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.

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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 Benthama founder of Utilitarianismon 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.

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God in Our Nation's Capital

U.S. Capitol Building

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

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

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

Unfortunately, the original design failed to consider that additional states would enter the union, and these additional representatives were crowding the Capitol. President Millard Fillmore chose Thomas Walter to continue the Capitols construction and rehabilitation. Construction halted during the first part of the Civil War, and it wasnt until 1866 that the canopy fresco in the Rotunda was completed.

The religious imagery in the Rotunda is significant. Eight

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

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

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

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

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

The Washington Monument

The tallest monument in Washington, DC, is the Washington Monument. From the base of the monument to its aluminum capstone are numerous references to God. This is fitting since George Washington was a religious man. When he took the oath of office on April 30, 1789, he asked that the Bible be opened to Deuteronomy 28. After the oath, Washington added, So help

me God and bent forward and kissed the Bible before him.{5}

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

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

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

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

So what was George Washingtons faith? Historians have long debated the extent of his faith. But Michael Novak points out that Washingtons own step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis, thought his words and actions were so plain and obvious that she could not understand how anybody failed to see that he had always lived as a serious Christian.{6}

During the first meeting of the Continental Congress in

September 1774, George Washington prayed alongside the other delegates. And they recited Psalm 35 together as patriots.

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

The Lincoln Memorial

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

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

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

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

birth of freedom.

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

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

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

At a White House dinner during the war, a clergyman gave the benediction and closed with the statement that The Lord is on the Unions side. Abraham Lincoln responded: I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lords side.{9}

The Jefferson Memorial

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

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

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

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

On the second panel is an excerpt from A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1777. It was passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1786. It reads: Almighty God hath created the mind free. . . . All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion. . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions of belief, but all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of

religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.

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

The Supreme Court

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

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

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

In a number of cases, the Supreme Court has declared the posting of the Ten Commandments unconstitutional (in public school classrooms and in a local courthouse in Kentucky). But

this same Supreme Court has a number of places in its building where there are images of Moses with the Ten Commandments. These can be found at the center of the sculpture over the east portico of the Supreme Court building, inside the actual courtroom, and finally, engraved over the chair of the Chief Justice, and on the bronze doors of the Supreme Court itself.{11}

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

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

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

The next time you are in our nations capital, make sure you take a walking tour of the buildings and monuments. They

testify to a belief in God and a dynamic faith that today is often under attack from the courts and the culture.

Notes

1. Newt Gingrich, *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nation's History and Future* (Nashville, TN: Integrity House, 2006).
2. Ibid., 77.
3. Ibid., 81.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid., 39.
7. Ibid., 40.
8. Ibid., 50.
9. Ibid., 54.
10. Ibid., 44.
11. Ibid., 87.
12. Ibid., 132.

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