

A President's Educational Choice

An Important Choice

With each presidential election Americans are called to reflect upon public policy, ranging from military funding to education reform. Once the new president is chosen, everyone looks for evidence that he will move the federal bureaucracy in a direction favorable to their own agenda.

When it comes to education, President Obama has been difficult to figure out. In early speeches he seemed to favor dramatic reform. During the campaign he said:

We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform; where parents take responsibility for their children's success; where our schools and government are accountable for results; where we're recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers, and students are excited to learn because they're attending schools of the future; and where we expect all our children not only to graduate high school, but to graduate college and get a good paying job.[*{1}*](#)

Later, Obama appeared to move closer to those who already hold sway over how our schools operate, especially the teachers unions. An indication of this trend was the sound of relief voiced by Marty Hittelman, president of the California Federation of Teachers, who said, "It's such a clear change from what we've had. . . . Someone who's friendly to labor. . . . Someone who wants to work with teachers."[*{2}*](#) Obama has also signaled encouragement to the unions by appointing a

teacher-friendly Stanford University professor to lead his education transition team.

But sometimes personal action speaks louder than political appointments. Our new president has decided to send his two children, Malia Anne and Natasha, to a well known private school in Washington, D.C. The Obama children will attend Sidwell Friends School, a private Quaker affiliated school that charges \$29,000 a year per student. Some are criticizing the Obama family for not supporting the local public schools. As a supporter of educational freedom, and choice, I personally have no problem with the president choosing the best educational setting for his children. I would do the same.

What interests me is what this choice says about President Obama's thoughts regarding educational excellence. Sidwell Friends School violates key principles that the teachers unions and other public school supporters tell us are necessary elements for excellent schools, programs and policies that reformers insist taxpayers should be providing for every student in America.

Ensuring an adequate education for all of our children is a matter of justice that Christians should be concerned about. In what follows I will look at these so-called educational necessities the teachers unions and other public school supporters demand.

What Sidwell Needs

President Obama's decision to place his daughters in Sidwell reveals something about what he thinks it takes to provide a superior education. Choosing this expensive private school raises interesting questions about President Obama's support of what might be called the "common wisdom" that public school leaders and teachers unions tell us is necessary for good

schools.

Much of the following was brought to my attention by Mike Antonucci who writes a monthly newsletter for those who are concerned about education in America and particularly the role that the unions play in shaping it. Antonucci points out six areas in which the Sidwell School might be seen as deficient by our leading reformers and especially by the teachers unions.

According to the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the country, the first deficiency at Sidwell is obvious. On its web site the NEA argues that “the attainment and exercise of collective bargaining rights are essential to the promotion of education employee and student needs in society.”[\[3\]](#) In other words, the school simply must be unionized. How can Sidwell School hope to effectively educate students without a collective bargaining agreement? It boggles the mind to think that they can educate President Obama’s children without such necessities as union agency fees, binding arbitration, grievance procedures, and most important, teachers strikes!

How can real education occur in the absence of an angry battle between a well financed teachers union and a harried entrenched school administration? Can real learning happen in the absence of endless hours of negotiations over every aspect of the curriculum, the daily schedule, and teacher placement? Doesn’t the president know that a hostile, confrontational working environment actually improves the educational process?

In addition to this remarkable neglect, the Sidwell School forces its teachers to pay between ten and forty percent of their health care insurance premiums, contribute towards their own retirement plan, and almost unbelievably receive only two personal days off per school year. Barbaric! Everyone knows that teachers are only concerned about compensation and benefits and if they do not receive an amount above the median

level paid out by other schools of similar size, they simply can't function. These teachers are obviously being coerced to remain at this school. And to think that some have suggested that the opportunity to work with motivated students and supportive parents in building a strong learning community might be more important than financial rewards.

More Problems with Sidwell

A key ingredient missing from the Sidwell experience will be an appropriate level of diversity. To many, diversity has become the ultimate good in education. Millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent to create highly diverse student bodies across the nation. Without a high level of diversity, it's argued, students will not develop the necessary degree of tolerance, both for people and ideas, needed for our society to prosper or even exist into the future. A diversity deficit might result in the president's children coming to the frightening conclusion that truth itself isn't diverse and that perhaps we should not accept all ideas equally.

Although the Sidwell School has a significant level of diversity – thirty-nine percent of the students are part of an ethnic or racial minority group – Washington D. C. public schools are ninety-five percent ethnic and racial minorities. How can the president send his children to a learning environment that is so far behind the level of essential diversity prominent in our capitol's public schools? If some diversity is good, isn't more diversity better?

However, this deficit of diversity pales in comparison to the next problem. The Sidwell School is a Quaker institution. It has mandatory weekly worship meetings for all its students, including the president's children. This practice goes far beyond the legitimate academic objective of learning the history of religious traditions; it requires students to

participate in a religious activity.

The official National Education Association's Web site makes it clear that "encouraging or compelling students to participate in any religious activity, such as prayer, during any type of holiday festivity or classroom activity is forbidden."[\[4\]](#) Now, if such activity is harmful to our public school students, does it make sense to expose the president's children to them?

The NEA adds that while students may study various religious expressions and practices, they may do so "as long as schools make sure different faiths are represented in school-wide or classroom activities."[\[5\]](#) Does Sidwell promote Islamic or Wiccan worship? Is our president setting a good example by allowing his children to be taught in such an intolerant setting?

Sidwell's Curriculum

Here's another problem. It appears that Sidwell is kind of old fashioned when it comes to its curriculum. Its Web site says, "We believe that to be effective, education must be founded on secure mastery of basic skills . . . We place strong emphasis on reading, personal expression of ideas through speaking and writing, and the mastery of computational and problem solving skills. We also encourage scientific exploration, artistic creativity, physical activity, second language acquisition."[\[6\]](#) Basic skills? Mastery learning? Isn't this a throwback to the education of the nineteenth century?

In the middle school, Sidwell's history curriculum says that "Each history course is designed to provide students with a sound foundation of knowledge in a given subject area and to develop research, writing and interpretive skills."[\[7\]](#) To many modern educators, this focus on acquiring information and developing mastery of essential skills is reminiscent of

educational policies that have been out of vogue for decades.

Professional educators tend to endorse something called the Progressive Education Movement. This movement emphasized a “naturalistic,” “project-oriented,” “hands-on,” “critical-thinking” curriculum and “democratic” education policies endorsed by the philosopher John Dewey.^{8} Beginning early in the twentieth century, educators challenged the emphasis on subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the “tool” metaphor for learning.

The “tool” metaphor argues that students’ minds shouldn’t be filled with lots of facts, but instead should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something like this: “Since knowledge is growing so quickly – in fact it’s exploding – we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated.” Education historian Lawrence Cremin writes that our elementary schools have been dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.^{9} The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called “intellectual capital,” an agreed upon set of necessary facts that all well educated people should possess.

The Sidwell School seems to believe that this so called intellectual capital is important. By stressing the acquisition of key information in its curriculum it is revealing a more traditional rather than progressive education. Can this antiquated curriculum possibly prepare the Obama children for the rapid changes of the twenty-first century?

Educational Excellence

It seems, then, that the Sidwell Friends School chosen by the Obama family for their daughters violates many of what is

considered to be the “best practices” in the public school sector.

On the other hand, it represents many of the factors that we know make for a superior learning environment. Almost twenty years ago the Brookings Institution published a book that made a powerful argument regarding what makes for an effective school and what doesn't.[\[10\]](#) The author's conclusions were really not that surprising. In a nutshell they found that bureaucracy kills, and if public schools are anything they are bureaucratic. In fact, the study argued that private schools are usually more effective simply because they have greater autonomy than public schools.

Exercising this autonomy begins with an educational leader. The role of a private school headmaster is often quite different from the public school equivalent, the principal. The headmaster has much more autonomy in fashioning the educational vision for his school as well as the authority for executing it. This includes shaping the curriculum and hiring and firing teachers based on their effectiveness and support for the school's program. In the end, private school leaders have much greater power to fashion the kind of educational community they envision than do public school administrators.

Private school leaders also enjoy the freedom to create a disciplined environment necessary for learning to occur. Because parents have freely chosen a private school for their children to attend, they have already bought into the way the school chooses to structure its students' time and how it deals with distractions to learning. Parents of private school children tend to be much more supportive of the school's teachers and administrators as a result. This is not to say that private schools always get it right when establishing a disciplined learning environment, but parents always have the option of pulling out if they become disenchanted with the program. This educational choice both empowers private schools and encourages change as well. Parents vote for the programs

that work and take their funds elsewhere when they feel the school is not a good fit for their children. Successful schools are rewarded; others are encouraged to change.

Private schools succeed when the headmaster, teachers, parents, and children have worked together to create a learning community. As simple as this sounds, it can be life changing for the students involved. Even students from our most challenging urban environments have benefitted from schools that have been freed from their bureaucratic straitjackets. If we hope to impact our most needy students in this country, we will do so by encouraging policies that increase the autonomy of school leaders and empower parents by giving them the kind of educational choice that President Obama enjoyed when deciding to send his children to the Sidwell Friends School.

Notes

1. Dan Lips and Jennifer A. Marshall, "Transforming and Improving American Education: A Memo to President-elect Obama," The Heritage Foundation online, December 9, 2008, www.heritage.org/Research/Education/sr32.cfm.
2. Nanette Asimov, "Stanford professor leads Obama education transition team," SFGate, online home of the San Francisco Chronicle, November 22, 2008, www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/11/21/BANK140G28.DTL.
3. EIA Communiqué, November 24, 2008, www.eiaonline.com/archives/20081124.htm
4. Tim Walker, "Merry...? Happy...?" National Education Association online, www.nea.org/home/15287.htm.
5. Ibid.
6. Sidwell Friends School, Lower School Philosophy, www.sidwell.edu/lower_school/academics.asp.
7. Sidwell Friends School, Departments, www.sidwell.edu/upper_school/departments.asp.
8. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't*

Have Them (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 7.

9 . Ibid., 49.

10. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (The Brookings Institution, 1990)

© 2009 Probe Ministries

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

Politically Correct Education

Don Closson considers the impact that affirmative action, multiculturalism, and speech codes have had on education. He

also argues that the heart of the issue is the rejection of both the Judeo-Christian worldview and Western Civilization.

The Power of Political Correctness

The media has recently taken notice of a trend in education that has actually been around for some time. This trend has been obvious to anyone well-acquainted with the goings-on in our citadels of higher learning or even on selected high school campuses. The term *Political Correctness*, or *politically correct speech*, covers most of the issues involved. Multiculturalism is often given as the driving ethic that prompts one to be politically correct.

At the foundation of this movement is the belief that all education is political. Nowhere in the curriculum can one find a hiding place from race, class, or gender issues. Added to this assumption is the law of moral and ethical relativism: All systems of thought, all cultures, are equal in value. To assume otherwise is politically incorrect by definition.

Just how important this type of thinking is to those who influence our nation's students is reflected by some of their comments. According to Glenn Maloney, assistant dean of students at the University of Texas at Austin, "Multiculturalism will be the key word for education. I believe that will be the mission of the university in the 90's." (1) Donna Shalala, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, adds that this movement amounts to "a basic transformation of American higher education in the name of multiculturalism and diversity." (2)

A recent study of the New York school system found that "African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Rican/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European American worlds for centuries." (3)

The report goes on to state, "Unfortunately, stereotyping and misinformation have become part of the dominant culture enveloping everyone. . . . Because of the depth of the problem and the tenacity of its hold on the mind, only the most stringent measures can have significant impact."(4)

And stringent measures are what have occurred. Curricula, admissions policies, the hiring and promotion of faculty, and the freedom to debate issues have all been modified by those who currently define political correctness. There is a growing body of evidence that quota systems are now in place in many admissions offices across the country. Textbooks are being written and courses changed to promote multiculturalism at the expense of teaching about Western Civilization. Professors are unable to teach their courses or participate in the academic enterprise because their views fail to conform to the new guardians of culture.

What is most appalling is the attempt to remove the freedom of speech from students who fail to conform to the correct position on a broad spectrum of topics. What is ironic is that many of those now attempting to limit the freedom of speech of students in the name of multiculturalism are the very same individuals that began the free speech movement in the sixties, arguing for academic freedom and student input into the curriculum. It seems that the issue was more a matter of gaining power to control the curriculum and inject it with their views rather than truly to promote freedom of academic endeavors.

Ethnic Studies

Let's look at a few places where political correctness has had a major impact. In 1988 the Stanford faculty voted to change the Western Culture course, one of the most popular on campus, to "Cultures, Ideas and Values." The fifteen-book requirement was dropped and replaced with the admonition to give substantial attention to issues of race(5) and gender. The

reading list now had to include a quota of works by women and minorities. Out goes Shakespeare, in comes Burgos-Debray.

Shakespeare is deemed to be racist, sexist, and classist, a product of the ultimate evil—Western Civilization. French writer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray is, on the other hand, politically correct. One of her works, now part of the Stanford curriculum, describes a Guatemalan woman's struggle against capitalist oppression. She rejects marriage and motherhood and becomes a feminist, a socialist, and finally a Marxist, arguing politics with fellow revolutionaries in Paris. According to the author, this simple Guatemalan woman speaks for all the Indians of the American continent.(6)

Berkeley, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Wisconsin are just a few of the schools where students must take a course in ethnic studies but are not required to take a single course in Western Civilization. At Berkeley, the ethnic studies course is the only required course on campus, and Wisconsin students can graduate without taking any American history. Ohio State has gone even further, revamping its entire curriculum to reflect issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. The chairman of the English department at Pennsylvania State University has remarked, "I would bet that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is taught in more English departments today than all of Shakespeare's plays combined."(7)

An ironic twist to this revolution is that when writings of third- world authors are included in the curriculum, they rarely are the classics from that culture. Instead, they tend to be recent, Marxist, and politically correct works.

Unfortunately, curriculum revisions are not confined to the college campus. The state of New York recently commissioned a committee to review its statewide secondary-school curriculum. The results were a bit startling, to say the least.

According to the report, no topic is culture-free. The

Eurocentric, white, American culture currently dominating the curriculum must give way to one which represents all cultures equally. Even math and science were cited as culturally biased because they failed to give credit to contributions from other cultures.(8)

In the social sciences, even more radical demands have been made. One Black Studies professor charges that the current curriculum in New York's high schools reflects "deep-seated pathologies of racial hatred." He argues that time spent studying the U.S. Constitution, which is seriously flawed in his opinion, is grounds for miseducation. He adds that studying the Constitution is egocentric and blatant White Nationalism.(9)

Instruments of Exclusion

In chapter 2 of his book *Illiberal Education*, Dinesh D'Souza takes up the case of high school senior Yat-pang Au. To make a fairly long story short, Yat-pang received a rejection letter from the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 although he had graduated first in his high school class, scored 1340 on the SAT, earned letters in track and cross-country, served on the student council, and won seven scholarships from groups such as the National Society of Professional Engineers. What went wrong?

It wasn't his credentials. In fact, Yat-pang was considerably above the Berkeley average in his qualifications. His only real problem was his race, and what chancellor Ira Michael Hayman called "a little social engineering." Under Hayman the university began to devalue the importance of merit and achievement in admissions in order to achieve a racially balanced student body, one that reflects the population at large.

As a result, this family of immigrants from Hong Kong found that their son could not go to Berkeley although ten other

students from his high school had been accepted with lower qualifications. The policy of racial balance which seemed so fair to Hayman was anything but fair to the Au family.

If Yat-pang had been Hispanic or Black he would have had no problem attending Berkeley. Asians, many of them immigrants, are now being excluded from Berkeley because they happen to be a too-successful minority that values the family and education.

Unfortunately, Berkeley is not the only place one can find this type of discrimination. Harvard, UCLA, Stanford, Brown, and others have been charged with discrimination towards Asians. As D'Souza writes, "Quotas which were intended as instruments of inclusion now seemed to function as instruments of exclusion." (10)

Even if we set aside Yat-pang's individual rights, does this policy make sense for the minorities it is trying to help? Often it does not. D'Souza notes that Blacks and Hispanics admitted under reduced academic requirements do not fare well at Berkeley. In one study, only 18 percent of the Black and 22 percent of the Hispanic affirmative-action students graduated within five years. Almost 30 percent of Black and Hispanic students drop out at the end of their freshman year. (11) Because we have set aside academic preparation as the criterion for admission to our top schools, many students who cannot compete are being admitted. They simply drop out, more frustrated and angry than before.

Another issue that goes hand-in-hand with admissions is the issue of testing itself. Many argue that since some groups do better than others on the SAT, the test is biased. A New York federal judge has ruled that, since women do not do as well as men on the SAT, using the test as a criterion for awarding its Regents and Empire State scholarships violates state law. (12)

What is remarkable about this trend is that testing was

installed in the 1920s to fight arbitrary bias in admissions. When one removes testing, which even the critics must agree is still the best way to predict academic success, all other criteria except race and gender are subjective.

In light of this fact, College Board president Donald Stewart, who is black, has argued that the test covers words and ideas necessary for success in college, regardless of cultural background.(13)

Freedom of Speech

Those who consider themselves politically correct have inflicted grave damage on the concept of free speech. It is interesting to note that Christians have endured free-speech restrictions for years, but only recently have others who hold to politically incorrect positions experienced this form of discrimination.

Restrictions on speech come in three different forms on campus. The most widespread form is the conduct code. Another is the refusal to allow conservative speakers to address groups on campus. And last is the censure of faculty members who step outside the sphere of politically correct thought.

The University of Michigan has been a leader in restricting First Amendment rights. Responding to a student radio disc jockey who invited other students to call in their favorite racial jokes, the university began a long crusade to stamp out racism, sexism, and a multitude of other "isms." Instead of just punishing the offender, all students were now under suspicion, and all speech would be monitored carefully.

A new policy on discrimination and discriminatory harassment was approved. It defined as punishable "any behavior, verbal or physical, that stigmatizes or victimizes an individual on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, creed, national origin, ancestry, age, marital

status, handicap, or Vietnam-era veteran status.”(14)

Debate on these topics was to be restricted in fear that someone might be stigmatized by the discussion. The so-called marketplace of ideas that colleges are supposed to represent had been shrunk down to convenience-store size.

Since one cannot be certain that even the most balanced discussion of a topic such as gay rights or religious cults might not stigmatize a fellow student, one must refrain from entering into that territory. The result of this type of policy is to guarantee a monopoly to the radical Marxist and feminist ideas now being promoted by the faculty and administration on many of our campuses.

Fortunately, this policy was successfully challenged by an unnamed psychology professor who realized that most of the subject matter he dealt with in class might stigmatize someone. In a strange twist, the ACLU was on the right side of this issue and represented the professor. Eventually a U.S. District Court struck down even a modified version of the code. But there are still codes in effect at Emory, Middlebury, Brown, Penn State, Tufts, and the Universities of California, Connecticut, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and others. Many more schools are considering implementing codes.(15)

Some groups on campus have used more blatant tactics to keep conservatives from speaking. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner, U.N. ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan have all been victims of censorship in the form of gay and pro-abortion groups shouting them down. In one case, black students with clubs disrupted a meeting for the National Association of Scholars, a conservative group of professors, charging that they were actually supported by the Ku Klux Klan.(16)

Another form of censorship is the silencing of faculty. Alan

Gribben, a professor at the University of Texas, made the mistake of voting against the politization of a writing course in the English Department. As a result he was ostracized by the department and decided to leave after seventeen years on the faculty.(17)

The “Ism” Proliferation

The goal of the political correctness revolutionaries on campus is the removal of any remnant of racism, sexism, class elitism, and even lookism, the practice of treating people differently because of their looks. There are also specific positions on ecology, foreign and domestic policy, homosexuality, and animal rights that are politically correct.

The hope behind all of this is the creation of a society where each culture and social group is appreciated for its contributions. But the fallout has been to encourage people to find some reason to declare oppression, for it seems that only those who are oppressed are in a position to determine what is politically correct. White, middle-class males are the great Satan incarnate—even the most repentant among them must be watched closely.

Politically correct people argue that they are calling for a philosophy of inclusion. They are not thought police, they say; they are only concerned with correcting centuries of unfairness. In reality the effect of this movement has been to silence or remove from campus those who differ from the politically correct position. If a professor opposes racially based admissions policies, he is racist. If a student holds to religious convictions concerning homosexuality, she is homophobic. The issue really goes beyond mere tolerance; the goal of this movement is to remove opposition to the plans of the radical left.

Since those who are politically correct agree that Western Civilization is the cause of all evil in the world, one might

ask what should replace it. Not surprisingly, the writers and heroes of this movement tend to be Marxist, feminist, and gay. It is interesting that Marx, a white male European, is still considered politically correct, although he held quite incorrect views on racial issues (in fact, he spoke positively concerning slavery in America).(18)

If true multiculturalism were the issue, these folks would be calling for the study and implementation of traditional cultures from around the world, which, by the way, are just as racist and far more male-dominated than our own. Whether one looks at Islam or the teachings of oriental traditions, one finds that a dim view is taken of both modern feminist thought and homosexuality.

The tradition of Western thought has been to deal with ideas that transcend race, and it has been anything but homogeneous in its conclusions. The irony of the accusations leveled at Western thought by the politically correct is that the ideas they favor have been most fully developed in America and Europe. Even with all of its faults, Western Civilization has been the most open and tolerant of all societies. It has been eager to find and incorporate ideas that are beneficial from other cultures.

All the important issues considered on our campuses have religious elements. Whether one is considering the uses of technology or the relationships between the sexes, everyone is informed by his or her religious presuppositions. Placing a prior restraint on someone's freedom to speak because he is coming from a different position not only violates our historic view of freedom of speech but also can be used to further remove Christian thought from our schools.

What those in authority on our campuses really hope to accomplish is the unquestioned implementation of a worldview that releases man from his moral obligation to a creator God, a God who sees all men and women, regardless of their color,

as in need of redemption. As Christian parents and alumni, we need to make certain that colleges remain places where students can seek and find the truth.

Notes

1. "Multiculturalism Seen As Education Key," *Dallas Morning News*, 9 December 1990, sec. A, p. 56.
2. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 13.
3. Helle Bering-Jensen, "Teaching All Things to All People," *Insight*, 2 April 1990, 49.
4. Ibid.
5. Allan C. Brownfeld, "'Cultural Imperialism' Is Destroying American Education," *Human Events*, 29 June 1991, 523.
6. D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*, 71.
7. Brownfeld, "Cultural Imperialism," 523.
8. Bering-Jensen, "Teaching All Things," 50.
9. Ibid.
10. D'Souza, *ILLIBERAL EDUCATION*, 29.
11. Ibid., 39.
12. Ibid., 44.
13. Ibid., 45.
14. Ibid., 142.
15. Ibid., 146.
16. "Race Riot: Minority Students Disrupt NAS Lecture," *Campus Report from Accuracy in Academia*, May 1991, 1.
17. "P.C. or Not P.C., That Is the Question," *The Dallas Morning News*, 21 April 1991, sec. J, p. 1.
18. Brownfeld, "Cultural Imperialism," 11.

Educational Opportunity

What Produces Effective Education?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The One Best System?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Myths About Choice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More Myths About Choice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other Mechanisms For Creating Effective Schools

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

California and Minnesota have also passed charter legislation. Minnesota’s program is a good example of why charter laws are more a political response to the voucher threat than a real attempt to free schools from excessive bureaucracy. Their charter schools must

be started by licensed teachers who must comprise a majority of the board. They must also meet state education standards called

outcomes. Charter schools may establish their own budget and establish curricula, but the goals of individual schools will be

dictated by the state. The state-wide teacher union would be a powerful force within these teacher-controlled schools.

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

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

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

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

Our interest in this debate over educational reform should not be driven by our own family's educational needs alone. God told His

people, while captive in Babylon, to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare" (Jer. 29:7). Thus, the welfare of all children in our nation should be our concern.

Notes

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

© 1994 Probe Ministries International

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-abort” and you are guilty. Study and pray hard on such issues as God gives freedom of conscience.

Sometimes it comes down to choices we’d rather not make. Only

rarely, perhaps, can we say that to abstain from voting is the only way. Notable Christian author Mark Noll believes this is such a time for him.[\[34\]](#)

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

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

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

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

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.