on Political Theory, see the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*The Social Contract*), John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*).
3. For an interesting look at the history of utilitarianism, see the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on "John Stuart Mill," www.iep.utm.edu/milljs/#SSH2d.ii; also, Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, Nashville, TN, 2005, Thomas Nelson, Inc., pps. 15-17.
4. Joni and Friends, www.joniandfriendsnews.com/docs/091125_healthcare.pdf
5. Translation from the Greek by Ludwig Edelstein. From *The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation, and Interpretation*, by Ludwig Edelstein. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943.

Blessings and Judgment

Kerby Anderson answers some intriguing questions: Is God blessing America? Will God bring judgment against America? What are the biblical principles of blessing and judgment we find in the Bible concerning the nation of Israel? Do any of them apply to our nation?

Is God blessing America? Will God bring judgment against America? These are questions I often hear, and yet rarely do we hear good answers to these questions. Part of the reason is that Christians haven't really studied the subject of blessings and judgment.



In this article we deal with this difficult and controversial subject. While we may not be able to come to definitive answers to all of these questions, I think we will have a better understanding of what blessings and judgment are from a biblical perspective.

When we think about this topic, often we are in two minds. On one hand, we believe that God is on our side and blessing us. After the attacks on 9/11, for example, we launched a war on terror and were generally convinced that God was on our side. At least we hoped that He was. Surely God could not be on the side of the terrorists.

On the other hand, we also wonder if God is ready to judge America. Given the evils of our society, isn't it possible that God will judge America? Haven't we exceeded what other nations have done that God has judged in the past?

In his book *Is God on America's Side?*, Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about

blessing and cursing. We will look at these in more depth below. But we should first acknowledge that God through His prophets clearly declared when he was bringing judgment. In those cases, we have special revelation to clearly show what God was doing. We do not have Old Testament prophets today, but that doesn't stop Christians living in the church age from claiming (often inaccurately) that certain things are a judgment of God.

In the 1980s and 1990s we heard many suggest that AIDS was a judgment of God against homosexuality. In my book *Living Ethically In the 90s* I said that it did not look like a judgment from God. First, there were many who engaged in homosexual behavior who were not stricken with AIDS (many male homosexuals and nearly all lesbians were AIDS-free). Second, it struck many innocent victims (those who contracted the disease from blood transfusions). Was AIDS a judgment of God? I don't think so.

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, people called into [my talk show](#) suggesting this was God's judgment against the city because of its decadence. But then callers from the Gulf Coast called to say that the hurricane devastated their communities, destroying homes, businesses, and churches. Was God judging the righteous church-going people of the Gulf Coast? Was Hurricane Katrina a judgment of God? I don't think so.

In this article we are going to look at blessings and judgments that are set forth by God in the Old Testament so that we truly understand what they are.

Seven Principles (Part 1)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The first principle is that God can both

bless and curse a nation.[{1}](#)

When we sing “God Bless America” do we really mean it? I guess part of the answer to that question is what do most Americans mean by the word “God”? We say we believe in God, but many people believe in a god of their own construction. In a sense, most Americans embrace a god of our civil religion. This is not the God of the Bible.

R.C. Sproul says the god of this civil religion is without power: “He is a deity without sovereignty, a god without wrath, a judge without judgment, and a force without power.”[{2}](#) We have driven God from the public square, but we bring him back during times of crisis (like 9/11) but he is only allowed off the reservation for a short period of time.

We sing “God Bless America” but do we mean it? Nearly every political speech and every “State of the Union” address ends with the phrase, “May God bless America.” But what importance do we place in that phrase?

Contrast this with what God said in the Old Testament. God gave Israel a choice of either being blessed or being cursed. “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known” (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

We should first acknowledge that Israel was unique because it had a covenant with God. America does not have a covenant with God. But it does still seem as if the principle of blessing and cursing can apply to nations today.

A second principle is that God judges nations based on the amount of light and opportunity they are given.[{3}](#) The Old Testament is a story of Israel. Other nations enter the story when they connect with Israel. Because Israel had a unique

relationship with God, the nation was judged more strictly than its neighbors.

God was more patient with the Canaanites—it took four hundred years before their “cup of iniquity” was full, and then judgment fell on them. Likewise, Paul points out (Romans 2:12-15) that in the end time, God would individually judge Jews and Gentiles by the amount of light they had when they were alive.

A nation that is given the light of revelation will be held to greater account than a nation that is not.

Seven Principles (Part 2)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The third principle is that God sometimes uses exceedingly evil nations to judge those that are less evil. [\[4\]](#)

Israel was blessed with undeserved opportunities, yet were disobedient. God reveals to Isaiah that God would use the wicked nation of Assyria to judge Israel. “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (Isaiah 10:5-6). In another instance, God reveals to Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans to march through the land, plundering, killing, and stealing (Habakkuk 1:5-11).

As I mentioned above, Christians are often of two minds when they think about America. On the one hand they believe America is a great country. We have been willing to rebuild countries after war or natural disaster. American missionaries travel around the world. Christians broadcast the gospel message around the world.

On the other hand, America is a decadent country. We are the leading exporters of pornography and movies that celebrate sex, violence, and profanity. We have aborted more than 50 million unborn babies. Our judicial system banishes God from public life. Will God use another nation to judge America?

A fourth principle is that when God judges a nation, the righteous suffer with the wicked.[{5}](#) A good example of this can be found in the book of Daniel. When God brought the Babylonians against Judah, Daniel and his friends were forced to accompany them.

We also see a parallel to this in manmade and natural disasters. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a hurricane or tsunami, we see that believers and nonbelievers die together. We live in a fallen world among fallen people. These actions (whether brought about by moral evil or physical evil) destroy lives and property in an indiscriminate way.

A fifth principle is that God's judgments take various forms.[{6}](#) Sometimes it results in the destruction of our families. We can see this in God's pronouncement in Deuteronomy 28:53-55. When the Israelites were forced to leave their homes to go to foreign lands, the warnings were fulfilled. Today we may not be forced into exile, but we wonder if "God is judging our families just the same. He is judging us for our immorality."

In Deuteronomy 28:36-37, "The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." When the ten tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria, they were assimilated into the pagan culture and never heard from again.

Seven Principles (Part 3)

The sixth principle is that in judgment, God's target is often His people, not just the pagans among them.[{7}](#)

Yes, it is true that God judges the wicked, but sometimes the real purpose of present judgments has more to do with the righteous than the wicked. Not only do we see this in the Old Testament, we also see this principle in the New Testament. 1 Peter 4:17-18 says: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'"

This raises a good question. If judgment begins at the house of God, is the church today under judgment? Have Christians become too worldly? Have Christians become too political and thus depend on government rather than on God? Have Christians become too materialistic? Someone has said we should change the motto on our coins from "In God we trust" to "In gold we trust."

A seventh and final principle is that God sometimes reverses intended judgments.[{8}](#) We must begin with an observation. God's blessing on any nation is undeserved. There is always sin and evil in the land. When God blesses us, either individually or corporately, it is an evidence of God's grace.

Sometimes God calls for judgment but then spares a nation. A good example of that can be found in the life of Jonah. God called him to that city to preach repentance for their sins. He didn't want to go because it was the capital city of the Assyrians who had committed genocide against Israel. But when Jonah finally obeyed God, the city was saved from judgment.

God also used Old Testament prophets to preach to Israel. But the people didn't have a heart to care. Consider the ministry

of Micah and Jeremiah. Actually, Micah preached a hundred years before Jeremiah and warned Judah that her “wound is incurable.” A century later, Jeremiah is brought before the priests and false prophets who want him killed. After hearing him, they appeal to the preaching of Micah (Jeremiah 16:19). King Hezekiah listened to Micah’s words and sought God who withheld judgment.

Erwin Lutzer gives another example from eighteenth century England. The country was in decline, but God reversed the trend through the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning to the questions about whether God is blessing or judging our nation.

First, we must acknowledge that no nation can claim that God is on its side. In fact, there is a long and sorry history of nations that have claimed this. And the “God is on our side mentality” has done much harm throughout the history of the church.

Kim Riddlebarger: “Instead of letting God be God, our sinful pride leads us to make such pronouncements that are not ours to make. In these cases, God is not sovereign, he is a mascot.”^[9] As a nation, we must not claim that God is on our side.

This is also true in the political debates we have within this nation. Richard Land in his book, *The Divided States of America*, says: “What liberals and conservatives both are missing is that America has been blessed by God in unique ways—we are not just another country, but neither are we God’s special people. I do not believe that America is God’s chosen nation. God established one chosen nation and people: the Jews. We are not Israel. We do not have ‘God on our side.’ We

are not God's gift to the world."[10](#)

This brings us back to the famous quote by Abraham Lincoln who was asked if God was on the side of the Union forces or the Confederate forces. He said: "I do not care whether God is on my side; the important question is whether I am on God's side, for God is always right."

Second, we should be careful not to quickly assume that a disease or a disaster is a judgment of God. Above I gave examples of people wrongly assuming that AIDS or Hurricane Katrina was a judgment of God.

We can take comfort in knowing that this isn't just a problem in the twenty-first century. Apparently it was even a problem in the first century. The tower of Siloam fell and killed a number of people. It appears that those around Jesus thought it was a punishment for their sins. He counters this idea by saying: "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

We should wisely refrain from too quickly labeling a disease or disaster as a judgment of God. But we should take to heart the words of Jesus and focus on our need for salvation and repentance.

Notes

1. Erwin Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 11.
2. R.C. Sproul, *When Worlds Collide* (Wheaton: Crossway, 202), 63.
3. Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?*, 17.
4. *Ibid.*, 25.
5. *Ibid.*, 35.
6. *Ibid.*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 49.

8. Ibid., 65.

9. Kim Riddlebarger, "Using God," *Modern Reformation*, November/December 2007, 14.

10. Richard Land, *The Divided States of America* (Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 197.

© Copyright 2009 Probe Ministries

Challenges to Religious Liberty

Challenging Christian Publishers

As Christians we believe that there should be a place for Christian values, but we live in a society that often challenges and attempts to exclude Christianity in the public arena. I would like to document many of the challenges to religious liberty today.

We lament the fact that we often have a *naked* public square (where religious values are stripped from the public arena). But we are not calling for a *sacred* public square (where religious values are forced on others). What we want is an *open* public square (where various religious and secular values are given a fair hearing).

Sometimes the challenges to religious liberty seem frivolous, but they could easily establish a precedent that could be harmful to Christianity later on. One example of this is the man who sued two Christian publishers for emotional distress and mental instability because of their Bible translations. He is a homosexual and blames them for his emotional problems,

because their Bibles refer to homosexuality as a sin.

As I point out in my book *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality*, various denominations and gay theologians have been trying to rewrite the Bible concerning homosexuality.[{1}](#) I guess it was only a matter of time before someone would sue the publishers for their Bible translations.

The homosexual man bringing the lawsuit contends that the Bible translations refer to homosexuals as sinners and only reflect an individual opinion or a group's conclusion. In particular, he argues that deliberate changes made to 1 Corinthians 6:9 are to blame. They have, according to him, caused homosexuals "to endure verbal abuse, discrimination, episodes of hates, and physical violence."[{2}](#)

First, let me say that verbal or physical actions toward homosexuals or other people are wrong and should be condemned. But the Bible or a Bible translation should not be blamed for what sinful people do to others. Even when we may disagree with someone, we should always be gracious and always treat others with respect.

Second, we should take the Christian publishers at their word. One of the publishers stated that they do not translate the Bible nor even own the copyright for the translation. Instead, they "rely on the scholarly judgment of the highly respected and credible translation committees behind each translation."

The problem that this homosexual man and other gay activists have is not really with a Christian publisher. It is with the Word of God itself. God intended that sex is to be between a man and a woman in marriage. Any other sex outside of marriage is sinful and wrong.

Although this lawsuit might seem frivolous and without merit, it represents a growing movement to criminalize Christian thought through hate crimes legislation and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and homosexual behavior. As

such, it is but one of many challenges to religious liberty.

The Praying Coach

Another place where religious liberty is challenged is the public schools.

Marcus Borden is a high school football coach in East Brunswick, New Jersey. He is also a recipient of the national Caring Coach of the Year award. And he is in lots of trouble. A spokesman for the ACLU says he has fostered a “destructive environment” for students. So what did he do to create such an environment?

He bowed his head silently during pre-game prayers. Sometimes he even silently knelt down on one knee. Now understand, he didn't pray with the student football players. He merely showed his respect for them silently. But that was enough to set off anyone who believes in the separation of church and state.

One student athletic trainer said it best: “The tradition of student-initiated prayer goes back many, many years. I think with all that is wrong in our schools today, gun violence, bullying, promiscuity, etc. that the energy being spent on Marcus Borden bowing his head and taking a knee is a waste. Here is a man trying to support the youth in his care and be a positive role model and all these administrative yahoos can worry about is his presence in a room with his players while they pray.”[\[3\]](#)

I might mention that the tradition of student-initiated prayer has been part of the football program at this high school for more than a quarter century. The actual prayer is very short and simple. They pray that they will represent their families and communities well. And they pray that the players (on both sides of the ball) will come out of the game unscathed and unhurt.

School officials passed a policy prohibiting school district representatives from participating in student-initiated prayer. They even ordered Borden to stand rather than take a knee and bow his head while his players recited pre-game prayers. If he disobeyed he would lose his job as coach and tenured teacher.

A federal district court judge ruled that the school district violated Borden's constitutional rights to free speech, freedom of association, and academic freedom. But common sense didn't last long. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit overturned the decision and ruled that Borden could not take a knee.

As we talk about the challenges to religious liberty, I think it is important to consider the impact these challenges have on society. I think all of us would agree that we need positive role models in high school athletics. Coach Borden was one of them. He set a positive example and should be applauded, not punished.

Challenge to Christian Teachers

The challenge to religious liberties is also felt in public school classrooms.

A recent case illustrates the challenge many Christian teachers face. For a number of weeks I had been hearing about a teacher who was suspended without pay because he refused to remove his Bible from his desk. The story sounded too incredible, so I had to check it out for myself.

John Freshwater is a science teacher in Ohio who has twice received a Teacher of the Year award.[\[4\]](#) He has had his Living Bible on his desk for twenty-one years, but it is not in a prominent place. He told me that when he asked former students if they remember him having a Bible on his desk, many of them didn't remember that he did.

John Freshwater is an excellent teacher. In fact his science class was the only eighth grade class at the school to pass the Ohio Achievement Test. He has been accused of branding a student during a voluntary Tesla coil demonstration, but there doesn't seem to be much merit in this accusation.

When I interviewed him, he did mention that back in 2002-2003, he decided to follow some of the details in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation that allowed teachers to teach the controversy concerning evolution. He wonders if his willingness to talk about the problems with evolution is part of the reason for actions against him.

Freshwater pointed out that other teachers have religious items on their desk. And he was willing to remove a Ten Commandments poster from his classroom along with a box of Bibles that were stored in his office for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

So is he just a trouble-maker? I don't think so. I also interviewed his pastor who was most supportive of him, his character, and his teaching. As far as I can tell, he is the kind of teacher we would love to have to teach our children. He didn't deserve to be suspended, and he certainly didn't deserve to be fired.

His case is but one of many cases I have followed over the years of teachers who were reprimanded, suspended, or fired for having a Bible or a religious item on their desk or wall. It is amazing how far we have come when you consider that the Bible was the primary document in education not so long ago. Students read the Bible or else read about the Bible in their New England Primers or McGuffey Readers. How far we have come from the Bible being the center of education to a classroom where even having a Bible on the desk is seen as a reason to suspend or fire a teacher. This is once again a significant challenge to religious liberty.

Challenging the Boy Scouts

Awhile back I had the governor of the state of Texas in my radio studio to talk about the Boy Scouts. You might wonder why Rick Perry wanted to talk about the Boy Scouts. Well, he credits much of his success to them, and so wrote the book *On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts are Worth Fighting For.*[{5}](#)

His story is pretty simple. He grew up in Paint Creek, Texas. Yes, the town is as small as it sounds. There was not much to do, but you could join the Boy Scouts. Rick Perry did and became an Eagle Scout. And he joined an elite group of people like Gerald Ford, Ross Perot, William Bennett, and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates who were all Eagle Scouts long before they became prominent, successful public figures. A significant part of the book focuses on the positive aspects of scouting.

But another part of the book is illustrated by the subtitle dealing with the values that are worth fighting for.[{6}](#) The Boy Scouts have been under siege for years. Radical groups and secularists have attacked it on three fronts: (1) that it requires Scouts and Scout leaders to believe in God, (2) that it limits adult Scout leadership on the basis of sexuality, and (3) that it limits participation to boys. Atheists have attacked its requirement that scouts believe in God. Militant homosexual groups have tried to force it to install homosexual Scout leaders. And feminists have challenged whether the Boy Scouts should be limited just to boys and thus exclude girls.

The Boy Scouts have had to defend themselves all the way to the Supreme Court. And the Boy Scouts have also been attacked in the media and denied funding from various charitable organizations. They have been kicked off facilities that used to be provided for them. And in Philadelphia they were told to pay an exorbitant fee for a facility in the city the Scouts built eighty years ago and gave to the city for free.

While it is true that the Boy Scouts are not a religious organization, it is also true that many troops meet in churches. And they are often attacked for their belief in God. So I believe that these attacks on the Boy Scouts represent another challenge to religious liberty in this country.

But I also believe that the Boy Scouts illustrate the cultural decline in America. When the Boy Scouts were formed nearly a century ago, they were at the very center of American values. Today, they are one of the most vilified organizations in America. The Boy Scouts didn't change; America did.

Historical and Biblical Basis for Religious Liberty

What are the historical and religious bases for the religious liberty which is being challenged today?

The founders of this country wisely wanted to keep the institutions of church and state separate. But church/state separation does not mean that Christians cannot have an active role in politics.[{7}](#) We should be free to express our religious values in the public arena.

Thomas Jefferson declared that religious liberty is "the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights." After the Constitution was drafted, the Bill of Rights was added. The First Amendment specifically granted all citizens the free exercise of religion. Church historian Philip Schaff once called the First Amendment "the Magna Carta of religious freedom," and "the first example in history of a government deliberately depriving itself of all legislative control over religion."[{8}](#)

The biblical basis for religious liberty rests on the fact that we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27-28) and thus have value and dignity. With that also comes liberty of

conscience. We are free moral beings who can choose and have the right to express ourselves. In a very real sense, religious liberty is a gift from God.

Religious freedom is not something granted to us by a government. God grants us those rights, and it is the responsibility of governments to acknowledge those rights. The Declaration of Independence captures this idea in its most famous sentence: "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."

Government is a divinely ordained institution (Romans 13:1-7) that has the responsibility to keep order (1 Peter 2:13-15). We are to obey those in authority (Romans 13:1) and we are to pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

We also recognize that the church is separate from government. Those within the church are to preach the gospel (Acts 1:8). Church leaders are also to teach sound doctrine (Matthew 28:20) and to disciple believers (Ephesians 4:11-13).

We have seen that standing for our rights and our liberty can sometimes be costly and is an ongoing responsibility. As one nineteenth century activist put it: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." [\[9\]](#)

Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, [*A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008).
2. "Gay man sues publisher over Bible verses," *USA Today*, 9 July 2008.
3. John Whitehead, "The End of Freedom in America," commentary, http://www.rutherford.org/articles_db/commentary.asp?record_id=529.
4. Bob Burney, "A battle over a Bible for a Teacher (and a

- Nation)," Townhall, 21 May 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/54t5x2>.
5. Rick Perry, *On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts are Worth Fighting For* (Macon, GA: Stroud & Hall Publishers, 2008).
6. Rick Perry, "On My Honor: Why I wrote this book," *Human Events*, 20 February 2008, <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=25083>.
7. See Kerby Anderson, "Separation of Church and State," Probe Ministries, 2005, www.probe.org/separation-of-church-and-state/.
8. Robert Handy, "Minority-Majority Confrontations, Church-State Patterns, and the U.S. Supreme Court," in Jonathan Sarna, ed., *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 306.
9. Wendell Phillips in a speech before the Massachusetts Antislavery Society in 1852.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Fertility and Voting Patterns

November 1, 2007

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.

©2007 Probe Ministries

Candidates and Character

January 24, 2008

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.

©2008 Probe Ministries

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-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.

Notes

1. Charles Colson with Anne Morse, "Promises, Promises: How to really build a 'great society'," *Christianity Today* (online), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/august/11.64.html
2. Kerby Anderson, "Politics and Religion", www.probe.org/politics-and-religion-2, 1991.
3. Chuck Colson, "A Sacred Duty: Why Christians Must Vote," *Breakpoint*, breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=2429, May 13, 2004.
4. Gary Ledbetter, "Who should vote?" Baptist Press, www.bpnews.net/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID=18923.
5. Albert Einstein, as quoted on Hillwatch.com, www.hillwatch.com/PPRC/Quotes/Politics_and_Politicians.aspx
6. Chuck Colson, "Pulling the Lever: Our First Civic Duty," www.leaderu.com/common/colson-lever.html, 1998.
7. Richard J. Mouw, "Tolerance Without Compromise," *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1996, 33.
8. Quoted in D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote? A Christian Perspective on the Issues*, pre-release copy (Colo. Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2008), 29. Note: book released the week of this radio broadcast (week of Jan. 14, 2008).
9. Ibid, page 28.
10. Probe Ministries, "A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action," *Mind Games Survival Guide*, VI:52.

11. Kennedy and Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?* 30.
12. Mouw, "Tolerance," 34-35.
13. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America* (Grand Rapids, MI, : Zondervan, 1999), 69.
14. Ibid.
15. [Jeremiah 17: 5-7](#) (NIV).
16. "Bill Armstrong: Senator and Christian," *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1983, 20
17. Thomas and Dobson, 105.
18. Kennedy and Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?* 106-119.
19. Ibid, 197.
20. Ibid, 201.
21. CNN Larry King Live, *Politics and Religion*, October 26, 2004 (as posted on Bible Bulletin Board: www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/mac-lkl5.htm).
22. Ross Douthat, "Crises of Faith," *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2007.
23. Tim Garrett, "St. Augustine," Probe Ministries, 2000; available online at probe.org/st-augustine/.
24. Ibid, Colson, "Pulling the Lever."
25. Tony Jones, "Honest Questions About Mitt Romney," <http://tinyurl.com/3d8dm8>, February 21, 2007.
26. Ibid, Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 204.
27. Mark DeMoss, "Why evangelicals could support this Mormon," *The Politico*, April 24, 2007.

28. Paul Edwards, "Ravi Zacharias on a Mormon in the White House," The God & Culture Blog, <http://tinyurl.com/2mkj6u>.
29. Ronald J. Siders and Diane Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005).
30. Anderson, "Politics and Religion."
31. Ibid.
32. "How You Can Have Maximum Patriotic Impact-Brief," *iVoteValues.com*, <http://tinyurl.com/2uot68>, see point #3.
33. See an insightful application of this line of reasoning in Nathan Schlueter, "Drawing Pro-Life Lines," *First Things*, October 2001, tinyurl.com/6godf.
34. For a defense of his personal decision to abstain from voting in the 2004 major election, see Mark Noll, "None of the above: why I won't be voting for president," *Christian Century*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_19_121/ai_n6355192.
35. Gary Ledbetter, "Who should vote?"

© 2008 Probe Ministries

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

1. From *Olney Hymns*, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.
2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.
3. Aitken, *op. cit.*
4. Newton, *op. cit.*, 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.
8. Ibid., 44-45.
9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.
10. Newton, op. cit., 60.
11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.
12. Newton, op. cit., 69.
13. Ibid., 65, 68.
14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.
15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.
16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.
17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.
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.
29. Ibid., 319.
30. Ibid., 243.
31. Ibid., 347.
32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
33. Newton, op. cit., 23.
34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.
35. Ibid., 85.
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 a 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

1. Abraham Lincoln, Speech fragment concerning the abolition of slavery, c. July 1858. The Gilder Lehrman Collection; tinyurl.com/2cs99u, accessed April 6, 2007.
2. “Address of the President of the Republic of South Africa, Nelson Mandela to the Joint Houses of Parliament of the United Kingdom,” 11 July 1996, Issued by: Office of the President, www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1996/sp960711.html, accessed July 23, 2007.
3. Garth Lean, *God’s Politician* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1987), 1-6; Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William*

- Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 103-107.
4. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (first published in 1789), Chapter Two; excerpted in Ted Baehr, Susan Wales, Ken Wales, *The Amazing Grace of Freedom: The Inspiring Faith of William Wilberforce, the Slaves' Champion* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2007), 62-63.
 5. Mark Galli, "A Profitable Little Business," in Baehr, et al., op. cit., 58.
 6. Metaxas op. cit., 17-22.
 7. Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 2007), 21, 69-81 ff.; Lean, op. cit., 32-40.
 8. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 80.
 9. Lean, op. cit., 33-40.
 10. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 97.
 11. Lean, op. cit., 50-51.
 12. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 134.
 13. Lean, op. cit., 51, 60, 93.
 14. Kevin Belmonte, "William Wilberforce," www.wilberforce.org/Bio.asp?ID=1016, accessed April 6, 2007.
 15. Lean, op. cit., 58.
 16. Marylynn Rouse, "John Newton: Mentor to William Wilberforce," in Baehr, et al., op. cit., 105-106.
 17. William Law Mathieson, *Great Britain and the Slave Trade: 1839-1865* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 1, 3, 5, 7-10 ff., 170-171, 185-186 ff.
 18. Lean, op. cit., 69.
 19. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 95, 164-165, 167, 174.
 20. Kerby Anderson, "Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," 2004, www.probe.org/utilitarianism-the-greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number/; accessed April 6, 2007.
 21. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 212.
 22. Metaxas, op. cit., 133.
 23. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 245.

24. *William Wilberforce, Real Christianity*; Abridged and updated by Ellyn Sanna (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 1999). The original was published in 1797 with the ponderous title, *The Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*.
25. *Ibid.*, 50.
26. *Ibid.*, 29, 256.
27. *Ibid.*, 243 ff.; 246.
28. *Ibid.*, 256-257.
29. *Ibid.*, 50-51.
30. *Ibid.*, 198-199.
31. *Ibid.*, 269-270.
32. Belmonte 2002, 2007, *op. cit.*, 177; 90-91. Biblical references for the “Golden Rule” are Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12.
33. Wilberforce, *op. cit.*, 18; 221-222; 285-293.
34. *Ibid.*, 289.
35. *Ibid.*, 193.
36. Baehr et al., *op. cit.*, 140.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

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

1. Dennis Cauchon, Marriage gap could sway elections, *USA Today*, 27 September 2006.
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.

© 2007 Probe Ministries