

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS VOLUME 7, NUMBER 4 AGGREGATE ISSUE 35 AUGUST 2001

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'."  
Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

**Institutional Ethics: An Oxymoron?** *Joe E. Trull*

**Left Behind** *William E. Hull*

**Separation, Integration, and Accommodation: Religion and State in America**  
*Derek H. Davis*

**A Good Deed Kept Secret** *Hal Haralson*

**Color Blindness, Political Correctness, or Racial Reconciliation:  
Christian Ethics and Race**  
*George Yancy*

**Grossly Unfair: Evaluating the Bush Tax Proposal** *Ron Sider*

**God So Loved The World** *Book Review by J. Terry Young*

**Global Ethics: What We Can Learn From Christians Overseas**  
*Jack A. Hill*

**A Seamless Garment of Love:  
A Review and Reflection on Is the Fetus a Person?**  
*Wilton H. Bunch*

**God's Name In Vain** *Book Review by Darold H. Morgan*

**Two Essays on Pride and Prejudice:  
The Truly Blessed Cadillac and Prejudice in Two Colors**  
*Lawrence Webb*

**Wisdom** *Foy Valentine*

VISIT OUR NEW WEB SITE: [www.ChristianEthicsToday.com](http://www.ChristianEthicsToday.com)

---

# Institutional Ethics: An Oxymoron?

*By Joe E. Trull, Editor*

As I have become older (and hopefully wiser), my trust in institutions has diminished. Reinhold Niebuhr tried to warn me during my seminary studies, but I am a slow learner.

In his classic work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr proposed a classic thesis: that individual persons are always more moral than when they function in a social group. As a soldier in warfare or as a rioter in a mob, we act in ways we never would individually. The reason is basic: as individual persons, we seek to fulfill neighbor love; in a social group, the bottom line is the survival of that institution. There are exceptions to this rule of course, but their rarity only serves to prove the point.

For example, a corporate executive might provide food to a hungry person who came to him for help. But on that same day he might cast a vote to relocate a factory in order to sustain profitability for his company, even though it meant hundreds of families would lose their jobs and go hungry that month. On Wall Street, profits come before people.

Today's newspaper featured slaves and children conscripted by large companies to harvest cocoa on the Ivory Coast to keep the price of chocolate competitive. When I lived in El Paso, I witnessed first-hand the common business practice of hiring Mexican workers of both sides of the Rio Grande for less than a minimum wage. "That's just business," explained a Deacon in my church who managed a large assembly plant.

But before we attack the multi-national corporations or the maquiladoras factories on the Mexican border, let's look in our own backyard. Does integrity have a place in our Christian institutions as well as our personal lives?

The term *integrity* appears sixteen times in the Scriptures. The Hebrew word is *tom* or *tummah* and means "whole, sound, unimpaired, perfection." It is used to describe men like David (Ps. 7:8), Solomon (1 Kgs. 9:4), and Job (Job 2:9). None of these men were morally perfect, but they each modeled a life of wholeness and maturity.

Integrity describes both who you are and what you do. It is the way you think as well as how you act. Charles Swindoll defines integrity as "ethical soundness, intellectual veracity, and moral excellence. It keeps us from fearing the white light of close examination and from resisting the scrutiny of accountability. It is honesty at all cost . . . rocklike character that won't crack when standing alone or crumble when pressure mounts."

But how does this apply to institutions? For church and denominational leaders to do what is right and just if that choice means the institution suffers, is not easy. Occasionally a leader with deep ethical convictions will have a Wittenburg-moment. Like Luther, the executive declares,

"Here I stand." He knows the organization he leads will suffer. but he also knows that this was the right thing to do. We are blessed with a few such men and women of integrity today, but we need more!

Too many Baptist churches have leaders more concerned with "succeeding" than with being faithful to the gospel. I grow weary of those churches that claim to be "Blessed of God," whose church budget reveals their true priorities. When a church spends 95-99% of its income on itself, and gives a small percentage to missions and the needs of hungry and hurting people in the world, they have lost their integrity.

And what about the content of our worship? As a seminary teacher and interim pastor for the past 16 years, I have seen a shift. Too many churches today seem to focus on entertainment more than enlightenment, on convenience more than commitment, on shallow simplicity more than spiritual maturity. Why? Success! Pastors know what draws and keeps a crowd. When was the last time you heard a sermon on costly discipleship?

When I last visited the seminary where I taught, the faculty met to discuss concerns over chapel services. A new professor from a non-SBC school (who seldom spoke) shared a final thought: "As a newcomer, I have attended every chapel for the last three years, and I think I finally understand Southern Baptist preaching: (1) You always read a text but never return to it; (2) You shout a lot; (3) You never stand behind the pulpit; and (4) You tell a lot of stories that seem to put you down, but really flatter you!"

Our colleges and seminaries (and I have more than SBC schools in mind) are too often guilty of actions and practices that are less than Christian—all in the name of institutional success. Baptist schools have been a major part of my life, and I owe a tremendous debt to them all. Yet trustees, administrators, and presidents make decisions based not on what is right, but what is "best" for the success of the school. This may work for IBM and Dell, but it should not be the highest good for Christian institutions.

And our mission-sending organizations are also guilty. Most missionaries out on the front lines are maintaining their own integrity, often at a great personal price. Sad to say, this is not always true of the Mission Board leaders. Why do we feel we must twist the truth, exaggerate statistics, and misuse the resources provided by the churches? Are we afraid that if the people knew the truth, the enterprise would suffer (survival again)?

In over forty years of ministry, I have served on many denominational Boards and Committees, including three Search Committees for the head of a state paper, a state

*Continued on Page 22*

---

**Editor:** Joe E. Trull

**Publisher:** Christian Ethics Today Foundation, 101 Mt. View Rd; Wimberley, TX 78676 (512)847-8721 Fax (512) 847-8171.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY is produced in the U.S.A. and is published bi-monthly, mailed from Dallas, Texas, where third-class postage is paid.

The articles published in the CET express the views of the authors and not necessarily the viewpoint of the Journal or the Editor.

Send corrections and change of address to P.O. Box 26, Wimberley, TX 78676 or [www.ChristianEthicsToday.com/Subscriptions](http://www.ChristianEthicsToday.com/Subscriptions)

---

# “Left Behind”

By William E. Hull, Research Professor  
Samford University, Birmingham, AL

**Editor’s Note:** The article is an expanded study version of a sermon preached at the Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, February 11, 2001.

There was a time when most Christians got their theology at church, which had many advantages. We could be assured that the pastor was familiar with the distinctive doctrines of our denomination. If we didn’t understand what was being taught, he was readily available to answer questions. In case we disagreed with some emphasis, fellow church members were always willing to sharpen the issues through friendly debate.

But now the role of the congregation in shaping our convictions has an aggressive competitor in the secular marketplace. Take, for example, the doctrine of the End-Time made popular by the millennial madness of 1999. While most churches have been almost silent about such things as the Tribulation, the Antichrist, or Armageddon, the mass media have been trumpeting these themes for all who will listen. In bookstores, at movie houses, and on the Web, we have been saturated with dramatic efforts to shape our basic understanding of the Christian hope by those whom we do not know and have no way of holding accountable within the household of faith.

The most prominent example of this marketplace theology is the wildly popular phenomenon called *Left Behind*. Originally launched as a single novel by that title in 1995, it quickly grew to a twelve-book series scheduled to appear at six-month intervals until June 2004. Thus far, eight installments have been published by Tyndale House with sales in excess of thirty-two million copies: *Left Behind: A Novel of Earth’s Last Days*, 1995; *Tribulation Force: Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind*, 1996; *Nicolae: Rise of Antichrist*, 1997; *Soul Harvest: The World Takes Sides*, 1998; *Apollyon: Destroyer Is Unleashed*, 1999; *Assassins: Assignment Jerusalem, Target Antichrist*, 1999; *The Indwelling: The Beast Takes Possession*, 2000; *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World*, 2000.

But the 3,255 pages thus far devoted to this theme have not yet satiated an audience hungry for more. Recent releases have generated an initial print run of two million copies, putting them ahead of Stephen King and landing them in first place on the *New York Times* best seller list as soon as released. Tyndale is considering a three million copy printing of *Desecration*, ninth in the series due out in October. And now comes the \$17.5 million film version of *Left Behind* released on 874 screens nationwide after stimulating interest in a video format which has sold 2.8 million units. Add to that the children’s series called “Left Behind: The Kids,” which has sold five million copies with only 14 of 36 planned installments out and you begin to sense the sensational success of what has become an end-time industry in

doomsday chic.

The creators of this theological juggernaut work in a remarkable partnership. The idea was hatched by an independent Baptist minister from California named Tim LaHaye, best known in earlier years for writing and speaking with his wife Beverly on Christian family life. But in 1991 he became concerned about the decline of “pretribulation rapture Bible prophecy” and so by 1993 had established a “Pre-Trib Research Center” to reverse the trend. Because this brand of belief is both complex and esoteric, to say the least, LaHaye hit upon the approach of fictionalizing his views to make them accessible to the general public and enlisted Jerry Jenkins to assist him in that regard. The author of 120 books, Jenkins was best known as the ghostwriter of memoirs for sports celebrities and the autobiography of Billy Graham. He writes every word of the *Left Behind* series while LaHaye, now in his mid-seventies, gets credit as co-author for insuring “prophetic accuracy.”

My purpose here is neither to attack nor to defend this emphasis but rather to explain its main contentions and evaluate its suitability as Christian doctrine. To do this, I shall not base my critique either on the book series or on the motion picture, since both have fictional elements, but will draw instead on LaHaye’s book, *Revelation Unveiled*, which Zondervan published in 1999 to serve as a scriptural companion to the *Left Behind* series. For any who might think it beneath their dignity to deal with “best-seller theology” designed for entertainment purposes, I would point out that, precisely because LaHaye and Jenkins have made their sensationalistic views so accessible, even homey, they will be embraced by many simply because alternative positions are not out there in the marketplace competing for attention.

## I. Four Key Words

Before we can understand what LaHaye means by being “left behind,” we must define four key words, all of which are loaded with theological meaning. The first is “**Rapture**,” which we usually take to mean a state of emotional exhilaration or ecstatic delight. The biblical usage, however, has a quite different force. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Paul speaks of being “caught up” together with the dead in Christ to meet the Lord in the air. The Greek verb used here meant “to seize” something forcibly in order to carry it away, and so could be rendered “snatched up” in order to emphasize both the suddenness and power with which God would act. When this verse was put into Latin, the translators correctly used a comparable verb, *rapiō*, which meant “to lay hold” of something both forcibly and quickly, one form of which was

*raptus* from which we get such English words as “rapt” and “rapture.” LaHaye uses the term “Rapture” theologically to mean the instantaneous conveyance of Christians to heaven from their abode here on earth.

The second essential term, “**Pretribulation**,” obviously has two parts. The root of the word, “tribulation,” refers to a period immediately preceding the end-times which Jesus described as the most utterly corrupt era in human history (Mark 13:19). Based on his interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27, LaHaye calculates that this upheaval will last for seven years, from the appearance of the Antichrist to the final battle between good and evil called Armageddon. The addition of “pre” indicates that the Rapture will take place *before* the Tribulation, whereas a “Posttribulation” view would indicate that the Rapture will take place *after* the Tribulation.

The third term is “**Premillennial**,” another compound with the same prefix. The root “millennial” comes from the Latin word for “thousand” and refers to the triumphant reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:3. Those who are “Premillennialists” hold that the Rapture and the Tribulation will take place *before* the thousand-year kingdom is established, whereas those who are “Postmillennialists” hold that the Tribulation and Rapture will take place *after* the thousand-year reign of Christ is ended.

The final term is “**Dispensationalism**” which refers to a system of interpreting prophecy which incorporates and integrates the three positions just described. In other words, Dispensationalists are those who believe in a premillennial pretribulation rapture! The term itself refers to the belief that God deals with humanity in seven successive “dispensations” or epochs of history. In its entirety, Dispensationalism is both a full-blown biblical theology and a philosophy of history, but of greatest interest to us is its two most distinctive contentions: (1) that prophecy does not apply to the Church Age, which is a “great parenthesis” in God’s dealings with his people; and (2) that there are two prophetic tracks, one for the Gentiles but another for the Jews, the return of Israel to the Holy Land and the rebuilding of the Temple lying at the heart of the system.

Admittedly these are complex and, for the beginner, baffling distinctions, but every one of them is crucial for an understanding of what LaHaye means by being “left behind.” By this phrase he is referring to non-believers who remain on earth when all true Christians, both living and dead, are suddenly translated into heaven. Their departure unleashes a worldwide upsurge of evil for seven years presided over by its ultimate embodiment in the Antichrist. The first half of this period will see the rise of a one-world apostate church and a craze for one-world government, all of which will lead to sheer chaos in the second half of the period. Despite this hell on earth, a remnant of 144,000 Jews will be converted, to whom Christ will come in his Glorious Appearing to reign over a Millennium of peace, at the end of which the final judgment will usher in eternity.

In case this end-time scenario seems a bit strange or even bizarre to you, LaHaye freely admits that his position has long been a minority view with only a negligible number of major theologians embracing it throughout the long history of

the church. In the modern English-speaking world, the two most influential exponents of LaHaye’s Dispensationalism have been John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a leader of the strict Plymouth Brethren sect in England who set forth his system in thirty-two published volumes, and Cyrus I. Scofield (1843-1921), an independent Bible teacher of enormous popularity here in America. His Scofield Reference Bible, which skillfully summarized Darbyite Dispensationalism in a series of notes printed beneath the Scriptural text, has done more to spread the Premillennial system adopted by LaHaye than any other source. The publisher, Oxford University Press, estimates that between 1909 and 1967 its sales exceeded ten million, with a 1967 revision selling another 2.5 million by 1990.

Now that the influence of Scofield is beginning to wane, it remains to be seen whether the recent popularizations of Dispensationalism, first by Hal Lindsey and then by Tim LaHaye, will give it a new lease on life in the twenty-first century.

## II. Key Words in Light of Scripture Interpretation

**H**aving identified the theological underpinnings to which the *Left Behind* series carefully adheres, let us evaluate their adequacy in light of Scripture. Here our task will not be to marshal a collection of verses that either support or oppose the theory of LaHaye, for he has already identified every passage that might conceivably bear on his position. Rather, the crux of the matter is the methodology by which these many texts are interpreted. The issue of whether to accept or to reject Dispensationalism is not predetermined by whether one is a believer or non-believer, Biblicist or non-Biblicist, inerrantist or non-inerrantist. As LaHaye recognizes, Christians of the deepest possible commitment to Scripture differ sharply on this issue because they interpret the very same texts in quite different ways. Indeed, I cannot think of any other doctrine on which devout Bible students of equal faith and piety come to such diametrically different conclusions. Here let me mention only three of the methodological issues that create this difficulty.

**First**, the centerpiece of LaHaye’s system, the one decisive reason why anyone can be “left behind,” is the worldwide secret rapture that suddenly and surprisingly snatches up every believer from the earth. But notice how slight and ambiguous is the biblical evidence for this position. LaHaye’s prime passage is 1 Thessalonians 4:17, but the shouted command, the archangel’s call, and the trumpet’s sound in verse 16 suggest that this will be a very public rather than a private event, thus many conclude that it refers to the Final Advent rather than to the rapture. The second most cited passage, John 14:3, speaks of Christ coming to take his troubled disciples unto himself, but the larger context implies in verses 18 and 23 that this post-resurrection “coming” will be to earth rather than to heaven. Finally, LaHaye appeals to Revelation 4:1-2 where John is invited through heaven’s open door to glimpse God’s plans for the future, but this is standard language for being granted a prophetic vision while remaining on earth (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-4).

When we look hard at LaHaye’s best evidence, we find solid indications of God’s determination not to neglect or

abandon his troubled children here on earth. But these few texts just do not say anything explicit about God plucking the whole church out of the world and leaving everybody else behind. LaHaye likes to claim that there are 318 scriptural references to some phase of the Second Coming of Christ and lists twenty-six “rapture passages” among them, but his whole effort to split the Final Advent into two parts separated by seven years is just not supported by these texts themselves. At a stretch, we might find vague allusions or fleeting hints of some sort of “rapture” in two or three verses, but is that any foundation on which to build a theological superstructure? There are many core doctrines in the Bible explicitly taught in hundreds or even thousands of texts. The first principle of sound interpretation is to begin with what the Bible says most clearly, most consistently, and most constantly. The notion of a pretribulationist secret rapture fails this test.

**Second**, if LaHaye does not get his “left behind” scenario from the explicit teachings of the Biblical texts, then where does he get it? The answer is that it comes from the way in which he combines many Scripture passages that were originally unrelated to each other. Beginning with the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24-27, he tries to fit virtually the entire sweep of biblical history from the Babylonian Exile to the Millennium into its cryptic timetable of heptads (seven sevens, then sixty-two sevens, then one final seven). While one cannot help but admire the ingenuity of this effort, the problem is that the Bible itself nowhere makes these connections. The New Testament frequently utilizes the Old Testament, some 2,688 times according to one count, often in a relationship of promise and fulfillment, but it never comes close to utilizing Daniel 9 as the framework for a doctrine of the future in the way that LaHaye does. In other words, his system is like a necklace, each separate part a pearl taken straight out of Scripture, but the string holding these pearls together taken straight out of Scofield!

In terms of methodology, we are back to the old problem of proof-texting. I am only quoting Scripture when I cite Matthew 27:5 and Luke 10:37, but when I *combine* them in that sequence, the result reads that Judas “went and hanged himself . . . go and do thou likewise!” Thus we come to a second principle of interpretation: What God has joined together in Scripture, let us not put asunder. Likewise, what God has left separate in Scripture, let us beware of joining together lest the relationship thereby established reflects our own ideas rather than the plain teachings of Scripture. Fidelity to Scripture is determined, not only by the number of separate passages that we can cite in support of a particular theory, but also by the extent to which our overall design corresponds to the way in which these texts were actually used in relation to their original context within Scripture itself. A doctrine is not sound unless both its building blocks and its blueprint come from the Bible.

A **third** issue arises from LaHaye’s strong insistence on interpreting the Bible literally, as if only this approach passes the test of “making common sense” out of Scripture. The problem, again, is that the Bible itself does not teach, or even imply, that all of its content should be understood literally. Take, for example, the key prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 which

predicted that the coming of the Spirit in the “last days” would be so world-shaking that “the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon into blood.” But when this passage was fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:20), did these “wonders in the heaven above” (v. 19) take place literally? Peter plainly said that what was happening “*is* what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (v. 16), yet it was at the “literal” level a perfectly ordinary day, so ordinary that bystanders supposed that the Spirit-filled disciples were merely drunk (v. 15)! Why, we must ask, does it make “common sense” to interpret a passage “literally” if it was intended to be interpreted spiritually?

This brings us to our **last principle** of interpretation, namely, that the type of literature which God chose to use in revealing his truth should be taken with the utmost seriousness. To be sure, if God wished to convey factual information, as in an historical narrative, then a “literal” interpretation would be entirely appropriate. But God also chose to speak through parable and poetry and proverb using figurative language which does not lend itself to “literal” interpretation. This is especially true of highly symbolic apocalyptic writings such as Daniel and Revelation which lie at the heart of LaHaye’s enterprise. Many of the verses which LaHaye tries to force into a rigid historical framework are expressions of transcendent truths that cannot be limited by time. Indeed, one of the main reasons why Biblical writers employed vivid imagery was in an effort to describe realities that are eternal and thus relevant in every age of history.

### III. Theology In Fictional Garb

**W**hy have we devoted this much attention to LaHaye’s understanding of biblical prophecy if it is so methodologically flawed? Not only because of its enormous impact in the media marketplace, but also because it raises fundamental issues which lie at the heart of our hope for the future. Since, as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, let us turn from LaHaye’s use of the Bible to the ways in which his partner, Jerry Jenkins, has dressed this theology in fictional and cinematic garb. Any thoughtful reader of the books or viewer of the movie would have to ask at least three questions prompted by his portrayal of the Christian faith.

**First, does God really love the world, as John 3:16 affirms, or does he abhor it?** By his own admission, LaHaye conceived the idea of *Left Behind* while sitting on airplanes and watching the pilots, thinking to himself, “What if the Rapture occurred on an airplane?” The “signature scene” in Jenkin’s fictionalized account is of a crowded 747 red-eying it from O’Hare to Heathrow when suddenly dozens of passengers including every child on board, plus three crew members, simply disappear without taking any of their clothing and personal effects with them. The only thing that saves the plane is that the Captain and First Officer are “left behind.” When they return to Chicago and finally manage to land, chaos abounds. The highways are littered with wrecks from disappeared drivers, mothers are screaming for their missing babies, a woman in childbirth watches her womb deflate as the obstetrician can find no trace of the fetus and must content himself with delivering the placenta! When the pilot, Rayford Steele, finally gets home, all that is left of his

sleeping wife is an empty nightgown and her wedding ring between the sheets.

Surrounded by scenes of devastation caused by the Rapture, we are forced to wonder: Does Christ care for his own at the cost of such worldwide carnage? Does God want to strip the world of its good folks so that the bad folks will stew in their own juices? Did Jesus try to separate his disciples from publicans and sinners or to bring them together at unheard of levels of intimacy (Mark 2:13-17)? Is the strategy of the Gospel a deliberate effort to create so much earthly chaos that Christianity will be seen as a way to escape from its clutches? The highly respected evangelical scholar Gordon Fee put it this way: "Theologically, the distressing point for me is that [*Left Behind*] makes Christian conversion a matter of fear, rather than a matter of hearing the good news of the gospel, of the God who has loved us in Christ, come among us and redeemed us. It focuses on, very frankly, selfish fear."

Which leads straight to a second question: **What does awaken true faith in Christ?** Another main character, Buck Williams, is a young journalist always on the prowl for a fast-breaking story, full of the skepticism and cynicism that sometimes characterizes his profession. On that fateful overseas flight, for example, instead of helping frantic mothers try to find their children, he quickly plugs in his laptop and begins tapping out a scoop for his editor in New York. But when, a few days later, the now-converted pilot shows him a videotape on dispensational prophecy, Buck begins to view the events he is covering, particularly at the United Nations, in light of its predictions. Once he decides that history is, indeed, beginning to unfold in accordance with LaHaye's understanding of the Tribulation, light dawns, he sinks to the floor in amazement, and soon joins a tiny remnant of those who share his clue to the meaning of world events.

Again we ponder: Is the struggle of faith a search for the right understanding of political events, especially involving the nation of Israel, or is it a search for personal and cosmic renewal from a risen Lord? Is faith confirmed when historical events unfold in accordance with a predetermined sequence, or when the Holy Spirit leads us through whatever the future may happen to bring? Indeed, are we saved by an *understanding* of anything regarding the Tribulation, or are we saved by a cross-bearing *relationship* with Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:20)? During his earthly ministry, Jesus refused all requests for signs (Mark 8:11-2), for times and places that could be observed (Luke 17:20-21), insisting that even he did not know the day or the hour when the end would come (Mark 13:32). Like him, we would do well to leave matters of calculation in the hands of God, for so often we have been mistaken in reading the "signs of the times" (Luke 12:54-56). Just in my lifetime I have heard the Antichrist identified as a certain Pope, or as Adolf Hitler, or as Josif Stalin, none of which could be correct because, on LaHaye's timetable, the

Antichrist will appear for only seven years before the Millennium!

Our final question is built on answers to the first two. If the gospel means that God loves not just the church but the world as well, and if faith means learning to love him back in return, then **what is to be the attitude of God's people toward the world around them?** Just in case readers and viewers are not sufficiently attracted to *Left Behind* by Dispensational Theology's potent combination of the surprising, the suspenseful, and the spectacular, this series has much to offer those addicted to right-wing ideological crusades. The plot line is rich with what Richard Hofstadter called "the paranoid style in American politics": anti-United Nations, anti-common currency, anti-ecumenical movement, anti-Arab coalition, and anti-governmental taxation. The kind of carping about contemporary life that one can hear in any country club locker room has been demonized by LaHaye as a "one-world mania" that "seems to be gripping the world" today.

So: what shall we do with our enemies in "this adulterous and sinful generation" (Mark 8:38)? *Left Behind* seems to offer two answers: First, flee from them by means of that miraculous evacuation called the Rapture. Second, fight them in the greatest war ever waged called Armageddon. But did Jesus advocate this kind of instant escapism and unrestrained violence as a way of bringing history to its intended end? In his own Apocalyptic Discourse he warned that wickedness would be multiplied and men's love would grow cold (Matthew 24:12), to which we should respond, not by escaping, but by "enduring to the end" (v. 13). That endurance was not to be passive, however, but involved a preaching of "the gospel of the Kingdom" to the ends of the earth (v. 14). Only then will the end come, not because our enemies have been destroyed by "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6), but because friend and foe alike have been given a loving invitation to believe. As the familiar hymn puts it:

For not with swords' loud clashing,  
Or roll of stirring drums;  
With deeds of love and mercy  
The heavenly kingdom comes.

In the midst of his ministry, Jesus took three of his leading disciples up a high mountain where they witnessed him communing with Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:4). Neither of these Old Testament worthies had undergone a normal death and burial but, in a sense, had been "raptured" to heaven by God. Seizing the moment, Peter blurted out his wish to make this mountaintop experience more permanent (v. 5), but God interrupted with a command to keep listening to Jesus as he pointed them toward Jerusalem and the challenges which awaited them there (Mark 8:31). All of us would welcome a short-cut to glory, but Jesus still bids us share his saving gospel of suffering love with all the world until time shall be no more. ■

# A Reminder of Why I Wanted to Follow Jesus

©2001

By Dwight A. Moody, Dean of the Chapel  
Georgetown College

Tony Campolo came to town. In one evening of anecdotes and illustration, of laughter and tears, he reminded me of the vision of Christianity that captured my allegiance more than three decades ago.

Tony is a retired sociology professor from Philadelphia, not the sort of professional identity we normally associate with spellbinding stage presence. But there he was, Cardigan sweater and bald head, a blend of Mr. Rogers and Dick Vitale; at ease one moment and in your face the next; a thousand students in the palm of his hand.

For thirty years, Tony has been traveling the country promoting his brand of following Jesus. It is story after story, no doubt retold a thousand times, about life as a vocation, a calling away from the self-centered materialism of middle class American culture and into the hurts and hopelessness of the rest of the world.

One former student, driven by a dream of Christ-centered service, ended up a plastic surgeon in New York specializing in cosmetic surgery for rich women. You sold out the dream, Campolo told him at a chance meeting on a city street.

Another student, a veteran of Harvard Law Review and the Supreme Court, traded a promising career to serve as public defender in Montgomery, Alabama; it was his vocation in life. Campolo said to him, "You don't know how good you are."

To be full of the Spirit, Campolo said, is to have your heart broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Prayer was the launching pad for both his speech and his own pilgrimage years ago. As a young man, he stopped using prayer as a want list presented monologue-style to God. Prayer, for him, is lying in bed in the morning, allowing the grace to wash and cleanse the soul.

He supported his prayer thesis with that wonderful dialogue between CBS Newsmen Dan Rather and Mother Teresa: "When you pray," Dan asked, "what do you say to God?" "When I pray," she responded, "I don't say anything; I listen."

This caught Dan off guard; but he came again: "Well, when you pray, what does God say?" "God doesn't say anything," the good nun replied, "God listens, and if you don't know what that means, I cannot explain it."

Campolo's message needed no explanation, only his intense, entertaining presentation: "Follow Jesus," he said. "Turn your back on the accumulation of stuff and turn your life into a service to others."

It was a wide range of illustrations that Campolo used to drive home his point. Pascal and Einstein, Haiti and Philadelphia, elevators and graduations, doctors, lawyers, beggars and bums.

Best of all was Salinger, as in J. D. Salinger who wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*. It was standard high school reading a generation ago, even though ministerial types roundly condemned it for its crude language and worldly scenes.

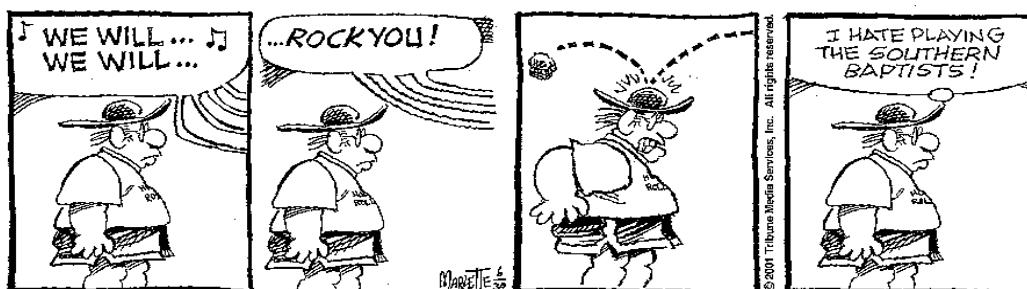
Remember when Holden Caulfield tells his sister what he wants to be? He sees himself with other children in a field of rye, running and playing. One by one they come to the edge of the cliff; I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye.

Be a catcher in the rye, Campolo said, redeeming this secular story and filling it with the grace of God. You can't save all of the at-risk children of the world; but you can save some, and that is a noble vision and a worthy aspiration.

It was a radical call that Campolo thrust at us, altogether in the lineage of Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Of course, it sounds a lot like Jesus himself, who challenged his hearers to turn away from self interest, take up the cross of suffering and service, and follow Him.

When I was a teenager this was the invitation that stirred my soul and shaped my life. It was summarized in the chorus that defined my generation, "I have decided to follow Jesus." As Campolo spoke, I sensed again and afresh that deep devotion to Jesus. When he directed us to close our eyes and raise our hands as a signal of renewed dedication, mine joined the hundreds waving toward the heavens.

**Editor's Postscript:** This Journal is grateful to have Tony Campolo as a member of our Board of Directors—he exemplifies the combination of healthy evangelism and genuine social concern that *Christian Ethics Today* seeks to strengthen and support. ■



---

# Separation, Integration, And Accommodation: Religion And State In America

*By Derek H. Davis, Director*  
J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies  
Baylor University

**Editor's Note:** This article is an edited version of an address delivered at the Texas Christian Life Commission Conference on February 12, 2001, in Austin, Texas.

The interplay between religion and state in the United States is complex, if anything. The rules that comprise the American system of church-state relations—rules dictated mostly by judicial interpretations of the First Amendment's religion clauses, but also embracing traditions that the High Court chooses not to interfere with—are frequently criticized as inconsistent and confusing. A common criticism, for example, is that students in public schools cannot have prayers in their classrooms or at their football games, but the U.S. Congress may have its own chaplains to lead its daily prayers. Another is that the Ten Commandments cannot be posted in public school classrooms, yet the U.S. Supreme Court chamber in Washington, D.C. is decorated with a representation of Moses holding the Ten Commandments. And how is it that ordained preachers like Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson can run for President of the United States in the face of the constitutional requirement of separation of church and state? On their face, these seemingly contradictory rules and practices seem rather odd, even bizarre. But understood in the broader, elaborate American framework in which religion and state interact, these apparent consistencies can be understood, even justified.

It is suggested here that the American system must be understood as embracing three distinct, yet interrelated sets of rules: *separation* of church and state, *integration* of religion and politics, and *accommodation* of civil religion. All of the various rules, customs, and practices that shape the unique relationship between religion and state in America can be assigned primarily, though not always exclusively, to one of these three categories. Each category is essential to the overall American public philosophy, each one part of a nuanced, interconnected system that has as its goal the Good Society. And, as will be argued in this essay, without some appreciation of these three categories, their interrelationship, and the way in which they combine to promote democratic principles, one is certain to become hopelessly confused by the apparent contradictions in the overall system.

## I. Separation of Church and State

“Separation of church and state” has become the customary way of describing the relationship between religion and state in the American system. Yet the phrase is too broad to accurately describe the whole system, because in many respects there clearly is no “separation.” How can a system that proclaims “In God We Trust” as its national motto, invokes the names of God in its pledge of allegiance,

observes a national day of prayer, and sanctions government-paid legislative chaplains be said to have a commitment to the separation of church and state? Obviously, the American tradition of separation of church and state does not mean that a separation of religion from government is required in all cases. So, while the phrase is too broad to embrace the whole system, it nevertheless does accurately describe an important part of the system.

A better way to think of “separation” is as a term that describes an *institutional* separation of church and state. In other words, the Constitution requires that the *institutions* of church and state in American society not be interconnected, dependent upon, or functionally related to each other. The purpose of this requirement is to achieve mutual independence and autonomy for these institutions, based on the belief that they will function best if neither has authority over the other. Affected are the institutional bodies of religion, i.e., churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, and other bodies of organized religion, and the institutional bodies of governmental authority—state and federal governments, but also small local bodies such as school districts, police departments, city councils, utility districts, municipal courts, county commissions, and the like. Consequently, churches and other houses of worship receive no direct governmental funding, nor are they required to pay taxes. Government officials appoint no clergy; conversely, religious bodies appoint no government officials. Governments, even courts, are not allowed to settle church disputes that involve doctrinal issues. And religious bodies, unlike the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, have no authority to dictate law or public policy.

The institutional separation of church and state is observed most frequently, and most controversially, in judicial decisions that limit religious activity in the public schools. Court decisions limiting schools' ability to entertain vocal prayers and scripture readings, to post the Ten Commandments and other religious texts, or to advance a particular religious worldview are intended to protect the sacred domain of religion from state interference. It is important to remember that in the public school context, it is the precepts and practices of *institutionalized* religion that are prohibited from being embraced or proscribed. Courses that teach comparative religion, the historical or literary aspects of religion, or the anthropologized dimensions of religion are permitted, even encouraged. As Justice Tom Clark wrote in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), “one's education is not complete



without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. . . . study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education [does not violate] the First Amendment.”

Likewise, court decisions that place restrictions on the ability of government to fund private religious education are the product of the institutional separation of church and state. Generally, the courts have held that these programs, administered by bodies of institutionalized religion, tend to advance religion in a sectarian manner and therefore violate the Establishment Clause. But funding of “secular” components of private religious schools is permitted. Consequently, the courts have permitted governments to purchase, by way of example, textbooks, computers, equipment for diagnostic testing, and other miscellaneous expenditures on behalf of private religious schools because these aid programs are not endorsements of religion. Programs that provide benefits that might be used for promoting or advancing religion, however, such as teacher stipends, open-ended subsidies that might be used to purchase religious texts, erect religious statues, or finance field trips in which religious instruction might take place, have been held unconstitutional.

The institutional separation of church and state affects other areas of religion-government interaction as well. Government has passed in recent years a set of measures that attempt to provide government funding of churches and other religious institutions that are willing to administer social service programs—soup kitchens, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, clothing pantries, homeless shelters, youth anti-crime programs, and the like. Theoretically, these programs advance secular ends, thus passing constitutional scrutiny. But they are a bold challenge to prevailing constitutional doctrine which holds that churches, temples, mosques, and other houses of worship are “pervasively sectarian,” which means that their mission and purpose is so pervaded by religion that it is virtually impossible for them to ferret out “secular” aspects of their activity. This legislation, dubbed “Charitable Choice” because program beneficiaries may choose either a government-funded religious or secular provider, is a challenge to traditional “separationist” judicial interpretations of the Establishment Clause. Proponents of Charitable Choice advance the ancient fear that without government aid, religion will suffer, potential recipients of assistance will be ignored, and society will experience moral decline. Opponents counter with the argument that religion thrives best when it relies on private rather than government

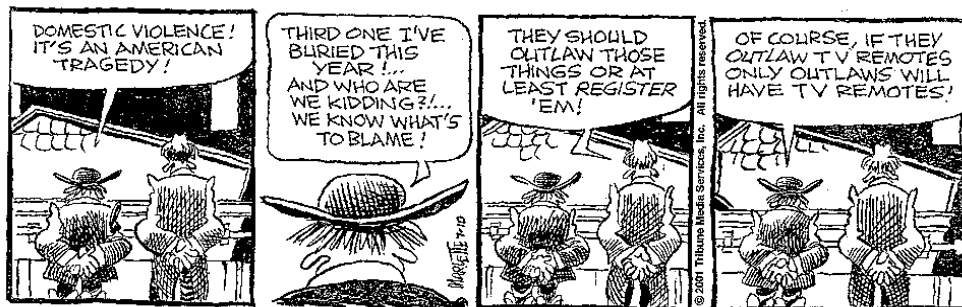
resources, and that morality is best fostered in a climate of self-sustaining voluntarism rather than government-sustaining inducements.

The institutional separation of church and state is a novel experiment in human history. Most societies throughout history have operated on the assumption that government should be a moral agent, that it must play a leading role in crafting the human being. It became customary in ancient times for governments to sponsor, even require, religious worship and instruction as the means of inculcating morality into citizens’ lives. The American founders were convinced that successful nation-building would be impossible in the absence of a moral citizenry, but they believed that moral training, insofar as it was religiously based, must derive primarily from the faith community, not government. The Establishment Clause was the founders’ attempt to end government’s coercive role in directing the religious course of citizens’ lives; the Free Exercise Clause reflected their goal of putting religion in the hands of the citizens to enable them to shape their own religious commitments. It was a bold experiment, but one that is now central to the American public philosophy. As Supreme Court Justice Wiley Rutledge once declared, “We have staked the very existence of our country on the faith that complete separation between the state and religion is best for the state and best for religion.” Justice Rutledge knew better than anyone that *complete* separation between church and state is impossible, but his words are a powerful reminder of how central the principle of separation to the American way of life.

## II. Integration of Religion and Politics

Separation of church and state is indeed important to the American way of life, but as noted already, it does not describe all aspects of the interplay between religion and state. This is readily seen in the way that the American system encourages the participation of religious voices in the political process. Were the system one of *total* separation, it would not countenance the active involvement of religious persons, faith communities, and religious organizations who vigorously enter public discourse, seeking to persuade government officials of the merits of framing law and public policy to reflect their distinctly religious outlooks.

The right of churches and other religious bodies to engage in political advocacy and to make political pronouncements has never been seriously questioned throughout this nation's history, from the colonial period down to the present. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, for example, the churches assumed a leading role in the political debate on



the question of whether the colonies should go to war with the mother country. In the nineteenth century, the major causes for political action among the churches and other religious groups were slavery, temperance, and non-sectarian education. In the twentieth century, the engagement of religious bodies in the body politic grew to cover a wide range of issues including economic and social justice, war and peace, abortion, civil rights, and world hunger. Today virtually all of the major religious groups in America and many religious coalitions have public affairs offices in Washington, D.C. to lead their lobbying efforts. These groups, for the most part, do not consider these offices to exist for the promotion of their self interests, but as an effective means by which they give witness in public affairs based upon their own understanding of their mission in the world.

Given the time-honored right of religious bodies to be active participants in the American political process, it is not surprising that the United States Supreme Court has not seriously challenged this basic right. The strongest affirmation of this right was given by the Court in *Walz v. Tax Commission* (1970): “Adherents of particular faiths and individual churches frequently take strong positions on public issues, including . . . vigorous advocacy of legal and constitutional positions. Of course, churches as much as secular bodies and private citizens have that right.” Likewise, in *McDaniel v. Paty* (1978), a case striking down the last of the state statutes prohibiting ministers from seeking state office, the Supreme Court affirmed the importance and protected status of religious ideas in public debate: “[R]eligious ideas, no less than any other, may be the subject of debate which is uninhibited, robust, and wide-open . . . . That public debate of religious ideas, like any other, may arouse emotion, may incite, may foment religious divisiveness and strife, does not rob it of its constitutional protection.”

Supreme Court pronouncements such as these, however, should not lead one to assume that organized religion in America enjoys an absolute right to participate in the making of public policy, free from governmental interference of any type. These groups are subject to losing their tax exemptions, for example, for excessive political expenditures or for endorsing political candidates. Nevertheless, they enjoy essentially the same rights as secular groups to participate in the political process. The principles of democracy prevail here, such that the rights of every person or group in American society, religious or secular, that wishes to contribute to democratic governance is free to do so, even encouraged to do so, even though such participation constitutes a technical violation of the principle of church-state separation. Complete separation would mean banning the activities of the Christian Coalition and approximately 125 other religious lobbies whose sole reason for existence is to influence lawmaking and public policy according to religiously-inspired perspectives. Although many of these lobbies, unfortunately, attempt to issue dictates rather than offer advice, mandates rather than persuasive arguments, the great majority of them have learned to submit their perspectives with some degree of humility, recognizing that

America is a democracy shaped by many views, not a theocracy shaped by a few.

While religious arguments are commonplace in American political discourse, legislation that advances a religious purpose generally is not because of the Supreme Court’s requirement, pursuant to the Lemon test (*Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 1970), that governmental action reflect a secular purpose, that it not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion, and that it not create an excessive entanglement between religion and government.

In terms of political theory, the Lemon test reflects the Court’s understanding that the nation is essentially a liberal state rather than a religious state. However, according to most scholarly accounts of the liberal state, this designation carries requirements that are in addition to the mandates of the Lemon test. Most significantly, participants’ dialogue in public discourse within a liberal democracy must be intelligible to other participants. Since religious language is unintelligible to many citizens, it should be translated into secular language accessible to everyone. Religious motivation might lie beneath the veneer of certain legislation, but the legislation itself must be couched in essentially secular language. By most accounts, this requirement is a logical antecedent to the Lemon test, which requires that the final product of public discourse—legislation—carry a secular orientation.

The work of John Rawls, of course, is pivotal for the entire tradition of liberal political thought. In *A Theory of Justice* (1990), he makes the basic points just enumerated in support of a secular basis for the liberal state. Rawls’ work has been highly influential in the United States, and has widespread support among political theorists, albeit in varying degrees. In recent years, however, liberal political theory has been challenged by a host of communitarian thinkers, all complaining essentially that Rawlsian liberal theory unnecessarily undermines the viable contributions to the public good that specifically religious viewpoints can make. Among these critics has been Stephen Carter, who argues in *The Culture of Disbelief* (1994) that religious arguments and even religion-based legislation should be countenanced in a liberal democratic framework.

It is this writer’s view, contrary to Rawls and affirming Carter, that religious arguments in public discourse generally should be permitted. Common sense may dictate that on many occasions the one advancing a religious argument should translate that argument into secular language in order that it become more intelligible and convincing to others, but that should be the decision of the one advancing the argument. Nevertheless, it is suggested here, contrary to Carter and affirming Rawls, that when the public debate on a particular issue is completed and legislation is to be enacted—when the relative “free-for-all” that is American liberal democracy in which every conceivable viewpoint (religious and secular alike) has been entertained—the legislation enacted, consistent with the Lemon test, should reflect essentially secular aims and effects. The great weight of evidence is that the founding fathers intended, as indicated most demonstrably by their purposive omission of God’s name in the Constitution, to create what is generally referred

to today as a liberal state. The decision to break with traditional political theory that placed human government under divine authority was the result of their belief that the power to frame a new government derived not immediately from heaven, but from the American people. The founders created a government which was to be "of the people, by the people, and for the people." This in no way was a denial of their personal religious (mostly Christian) convictions, but the new federal government was to be one in which the people were the responsible parties, not God. The product of public discourse was to be man's law, not holy law. This always has been, and remains, the essence of a liberal state.

In the modern lawmaking process, politicians, like the founding fathers, may personally hold themselves accountable to God. But whether or not they do, they are in fact accountable to the people. Since the people are of diverse faiths, the product of public debate—legislation—should be religiously neutral (secular) so as to reflect the common good, not merely the good of those who prevailed in the debate. This kind of commitment is what is embodied in the Lemon three-prong test and the tradition of American political discourse.

American adherence to the integration of religion and politics also means that potential candidates and officeholders are free to speak about their religious views. They may think it prudent at times to abstain from too much "God-speak," but the Free Exercise Clause gives them the freedom to speak freely about matters of faith, even, for the most part, when acting in their official capacities. It is unlikely that a candidate for president could be elected in America without some candid talk about his or her religious views. America is diverse in its religious makeup, but it is unmistakably one of the most religious nations on the globe, and the American people generally demand to know their representatives' religious beliefs. The Constitution forbids the administration of formal religious tests for holding public office (and most states have followed suit), but this is different from the unofficial expectation that an officeholder have at least some religious commitments. This expectation is the product of a religious culture, of a body of citizens who "are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being." This was the perspective of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas (*Zorach v. Clauson*, 1954), but it remains true roughly a half century later.

### III. Accommodation of Civil Religion

If in the American system the Establishment Clause is relaxed in sanctioning an integration of religion and politics, it is equally relaxed in accommodating various expressions of civil religion. According to Robert Bellah, the most celebrated scholar on American civil religion, "Civil religion is about those public rituals that express the nexus of the political order to the divine reality." By most accounts, civil religion is a form of religion which gives sacred meaning to national life. It is a kind of theological glue that binds a nation together by allying the political with the transcendent. Civil religion is a way for Americans to recognize the sovereignty of God over their nation without getting bogged down in theological differences.

Many Americans affirm the separation of church and state, but this does not remove their belief that the nation—as a civil entity—is still somehow obligated to God. For them, nationhood makes little sense unless it is part of a universe ruled by God; consequently, they believe that the body politic should have a religious dimension. Stated in another way, religion is not merely private; it is inescapably public, too. Bellah acknowledges this, arguing that separation of church and state does not deny the political realm a religious dimension.

The most common symbols of American civil religion are the national motto, "In God We Trust," which also appears on U.S. currency; the invocation of God's name in the pledge of allegiance, recited daily by students in many of the nation's public schools; observance of a national day of prayer; the utilization of government-paid chaplains in the military, U.S. Congress, and state legislatures; and the frequent allusion to God and America's religious destiny in political, especially presidential, speeches (every president has acknowledged God in his inaugural address). These civil religious expressions are not promoted exclusively by the state, or exclusively by the religious community. Rather, they are promoted by both, serving to imbed in the national civil order an unmistakable religious quality.

Civil religion is a sociological reality in every society. It manifests itself in different ways in different contexts, but French Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was probably correct in suggesting that every society at its deepest foundations is religious, and the sovereign must act responsibly to respect and acknowledge this, lest the society itself deteriorate and pass into oblivion. For most Americans, of course, a nation which takes steps to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, even if in generic, symbolic ways, is not merely accommodating the wishes of the citizenry in the sense of filling a sociological need, but acting to affirm the divine reality. In any case, the accommodation of civil religion can be said to prevent the nation from steering too far in the direction of a secularized culture.

The U.S. Supreme Court occasionally acknowledges the evidence of civil religion in American life. Legislative prayer, legislative and military chaplains, Christmas and Hanukkah displays, and graduation prayers in public schools, as expressions of civil religion, have all been challenged as violations of the "separation" requirements of the Establishment Clause. The Court tends to sanction those civil religious traditions that are generic, longstanding, and not likely to offend persons of tender age. Thus, in the case of legislative prayer, the Supreme Court has held that the practice is constitutional because it has a long and unbroken tradition in American political life. In the public school context, however, given the impressionability of young persons, similar prayers are prohibited as violations of the institutional separation of church and state. The same contrary set of rules, applied in the respective contexts of legislative halls and public school classrooms, can be said to apply to the posting of the Ten Commandments and other sacred texts. Legislative and military chaplains are likewise affirmed as longstanding traditions, although it is doubtful that courts would endorse the concept of public school

chaplains because of the impressionability and potential for indoctrination of the students they would serve. Holiday displays have been held not to violate the Establishment Clause if their religious message is muted by surrounding secular symbols. Prayer offered by a clergyman at a public school graduation ceremony, however, has been held to violate the Establishment Clause as an inappropriate government sponsorship of religion.

The federal courts have struggled in their efforts to assess the constitutional propriety of these kinds of public acknowledgment cases. The difficulty in evaluating such cases is that the religion advanced is typically nonsectarian, symbolic, and without specific theological content—in short, civil religion. The courts, with lawyers sitting as judges, have not been particularly sophisticated in their ability to distinguish civil religion from traditional religion. Occasionally, the Supreme Court has applied a vague concept called “ceremonial deism” to justify some practices of civil religion, but for the most part, the Court has seemed to be totally unaware of the large body of scholarly literature that has appeared in recent decades giving analysis to civil religion as a distinctive form of religion. The Court has never defined “ceremonial deism”; the term seems to be mere shorthand for the Court’s judgment that a practice ought to be constitutional because it is not really religious, either because it has culturally lost the significance it once had or because it is used only to solemnize a public occasion.

The increased attention that some courts have given to the civil religion concept has led some legal commentators to suggest that civil religion should be judicially recognized and approved, that indeed civil religion mediates, and is the much-needed compromise to settle the debate between those who believe that a strong adherence to separation of church and state is best for America, and those who believe that more religion should be accommodated in the public sphere. It is true that the courts have begun to consider the possibility of carving out a special test that might constitutionally sanction certain expressions of civil religion. In a 1987 case, *Stein v. Plainwell Community Schools*, a federal appeals court considered the constitutionality of including prayers in high school commencement ceremonies. The plaintiffs, parents of students at two Michigan high schools, argued that the prayers “invoke[d] the image of a God or Supreme Being” and thus violated the First Amendment values of “liberty of conscience, state neutrality and noninterference with religion.” Attendance at the commencement ceremonies was voluntary, and failure to attend did not affect the receipt of a diploma. In one school a student delivered the prayer, at the other a member of the local clergy.

The court concluded that the religion clauses, taken together, guarantee “equal liberty of conscience,” erecting “a neutral state designed to foster the most extensive liberty of conscience compatible with a similar or equal liberty for others.” Treating commencement prayers as analogous to legislative prayers, the court concluded that *Marsh v. Chambers* (authorizing legislative prayers) governed the case, permitting some accommodation to the nation’s religious traditions. In analyzing the nature of commencement prayers, the court sought to place them within an overall framework of

a “civil religion”: “So long as the invocation or benediction on these public occasions does not go beyond ‘the American civil religion,’ so long as it preserves the substance of the principle of equality of liberty of conscience, no violation of the Establishment Clause occurs under the reasoning of *Marsh*.” In sustaining commencement prayers generally, the court emphasized that, unlike classroom prayer, they presented little danger of religious coercion or indoctrination. The court, however, found the prayers unacceptable because they were so distinctively Christian that they connoted a governmental endorsement of Christianity. Thus the prayers failed to qualify as permissible invocations and benedictions under a special category of “American civil religion.”

In 1992, in *Lee v. Weisman*, the U. S. Supreme Court considered a similar case involving commencement prayer. There, a middle school principal had invited a Jewish rabbi to give the invocation and benediction at the school’s commencement ceremony. The rabbi recited nonsectarian prayers, following the school’s instructions that prayers reflect “inclusiveness in sensitivity.” The plaintiff, the father of a fourteen-year-old student of the school, complained that the prayers were an impermissible governmental advancement of religion contrary to the prohibitions of the Establishment Clause.

The Court held that the prayers bore the imprint of the Providence school system and were therefore unlawful advancements of religion. The Court stated that even for those students who objected to the religious ceremony, their attendance was in a “fair and real sense” obligatory, even though attendance was not required as a condition for receipt of a diploma. The Court reasoned that this constituted an indirect coercion, which could be as real as any overt compulsion to participate in the state-sponsored religious activity. The atmosphere of the commencement proceeding was distinguished from that of a state legislature, as in *Marsh*. In the latter, the Court said, adults are free to enter and leave with little comment and for any number of reasons, whereas in the former, children are constrained to attend in its entirety the one most important event of their school year.

Of special interest here is the attention that Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority, gave to the brief discussion of civil religion set forth in the *Stein* case:

“We are asked to recognize the existence of a practice of nonsectarian prayer, prayer within the embrace of what is known as the Judeo-Christian tradition, prayer which is more acceptable than one which, for example, makes explicit references to the God of Israel, or to Jesus Christ, or to a patron saint. There may be some support, as an empirical observation, to the statement of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, picked up by Judge Campbell’s dissent in the Court of Appeals in this case, that there has emerged in this country a civic religion, one which is tolerated when sectarian exercises are not. . . . If common ground can be defined which permits once conflicting faiths to express the shared conviction that there is an ethic and morality which transcend human invention, the sense of community and purpose sought by all decent societies might be advanced. But though the First Amendment does not allow the government to stifle prayers which aspire to these ends, neither does it permit the

government to undertake that task for itself."

Kennedy's point here is that "civic religion," whatever its merits and however it might represent consensus, is religion just the same, and if promulgated by government, violates the Establishment Clause. While Kennedy's was not an extended inquiry into the nature of civil religion, his recognition of it as a distinctive form of religion that is different from creedal religions at least gives Court-watchers some glimpse of how the Court might adjudicate future attempts to seek a special status for civil religion under the Establishment Clause.

In addition to Kennedy's assertion that civil religion is only another form of religion and therefore suspect under the Establishment Clause, there are other valid reasons for not enshrining civil religion as a test for measuring the constitutionality of time-honored religious practices. First, an impossible definitional task would ensue. According to civil religion a preferred status under the Establishment Clause would require that its contours be closely defined. As a religion without a formal set of theological tenets, clergy, history, mission, or confessional adherents, civil religion would not possess the content it would have to have as the comparative paradigm for assessing the acceptability of religious symbols and practices in public life.

A second problem with raising the American civil religion to constitutional status is the risk it poses for civil religion's becoming a threat to authentic religious faith. A civil religion tends to enshrine the political order and, as Senator Mark Hatfield once said, for those of traditional faith, borders on idolatry and "fails to speak of repentance, salvation, and God's standard of justice." Finally, constitutionally establishing a civil religion gives the government, through the courts, a tool to justify and reinforce its own policies. As the standard for acceptability, the civil religion would enjoy a preferred status that could be used to exclude traditional religious advocacy from the public arena.

In summary, civil religion has been for much of American history, and remains, a vital cultural force. It is manifested in our own day in prayers at presidential inaugurations, the invocation used each time the Supreme Court itself hears argument ("God save this honorable court"), Thanksgiving and National Day of Prayer proclamations, the words "under

God" in the pledge of allegiance, the phrase "In God We Trust" on coins, various Scripture quotations inscribed on government buildings ("Moses the Lawgiver" is the inscription above the Supreme Court's bench), and even the ritual benediction, "God Bless America," used frequently by presidents.

All of these civil religious traditions are violations of a strict notion of the separation of church and state. Yet they form a rich tradition of practices that are culturally and judicially accommodated. Undoubtedly they offend many, but they are for the most part generic practices that are not coercive in the way that, for example, audible school prayers in the public schools are. Indeed, these practices are accepted and celebrated by most Americans, and they contribute to a unique, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory set of concepts, principles, customs, beliefs, and symbols that comprise the American tradition of religion and state.

## VI. Conclusion

While contradictory in many respects, the principles of separation of church and state, integration of religion and politics, and accommodation of civil religion combine to provide unique but important contributions to America's public philosophy. The role of religion in American public life has been controversial since the founding and will likely remain so far into the future. But perhaps the separation-integration-accommodation triad described in this essay removes some of the hard edges from the controversy, because it embraces elements of both conservative and liberal thought, of competing philosophical and theological beliefs, indeed of key arguments advanced by both separationists and accommodationists. The final product can be likened to a tossed salad, a blend of items that perhaps are not so tasty if partaken of separately, but quite savory in combination. Such is the way a democracy should work—disparate elements coming together to produce that which hopefully serves everyone, that which we have come to call the common good, indeed that which we might refer to as the Good Society. ■



---

# A Good Deed Kept Secret

*By Hal Haralson*  
Attorney in Austin, Texas

I think big corporations are only out to make money. They rarely, if ever, go out of their way to help others. This story changed my mind.

We returned to Austin about 6:00 p.m. on December 26, 1972. The trip from Littlefield, Texas, where we spent Christmas with my wife's parents, to our home in Austin, takes about 8 hours.

Jill, our teen-aged daughter, walked in the house, went to her room, and turned on the radio. Typical teen behavior.

Moments later, she came crying into the den. "The radio said our church bus crashed into a cattle trailer in Clovis, New Mexico. Several of our kids are dead."

There were two busloads of kids and their sponsors headed for a ski slope in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Woodlawn Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, would never be the same again.

I went to the church and joined a crowd of people gathered in the chapel. There was no word as to the names of those who were killed. We didn't know who the survivors were.

About midnight, Jim Abington, our Pastor, spoke from the pulpit. For the first time, these families and friends were told who died and who lived.

Abington did not stop reading the names once he began. "The following are known dead." Each name that was read brought sobs. He continued until 19 names were read. There was stunned silence. I saw Ron Hicks, our minister of education, comforting families who had lost children. Ron had just learned that Beverly and Robin were killed . . . his wife and only child.

The accident occurred about 12 miles west of Clovis, New Mexico, in a deserted stretch of prairie. The Clovis hospital was filled with the injured.

Ultimately, the survivors were taken to the Clovis airport. They had no way to get home.

I was chairman of the church insurance committee. In Austin, we were on the phone trying to get a plane to go to Clovis and pick up the survivors.

We tried the military at Bergstrom Air Force Base

in Austin. Too much red tape. Our congressman's office tried to help, but again, protocol would delay a flight for hours. Finally, I picked up the phone and reached the home office of Southwest Airlines.

"We have approximately 40 kids in the airport in Clovis, New Mexico. They are survivors of an accident outside of Clovis in which 19 people were killed. They are all from Woodlawn Baptist Church in Austin, Texas. We need a plane in the air as quickly as possible. We've got to get these kids home."

The lady confirmed the information I had given her and said they would get a plane in the air immediately. "I have no idea what the cost will be."

"I don't care what it costs, just do it."

I later learned that the crew of a plane that had just landed volunteered to go. They were airborne almost immediately.

About an hour later, there was a call at the church office asking for me. "My name is Neil Adams (not his real name). I'm Vice-President of Southwest Airlines. We are in touch with the plane. It will land in about 30 minutes. It is large enough to bring all your people back."

Then Mr. Adams said very clearly, "I have been authorized to tell you there will be no cost for the plane."

I was in Clovis on business related to the accident about two weeks later. I struck up a conversation with the flight attendant on the return flight.

It was a Southwest Airlines plane. I was the only passenger on board. I told her about the mercy flight, and she broke down and cried. Not only was the flight not publicized, Southwest had not even told their own people of the free flight.

About six weeks later, the Vice-President I had talked to on the phone came by my law office. He just wanted to meet me and see if the flight was O.K.

So far as I know, Southwest Airlines never publicized their generosity. Thirty years later, I'm still reminded of this example of corporate America and a good deed kept secret . . . until now. ■

---

# Color Blindness, Political Correctness, or Racial Reconciliation: Christian Ethics and Race

*By George Yancey, Assistant Professor of Sociology  
The University of North Texas*

We hear a lot about the concept of racial reconciliation in Christian circles today. Yet how often do we think about what we mean by racial reconciliation? In one sense, no one is completely sure what it means because this concept easily represents contrasting ideas to different Christians. Nevertheless, it is still important for us to have a well-developed idea of what we mean when we talk about racial reconciliation. It is also important to explore how this idea may differ from non-Christian ideas as to how to solve the social problems of racism and racial alienation in our society. I will use this paper to explore a possible construction of racial reconciliation as a Christian concept and to see how our Christianity may shape a different answer to racial problems in our society than the answers given to us by secular thinkers in America.

To understand what racial reconciliation is, we have to first understand what it is not. There are two basic approaches that dominate how non-Christians attempt to handle racial problems. The first approach is what I call the “color-blind” model. Whenever I teach race/ethnicity, I generally have students (who are usually white) that question why we even have to study about race and ethnicity. Their thinking is that if we can ignore race then racism will disappear. The focus of the color-blind model is that despite the past historical abuses that minorities have suffered, neither whites nor racial minorities today should enjoy any economic or social advantages because of their skin color. Thus we should treat skin color as if it were hair color. The goals of this model are admirable since if we could become “color-blind” then many of the problems connected to racism would disappear. A real question is whether we can have a color-blind society now or whether we still must take “color-conscious” steps to alleviate the racial inequities and tensions in our society today.

It is naïve to believe that race does not continue to affect the life chances of racial minorities. Most racial minorities are aware that white Americans have historically benefited from racial privilege<sup>1</sup> and that this privilege continues to be passed down from one generation to the next. For example, the land where most white Americans live was once the home of Native Americans. Whites today are able to purchase land at relatively devalued prices because that land was stolen from the American Indians. Thus whites, as well as other non-Indian races, currently benefit from these historical sins and it is a mistake to ignore those past misdeeds. Corporate sins, as well as personal sins, must be addressed if we are going to rebuild fallen Native American relationships. Advocates of a color-blind society too easily dismiss the seriousness of historical and structural sins, and are unaware of the ways these sins affect our current racial relationships.<sup>2</sup>

A second way non-Christians have attempted to deal with

racism is through the “politically correct” model. The main argument of this model is that by empowering racial minorities we can overturn centuries of racial oppression. In this way the limitations of the color blind model, ignoring the historical and institutional racism that penetrates our society, is corrected with deliberate efforts to institutionally reverse the effects of that racism. For example, racial minorities have historically been barred from employment opportunities. Because of this historical discrimination, it is contended that there should be overt attempts to increase economic opportunities for racial minorities. This has resulted in calls for affirmative action by many supporters of this model.

It has also been contended that the culture and lives of racial minorities have been devalued. Thus, some of the more revolutionary supporters of this model promote the cultural values of racial minorities so intensely that they denigrate almost all European American values, while often ignoring the possible dysfunctions within minority group cultures. Many of those same individuals have such hostility toward majority group culture, one might argue that they seem to believe that to be European-American is to be evil. Even those who advocate multiculturalism, but do not condemn European-Americans and European—American values, tend to cling to a notion that universal norms do not exist, allowing them to accept norms and values from a variety of minority—group cultures.

Nevertheless, because of our sinful nature any society created by humans will contain fallen institutions. All “races” are represented by groups that have historically engaged in brutal practices: the cruelty of human sacrifices practiced by the Aztecs, the enslavement practiced by Africans in Egypt, Oman, and Sudan, and the massacres of Native Americans by European Americans. Furthermore, advocates of the politically correct model do not give enough attention to the personal responsibility of racial minority group members for some of the dysfunctional structures and practices prevalent within their communities. Some supporters of the politically correct model blame the criminally or sexually irresponsible actions of racial minorities solely on white discrimination. This is sometimes called “playing the race card.”

Neither the color-blind model nor the politically correct model fully appreciates the nature of sin. The color-blind model places too much confidence on the willingness of white Americans to seek justice in a meaningful way even if true racial reform inevitably leads to whites losing their historical, institutional advantages. Thus they tend to gloss over how majority group members of today have gained from past racial discrimination. The politically correct model is too eager to praise racial minorities and often fails to acknowledge the fact that sin knows no color. Thus there is a tendency to downplay occurrences of sin within minority

group culture or to shift the blame for that sin entirely to majority group members. It should not come as a surprise to Christians that models built upon an overly optimistic perspective of humanity are unable to compensate for the powerful effects of sin.

Certain Christian organizations, Reconcilers Fellowship and Circle Urban Ministry, have concentrated on building egalitarian multiracial ministries. It is out of these ministries that I believe we can find a Christian definition of racial reconciliation. I have called this ideology "reconciliation theology." Its origin comes from the work of black Christian activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Tom Skinner, and John Perkins, who have called us to confront our ugly racial past and to challenge the social structures that exploit racial minorities. While this is an ideology that is still in its infancy, I think that there are several principles that have developed from this approach that are worth exploring.

**T**he first principle of reconciliation theology is that since Christ calls us to love each other, members of different races must make deliberate attempts to interact with each other. Scriptural evidence of this principle can be seen in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. In 2 Kings 17:24-41, we learn that the Samaritans were a mixed race of people. Because of this racial amalgamation with pagan nations, a serious religious conflict emerged between Jews and Samaritans. Yet Jesus intentionally went into Samaria to serve and to minister to a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-26). Jesus realized that intentional efforts to create interracial interactions are necessary to deal with the historical hatreds and mistrusts that developed between Jews and Samaritans.

There are also minority-group members who fear that their racial cultural distinctiveness will be lost if whites are allowed to intrude upon their lives. Historically oppressive racial relationships can lead to paternalism in contemporary minority relationships. Interpersonal racial relationships can no longer be hierarchical, with whites controlling the lion's share of power. We must seek new egalitarian racial relationships.

Advocates of reconciliation theology understand that the mistrust generated from our historically oppressive racial relationships requires that we work to develop interpersonal relations between the different races. It is only in spending time together that we can learn how to relate to each other, to build trust, and to establish new relationships of equality.<sup>3</sup> This can lead to honest and open dialogue that helps us overcome historical forces of alienation. Perkins and Rice's book, *More Than Equals*,<sup>4</sup> documents how honest discourse between whites and blacks can lead to an interracial ministry that promotes racial healing rather than further estrangement. When Christians of different races develop primary relationships with each other, then they can develop more sympathy for the plight of individuals of other races. Perhaps it will be through these types of relationships that politically conservative white Christians will cease to label politically liberal black Christians as "fallen," and politically liberal black Christians will stop seeing politically conservative white Christians as "sinners."

**A** second important principle in reconciliation theology is that Christians of all racial and political backgrounds

must oppose social structures of racial inequality. While overt racist laws have been taken off our books, the devastating effects of centuries of racism still haunt us. The color-blind model breeds a limited understanding of racism because it focuses only upon overt and individualistic discrimination. This rings hollow for racial minorities because they understand that racism still has a significant effect on their educational and economic outcomes. Dealing with the societal structures that have created these conditions may be costly to white Christians. However, an unwillingness of Christians to deal with ways that racism has structurally manifested itself and to concentrate only on instances of individual racism cheapens the message of the gospel.

God's hatred of oppressive social structures is quite evident in the Scriptures. For example, Isaiah 1:18 is often quoted as an example of how God will take away our sins and wash us to be as white as snow. What are these sins for which we need God's mercy? In the next few verses we learn that God wants us to defend orphans and to help widows. In other words, to aid those who are the poorest and most disenfranchised in our society. He is also concerned about corrupt government (v. 23) and an illegitimate justice system. Passages calling for social reform are common throughout the Old Testament. Clearly the Scriptures picture sin not only in personal failure, but also in institutional structures. Given such a scriptural understanding it seems plausible to argue that the social structures created by America's racist past are corrupt and must be dismantled. Racial minorities are not going to be very interested in the message of Christianity if white Christians do not show a desire to help them to overcome historical economic injustice.

**R**elated to the second principle is a third principle: namely, that whites have historically benefited from racism and thus are called to an attitude of repentance for these historical and structural sins. Repentance for these corporate sins is a difficult but necessary step in the process of American racial healing. Yet, rather than attempting to manifest corporate repentance, some white Christians have developed a cognitive denial of the historical evils of racism. In a 1996 text, I point out that Americans tend to resist the notion of corporate sin because of the individualistic society in which we live.<sup>5</sup> However, corporate repentance is a biblical call for us to hear and heed.

*Let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses. (Nehemiah 1:6-7)*

*We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Thy servants the prophets, who spoke in Thy name to the kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land. (Daniel 9:5-6)*

Note that neither prophet is repenting of personal sins, but



rather each is repenting of the sins of their people. Yet they express contrition as if it were their own personal transgressions. These passages teach us that corporate sins must be handled in much the same manner as personal sins—through repentance and renewal. The unrepentant attitude of some white Christians makes it unlikely for them to seriously deal with the effects of historical and institutional racism. When white Americans fully realize how much they have, even unintentionally, drunk from the bitter cup of racism, then they will realize that they can no longer deny the effects of corporate racism. Only then can they develop the attitudes found in Nehemiah and Daniel.

The last principle of reconciliation theology is that just as Christ has forgiven us, so also must racial minorities engage in an attitude of forgiveness. This is not a request, but a command from our Savior. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus links the forgiveness we receive from God to a command that we forgive others. Ephesians 4:32 also makes this argument. Forgiveness is not based upon whether we feel like forgiving, but instead it is a basic obligation for faithful Christians. Thus, minorities must volitionally choose to forgive the historical abuses suffered by themselves and other members of their race, as well as forgive the contemporary consequences of those abuses.

This forgiveness does not come without costs to racial minorities. Some of them realize that they can use the guilt of whites to create power for themselves. Shelby Steele notes that African-Americans labeled victims gain a certain amount of status in our society.<sup>6</sup> Racial minorities are sometimes hesitant to develop an attitude of forgiveness because they fear that they will lose the leverage necessary to gain the social justice they desire. To forgive does not mean that racial minorities cannot fight institutional racism, but it does mean that they should not exploit “white guilt.” Care must also be taken to avoid an unjustifiable “playing of the race card.” While racial minorities have every right and responsibility to confront racially insensitive majority-group members, they must not use racial accusations to cover their own sins. Unfortunately the politically correct model has sometimes been used to endorse the sinful actions of racial minorities on the grounds that since they have suffered so much themselves, it is all right for them to use any means necessary to gain social power. While there are structural elements within the Eurocentric American society that must be addressed, we also must confront minority-group members who engage in destructive behavior.

Racial Alienation is the result of ethnocentrism by both whites and non-whites. Racial minorities are concerned that whites will not deal with their legitimate concerns and help them overcome the centuries of racial abuse they have suffered. Majority-group members are concerned that racial minorities will attempt to use legitimate racial concerns to gain an unfair advantage over them. When majority group members are willing to acknowledge that our racist past continues to affect the life chances of racial minorities, then they lessen the fear of racial minorities that whites will not help them overcome racial abuse. When racial minorities practice true forgiveness in response to whites, then majority group members have more confidence that racial minorities

are not just seeking to use historical racism to justify unfair gains for themselves. Reconciliation theology can best be conceptualized as a call for both whites and nonwhites to focus on the racial concerns both have. From this Christian perspective we can develop a framework of mutual accountability that will revolutionize American race relations.

Ultimately, neither of the two secular models is satisfying. Many Americans realize that we do not have a society where racial colorblindness is possible. They acknowledge that one’s race still matters. Steps must be taken to ease some of the problems racial minorities face. Yet many of these same individuals are uncomfortable with the lack of personal responsibility some racial minorities exhibit. Though racial minorities have additional social and economic barriers that whites do not have, many believe that racial minorities should take responsibility for their own problems as well.

Reconciliation theology offers a third way to examine the problems of race within our society. It is an ideology that evangelicals may be able to use to attract non-believers who are dissatisfied with the answers that they have received from the two secular models. It is also a model by which Christians can gain a better understanding of racial issues. Therefore, we must find ways to communicate our vision of reconciliation to the larger American society. We need our churches to go beyond superficial racial platitudes to make the Body of Christ an instrument that develops healthy, close, egalitarian, and reconciled racial relationships. ■

---

#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> McIntosh, Peggy, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia H. Collins, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1998), 94-105.

<sup>2</sup> A good examination of how historical racism has enfranchised certain institutional advantages for European-Americans relative to African-Americans can be seen in the work of Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). The authors show how residential segregation was enforced through historical discrimination, they demonstrate how this historical segregation continues to deprive American blacks of economic and educational opportunities, and they document why it is difficult for blacks to end residential segregation and thus reverse the effects of historical racism. I would encourage anyone who wants to understand how powerful the effects of historical racism can be to read this work.

<sup>3</sup> My own research suggests that whites in integrated churches tend to have more progressive racial attitudes than whites that attend churches that are segregated. Yancey, George “An Examination of the Effects of Residential and Church Integration on Racial Attitudes of Whites” *Sociological Perspectives* 42:2 (1999), 279-304.

<sup>4</sup> Perkins, Spencer and Chris Rice, *More than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Yancey, George, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House Company, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Steele, Shelby. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990).

---

# Grossly Unfair: Evaluating the Bush Proposal

*By Ron Sider, President*  
Evangelicals for Social Action

**Editor's Note:** Although an amended version of President Bush's tax cut has just been passed and signed into law, this critique is still applicable, especially coming from one who has been a strong supporter of the President's "faith-based" initiatives. This editorial was first published in the May/June 2001 *Prism Magazine*, the journal of ESA, which may be accessed at 800-650-6600 or esa@esa-online.org.

Consider the President's tax cut proposal blatantly unjust. If that sounds partisan, let me remind you that I try hard to evaluate political agendas in a non-partisan way. The postman has recently delivered some rather angry letters condemning my strong support for President Bush's new emphasis on faith-based initiatives. So be it. I think the President's new emphasis on FBOs and civil society is right and important—perhaps even of far-reaching, historic significance.

But some of his tax proposals are dead wrong. Forty percent of his tax cut would go to the richest one percent. The bottom 80 percent get only 29 percent!

President Bush wants to use about \$1.6 trillion of the projected federal budget surplus for several key changes in the tax code. Two of those measures—eliminating the marriage penalty in the income tax code and expanding the child tax credit from \$500 to \$1000—are indeed "pro-family" and "pro-marriage" and are essentially wise. Abolishing the estate tax and dropping the income tax rates for everyone are quite another matter.

Lowering the lowest income tax rate from 15 to 10 percent helps lower-income workers. But reducing the top income tax rate from 39.6 percent to 33 percent and completely abolishing the estate taxes provides a huge windfall to the wealthiest Americans.

It is true that the wealthy pay a lot more taxes than others. But even though the Treasury Department reports that the top one percent pay only 20 percent of all federal taxes, Bush wants to give them 40 percent of the tax cut. The bottom 40 percent get only four percent of Bush's tax cut—i.e., about 1/9 of what the richest one percent receive. The bottom 80 percent receive only 29 percent.

The more closely you look at what has been happening in the last few decades, the more outrageous this 40 percent tax cut for the richest one percent appears. The income of the top one percent has grown vastly more than the rest of the population. From 1989 to 1998, the after-tax income of the bottom 90 percent grew by only five percent, but the richest one percent enjoyed a 40 percent jump. That means the income of the top one percent grew eight times faster than the bottom 90 percent. (That explosion of after-tax income happened even though President Clinton and Congress raised the highest income tax rate to 39.6 percent in 1993—a small tax increase that apparently did not discourage investment, harm the economy or prevent the richest from significantly

widening the gap between themselves and everybody else.) Furthermore, the total effect of changes in the tax laws between 1977 and 1998 has already lowered the federal tax payments of the top 17 percent of families by over 14 percent (\$36,710) whereas the bottom 80 percent of families saw their average tax payments fall by just 6.9 percent (\$335).

It gets still worse. President Bush says his plan is fair because it lowers the tax rates for everyone. In fact, the poorest 31.5 percent of all families do not get a cent from Bush's proposal (even though 80 percent of them are working) because their incomes are so low they do not pay any federal income taxes. (They do pay substantial payroll taxes, but the tax cut does not change that.) More than half of all black and Latino children are in families that would not benefit a cent from this plan.

Abolishing the estate tax is also wrong. Of course it needs to be revised so that children can inherit family farms and small businesses (that would cost only a fraction of what abolishing it will cost). When fully implemented in 2010, the repeal of the estate tax would provide a mere 64,000 estates with a tax cut of \$55 billion—which is the same amount that the poorest 74 percent of all U.S. families (192 million people) would receive in tax cuts.

Abolishing the estate tax is misguided for several reasons. It would discourage charitable giving and thus undermine civil society. Wealthy individuals today can avoid estate taxes on wealth they give to charitable organizations. Consequently, abolishing the estate tax would almost certainly reduce charitable giving to a vast array of private agencies, including precisely the private, non-profit social service agencies in civil society that President Bush (wisely) wants to strengthen and expand. His proposal on the estate tax fundamentally contradicts his desire to expand the role of civil society in general and FBOs in particular in combating poverty—which is why John Dilulio, the head of Bush's new White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, recently criticized abolishing the estate tax. Fortunately, some of the wealthiest Americans (including Bill Gates' father) have launched a campaign to preserve the estate tax!

I work with the following principles as I search for a just tax code:

- Taxpayers in the same circumstances should pay the same taxes
- People should be taxed according to their ability to pay

(we see this basic principle in the Old Testament law which provides for different types of sacrificial offerings based on a person's wealth)

- Tax structures should strengthen two-parent families and marriage
- Tax structures should encourage work and responsibility and strengthen the poorer members of society
- The tax system should promote a healthy, sustainable economy

Cutting the present income tax at a time of large budget surpluses is not misguided, but the changes and cuts must be allocated more fairly. Much more of our budget surplus should go to empowering the working poor. Millions of Americans work full time without earning enough to even get up to the poverty level. We know how to change that. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) rewards work, encourages responsibility, and lifts millions out of poverty. (For every dollar a low-wage worker earns, she receives 40 cents as an income tax credit. And if she owes no federal income taxes, she gets the money anyway because this tax credit is refundable.) We should raise it significantly.

Unfortunately, the present EITC has a huge marriage penalty. Two single workers with children who are living together but remain unmarried both receive a substantial EITC, but if they get married, they lose hundreds, even thousands of dollars. President Bush's plan eliminates the marriage penalty for the middle class but does nothing to end it for poor workers getting the EITC. I agree with William W. Beach of the Heritage Foundation who wants to eliminate this marriage penalty by changing it so the phase-out range for married couples is twice that of singles. Of course that has a price tag, but we can easily do it if we do not give the richest one percent such a huge cut.

I endorse President Bush's expansion of the Child Tax Credit from \$500 to \$1000 for every child. But the devil is in the details and his proposals need major modification. Currently, this tax credit starts to phase out at \$110,000 for couples and \$75,000 for single parents. Bush wants to increase that to \$200,000! Come, now. Do couples earning between \$110,000 and \$200,000 need another \$500 tax credit?

Even worse, the child tax credit is not refundable so it does not provide a cent for poor families who owe no federal income taxes. This child tax credit only helps the middle

class! The poorest one quarter of all children would not benefit at all, even though two-thirds of those children live in working families that pay substantial federal payroll and sales taxes. In fact, almost half of Bush's expanded child tax credit would go to the richest one-fifth!

Again, there is an easy solution. Make it refundable as the Children's Defense Fund proposes. But it is crucial to make the increased (and refundable) child tax credit available only to taxpayers who have income from work (so that it is not dismissed as just an expansion of welfare). In fact, why not raise this kind of child tax credit to \$1500 per child? Again, there is a cost, but there is plenty of money to do that if the bonanza to the richest one percent is cut.

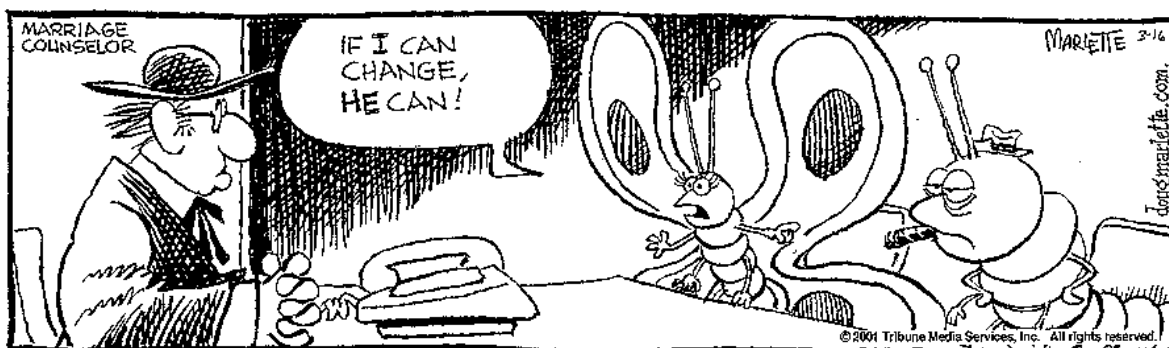
We should also change the Dependent Care Tax Credit. Currently, two-parent families where both work outside the home benefit from the Child Care Tax Credit. But if one parent stays home to care for the children, they lose the credit. In fact, they pay more taxes to subsidize child care for families where both work away from home. That's an anti-family tax policy if I ever saw one. Any family with one parent working should be eligible for the child care tax credit even if one parent stays at home with the children.

Furthermore, the child care tax credit is not refundable. Again, it only helps the middle class. Let's make it refundable.

In addition to the above, there are a number of other important things we need to do to make this nation more just. The elderly need prescription-drug coverage. The 44 million Americans without health insurance need to be covered. Social Security and Medicare require changes that will be costly.

Yes, some tax cut is desirable. But justice demands that the middle class and working poor should receive far more of the benefits than in the Bush proposal. President Bush's proposal is simply unfair.

**Editorial Postscript:** In a study of the new tax law signed by President Bush, the Citizens for Tax Justice, a nonprofit research institute, reported that nearly 40% of American adults will not get a full refund—34 million American adults (26%) will get no rebate and another 17 million (13%) will get less than a full rebate of \$300 for individuals or \$600 for couples. These are mainly people with incomes less than \$25,000. ■



---

# God So Loved The World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism

By Fisher Humphreys and Paul Robertson, New Orleans: Insight Press, 2001

*Book Review by J. Terry Young, Professor Emeritus, New Orleans Baptist Seminary*

Two Baptist professors of theology have done Southern Baptists a favor by authoring this small (102 pages) but very helpful book. There has been a rising tide of interest in Calvinism among Southern Baptists in the last thirty years. I saw evidences of it many times during twenty-seven years of teaching theology. I frequently found that students who thought that they were Calvinists quickly said, "That's not what I believe," when presented with a clearer picture of Calvinism.

The Calvinism most often encountered among Southern Baptists today is hyper-Calvinism, the more rigid form that is based upon the Canons of the Synod of Dort, named for the Netherlands city where the Dutch Church council met (1618-1619), backed by the power and authority of the government.

There are five major theological premises enunciated in the Canons of the Synod of Dort. These five statements are the foundation of most of the calls to Baptists to adopt Calvinism as their own expression of the Christian faith. Presently, some of the most noted (and quoted) figures in the new leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) are outspoken proponents of Calvinism. Some of them would like nothing better than to lead all Southern Baptists back to Dort. Indeed, debate over Calvinism may be the next major theological controversy for Southern Baptists, who have devoted much energy to doctrinal debate (often splitting theological hairs) during the last twenty-five years.

Humphreys and Robertson want to introduce the uninitiated to this hyper-Calvinism. They try to do it in a very gentle and loving way, writing with a remarkable irenic spirit. Fisher Humphreys is professor of theology at the Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama. He formerly taught at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, where Paul E. Robertson is professor of theology and Director of Research Doctoral Programs.

Humphreys and Robertson believe that traditional Southern Baptists and Calvinist Southern Baptists can function together graciously and lovingly. But that is a very optimistic hope, given the militant, strident tone of some of the Calvinists whom I have encountered, and given the apparent inability of many who attend the annual meetings of the SBC to carry on any doctrinal discussions in a civil manner.

"Our purpose is to help traditional Baptists understand Calvinism, not to debate Calvinists about Calvinism," say the authors. Theirs is a book about theology, "written out of pastoral concerns." They declare, "We are convinced that the Christian way of relating to anything must involve both truth and love; we hope that our book will be an example of speaking the truth in love."

According to the seminary professors, traditional Baptists agree with much of what Calvin says in his *Institutes of the*

*Christian Religion*, but disagree at significant points. However, the discussion today is not about the entire system of teaching put forth by Calvin. The focus of discussion today is primarily about the sovereignty of God and how God has sovereignly determined before creation who can (will) be saved and who will not (cannot) be saved.

The typical presentation of Calvinism by many today is an explanation of TULIP (from the Netherlands tulips, of course) Calvinism, an acronym formed from the pronouncements of the Canons of the Synod of Dort.

T is for Total Depravity

U is for Unconditional Election

L is for Limited Atonement

I is for Irresistible Grace

P is for the Perseverance of Believers.

This may be a helpful aid to the memory, but it distorts the Calvinist position. The order of the points in the findings of the Synod of Dort are really, ULTIP. The key to the whole of Calvin's theology is the sovereignty of God, expressed here as unconditional election. Most often today unconditional election is called unconditional predestination. This is the point at which most traditional Baptists have great difficulty.

According to the Calvinist view of predestination, God in his sovereignty determined from the beginning who will be saved and who will be damned. God's sovereign choice of who would and who would not be saved was not based upon his foreknowledge of how these persons would respond to the offer of salvation through Christ, but simply upon God's foreknowledge that these persons would in the future come into existence. These same people then become believers or unbelievers because God determined beforehand that this was to be their lot.

Traditional Baptists believe that God genuinely desires that all people be saved and has made a bona fide offer of salvation to any and all who will accept his offer of salvation.

Limited atonement then means that Christ died only for the elect, not for all persons. Though John 3:16 declares that God so loved the world, it really means, according to the Calvinists, that he loved the part of the world that is included among the elect. Traditional Baptists believe that the Bible means that God loved all persons, not just some. Christ died for all, not just some.

Total depravity means, in the Calvinist system, that people are dead in sin and cannot respond to the gospel with repentance and faith until they have already been born again. Only after they experience the grace of God in the new birth can they respond with repentance and faith. Traditional Baptists believe also that people are dead in sin, but they also believe that God has created them with a capacity to hear the gospel and make an intelligent personal choice to repent and

believe or to remain in their sin.

Irresistible grace is the expression of the Calvinist belief that all whom God intends to save will actually be saved. The grace of God cannot be resisted and will not fail to reach a single one of the persons marked out for salvation by God's sovereign choice. Traditional Baptists agree that God is sovereign, but in his sovereignty gave to humans the power of free will, allowing them a genuine choice when the offer of grace comes to them through the gospel.

Perseverance of believers, to Calvinists and to traditional Baptists, means that once people are saved, they will remain saved. Nothing can reverse the new birth they have experienced; they cannot fall away from God's grace.

The Calvinist view of these five points is considerably different from the traditional Baptist view. Humphreys and Robertson are quick to point out that the earliest Baptists were not Calvinists, even though they had their beginnings in a Calvinistic environment. It was a quarter of a century before Calvinist views appeared in Baptist life. Even then, for a considerable period of time there were two different groups of Baptists in England, General Baptists (non-Calvinistic) and Particular Baptists (Calvinistic). Later (1891) the two groups merged, but many congregations on both sides were suspicious of the merger and remained separate. In America, the first Baptist church (FBC of Providence, Rhode Island) had both Calvinists and non-Calvinists in its membership.

The Great Awakening and the beginning of revivalism, in England and America, significantly impacted Baptists with Calvinistic leanings. For example, the New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833, shows that the language of Calvinism and predestination was being muted. This Confession was widely distributed in Baptist churches all over America and was the model for the Baptist Faith and Message of 1925.

Humphreys and Robertson insist that the majority of Baptists are not Calvinists, despite the fact that numbers of outstanding Baptist leaders have been Calvinists. "Baptists who want to be true to their Baptist heritage have no obligation to become Calvinists. The earliest Baptists were not Calvinists, and neither are the great majority of Baptists today" (p. 38).

Millard Erickson, through his large (1300 pages) *Systematic Theology* has influenced many in the present generation of Baptists with his well-reasoned presentation of Calvinism. Erickson is a very astute theologian, and he knows how to reason his way through, or around, the points of Calvinism that are so difficult for traditional Baptists. The authors point out for instance, that Erickson says that God's plan (i.e., what God has predestined) is not so much an imperative as a descriptive statement concerning what will happen. Erickson reasons that there is no conflict between human free will and God's sovereign plan. Erickson holds that God has rendered everything that occurs certain, but still insists that humans make free decisions.

But Humphreys and Robertson are not convinced. "In spite of all of the thoughtful arguments made by Calvinists past and present, we, along with other traditional Baptists, remain unconvinced that God has done what Calvinists say, namely, decide the destinies of individuals in advance of their

decisions and independently of God's foreknowledge of their decisions" (p. 25).

The primary point of disagreement that Humphreys and Robertson have with Calvinism, in its various expressions, is the point of predestination. They simply cannot accept the idea that God has arbitrarily decided in advance who will and who will not be saved. They certainly do not question the sovereignty of God, but they insist that God has not exercised his sovereignty in this way.

Humphreys and Robertson examine a selection of Scripture passages that at face value appear to support the Calvinist view. Then, they examine a selection of Scripture passages that at face value appear to support the traditional Baptist view. The co-authors easily show that the passages often used by the Calvinists can be understood differently. The serious Bible reader must get below the surface of a few selected passages to work out a coherent reading of both sets of passages and a coherent reading of the Bible as a whole.

There are five points of basic traditional Baptist belief that are singled out for special comment by Humphreys and Robertson in their examination of Calvinism.

**1. The sovereignty of God and predestination:** While traditional Baptists and Calvinists agree that God is sovereign, traditional Baptists believe that God decided to exercise his sovereignty in a universe in which the humans he created have the ability to make real choices, and God respects those choices. God also chose out of his sovereignty to provide for forgiveness and salvation for all who would accept his offer of grace.

**2. The knowledge of God:** "Traditional Baptists believe that God has all knowledge and all wisdom and all understanding" (p. 87). But traditional Baptists do not believe that this means God has planned everything that happens. Traditional Baptists are not determinists. How God knows everything may be one of those things shrouded in mystery that we cannot penetrate.

**3. Human freedom:** "Traditional Baptists believe that God sovereignly decided to create human beings with personal freedom and to respect the decisions they make" (p. 90). This is not a limit on the freedom or sovereignty of God since God chose to do this. There is no problem of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom unless "one assumes in advance that divine sovereignty means that God wills or foreordains or decrees everything that will happen in the world" (p. 91).

**4. Sin:** Traditional Baptists believe that all human beings are made in the image of God, and all have chosen to sin. While they are dead in their sin, they still have the God-given ability to hear the gospel and respond to it with repentance and faith, which are gifts of God to all when presented with the gospel, and not gifts which God gives only to the elect.

**5. The grace of God:** "Traditional Baptists believe that God freely offers grace and salvation to all people. The offer is genuine; everyone is able to accept or reject it" (p. 93). While the sovereign God could have made grace irresistible, God did not choose to do so.

The crux of the whole discussion of Calvinism for Humphreys and Robertson is this: "Did the sovereign God decide in advance to save particular individuals and to damn

others? If we answer that question Yes, we are Calvinists, whatever we may say of the other four points of Dort; if we answer it No, we are not Calvinists, whatever we may say of the other four points" (p. 95).

The most important truth in Christian theology is that God is love—God loves the whole world. Calvinism fails to say clearly and unequivocally that God loves the whole world. "Since love means that you act for the welfare of those you love, predestining persons to be damned is not love" (p. 97).

The two theologians draw a very important implication from this emphasis on divine love. "The principal motives that drive most evangelistic and missionary work among

traditional Baptists are that God loves all people and wants them all to be saved, and that we must share the gospel so that people can be saved" (p. 100). Calvinists do not have these motives since they do not believe that God loves all people and the elect will be saved anyhow because of the sovereignty of irresistible grace. Indeed, Calvinism has sometimes been used as the basis of an anti-missionary theology. Along with the authors, I greatly fear the influence of a predestinarian Calvinism that so easily becomes a rigid determinism, blithely believing that everything that happens is the will of God.■

---

## Wisdom

*Continued from Page 31*

*A wise person acts.* That is, a wise individual, even while understanding the ambiguities of life and realizing that many difficult decisions are not subject to absolute black and white resolution, refuses to be everlastingly stalled in neutral, always immobilized, and forever dallying on the plains of hesitation, like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock descending the stairs in anguished consternation as he tries to decide whether or not he dare eat a peach. Wisdom requires action, work, involvement, and an incarnational commitment to be about the Father's business, actively working to redeem the time.

Too hurried to be still and know that the Lord is God, too harried to possess our own souls, too busy to take even one day out of seven to rest, too preoccupied with pleasure to experience joy, too busy getting and spending on earth to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven—modern people keep stumbling past the gate of wisdom.

There is a better way.

It is the way of intentionally seeking, and by God's grace, actually apprehending wisdom.

More than almost all other virtues, wisdom is found by those who seek her. A good start in that search is to read carefully the book of Proverbs. Then read the book of James. Then find some wise old persons with whom to sit down and talk at length to discover what they have to teach you. Then read such literature from the classics as may appeal to you. Start anew in whatever way seems right to you, a renewed journey into the world of wisdom. In that world is peace that passes all understanding, riches more precious than silver or gold or stocks or bonds or houses or lands, and abundance of life beyond anything we might imagine to think or to ask.

"Wisdom," Jesus said, "is justified of her children" (Matthew 11:19). ■

---

## Institutional Ethics: An Oxymoron?

*Continued from Page 2*

convention, and the Foreign Mission Board. Yes, I know the plural of data is not anecdotes. Nevertheless, I am convinced that in our churches and our institutions we need a revival of integrity. Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson noted, "If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don't have integrity, nothing else matters."

Am I becoming cynical? I hope not. Institutions are here to stay—in fact, they are necessary for the human social good. Yet Niebuhr was correct—institutions basically will operate not from neighbor love, but from a concern for survival.

Nevertheless, Christian institutions should operate differently from secular ones. For individuals, churches, and denominations, integrity is precious possession. It is a virtue that no one can take from you—you must give it away.

Every institution is writing its own story. The ultimate test of any story is the sort of person it shapes. As proclaimers of "The Story," we are compelled to ask, "Does our story fit God's story?"---JET

---

## Senior Citizen Responds

When criticized for deficiencies in the modern world, one Senior pointed out that it was NOT the older generation who took:

- The melody out of music,
- The pride out of appearance,
- The romance out of love,
- The commitment out of marriage,
- The responsibility out of parenthood,
- The togetherness out of the family,
- The learning out of education,
- The civility out of behavior,
- The refinement out of language,
- The dedication out of employment,
- The prudence out of spending,
- The ambition out of achievement,

And we certainly are not the ones who remove patience and tolerance from relationships.

---

# Global Ethics

## What We Can Learn From Christians Overseas

*By Jack A. Hill, Assistant Professor of Religion  
Texas Christian University*

As we enter the next millennium, we are more conscious than ever before of living in a “global village.” We drive cars from Japan, wear clothes sewn in China, eat bananas from Columbia, vacation in the Caribbean, and give Christmas ornaments made in India. We may have an idea about our church’s global mission outreach. We may even be dimly aware of “globalization,” but it’s one of those things, like global warming, that we would rather not think about. What does it have to do with our way of life? Does it mean protecting our borders against encroachment and terrorism? Is it primarily a matter of advancing America’s interest in freedom, democracy and prosperity? Although our answers to such questions are important, I would like to focus on a few of the implications of the global for Christian ethics.

As a former missionary who has lived in three continents, I think that living in a global village means that we have to re-think the starting place of Christian ethics. Ethics is reflection on moral experience. Traditionally, in the U.S. and Europe, it has concerned thinking about the norms, values, ideas of the good, and stories of right conduct in our western tradition. Christian ethics has been rooted in Scripture, the life of Jesus Christ, and the witness of the church as seen through western eyes. But today, the axis of Christianity is shifting away from the First World to the so-called “Two-Thirds” world. For example, there are now more Christians in Africa than in all of North America and Europe combined. While the mainline church in the West is losing members, the church is growing by leaps and bounds in places as far apart as Zaire and Brazil.

Consequently, what were formerly “missionary outposts” have now become teeming centers of Christendom in their own right. In the past, we in the West “planted” churches and educational institutions abroad and presumed the knowledge to instruct our colleagues overseas. Now the planting is essentially over, and our international neighbors want to share their own experience of Christian faith and practice with us. Two decades ago, I recall asking Jamaican church leaders what message they would like me to take back to churches in the U.S. The response was immediate and unambiguous. “Tell them we want them to get to know who they are.”

I am convinced that deep down, we are afraid of getting to know our new global Christian neighbors. We Americans are one of the most mobile people in human history. Continually on the move, we are perhaps especially anxious about forming new associations. It is tough enough to break the ice and get acquainted with new neighbors in our hometown, let alone in a strange city or region of the country. We are no longer as sure of our own roots as our grandparents were, and it is therefore even scarier to interact with people who are different from us. And now we find ourselves in a global

arena. We are no longer—if we ever were—the center of the universe. In fact, we are now part of a shrinking “One-Third” world.

I think we are afraid to get to know Christians in the “Two-Thirds” world because we are afraid of what we might learn about ourselves from listening to them. At bottom, our fear of our global neighbors lies in a gnawing insecurity about the ground and integrity of our own moral experience. Most Americans still profess religious faith—the vast majority professes a monotheistic faith—but we are less sure of how to live out that faith in our day-to-day routines. As a result, it is harder to listen to folks who speak of alternative ethics without feeling nervous about the “truth” of our own ethics. We fear that dreaded phenomenon, “relativism.” We worry about what ethicists call “normative claims” because in these post-modern times it is no longer clear what is to be considered “normative.” We try our best to think in terms of rules and standards derived from Scripture, but Christian ethicists themselves disagree vehemently about the pros and cons of hot issues such as pre-marital sex, abortion, and capital punishment. No wonder many intelligent, well-intentioned Christians are just throwing up their hands. Increasingly, we either resign ourselves to the idea that most of ethics is a matter of subjective preference (it really is not something we can intelligently discuss) or adopt the cynical attitude that it does not really matter anyway (as long as we do not directly harm anyone or break a “serious” law). When it all boils down, is not all ethics really a ruse? Is it not really all about getting our way? Is not all ethics really politics?

I think this climate of moral resignation and cynicism is deeper and more widespread in the church than many of us are willing to acknowledge. No, I am not a doomsayer, and yes, there is a lot right with what is happening in our country. But somewhere along the way we have lost vital connections with our land, traditions, and values—with what Tocqueville called “habits of the heart.” When I was a kid you could still drink out of fresh water streams in the Rocky Mountains without fear of pollution, I remember when church picnics were a big deal, and folks used to spend long evenings talking to neighbors on their verandahs. I recall a time not too long ago when we were challenged to build a “Great Society” which would eliminate poverty and racism. Now we buy bottled water when we go hiking, no longer build verandahs on our houses, and worry about the viability of social security while the digital divide grows and the church continues to host the most segregated hour in America.

In the image of the new life in Christ, I want to suggest a fresh beginning. I think we need to reconsider our understandings of Christian ethics in the light of the moral experience of our global Christian neighbors. This is risky

business because once we admit pluralism, or the reality of other points of view, we may become even less sure of the truth of our own fragile beliefs. We also risk conflict and controversy. But perhaps the deeper risk is that in hearing about how others live, we may be challenged to change the way we live. And who wants to change? Yet is not transformation at the heart of the New Testament message? We are told repeatedly that we must repent and be born again. Jesus also reportedly told us to become again as a little child. This is what I am suggesting. Not that we adopt a naïve, uncritical attitude toward our global neighbors, but that we approach them in a spirit of repentance, openness, and vulnerability.

When we start getting to know Christians in the “Two-Thirds” world we start hearing about connections to land, traditions, and values that have something to teach us about ethics. One of the real joys of being a missionary is that you get to spend a lot of time sitting down with people, sharing stories. As major Christian ethicists have noted, stories represent storehouses of moral and religious insights about living in community and about right relationships. Many of us grew up learning biblical stories, especially from the Old Testament, and Jesus frequently taught by telling stories. But in our heavily visual culture, where television, VCR, and computer transmissions are the norm, we are more and more prone to bite-size, fragmentary, graphics-oriented presentations of experience. We also tend to “objectify” that experience in such a way that we begin to think that the only things that are “real” are the objects of these bite-size pieces of experience—Outback shoes, stock market quotes and weather reports. The problem for ethics arises when these objects are abstracted from the concrete contexts of our lives. That is, it is not clear how they relate to or fit within the stories that have been significant for generations of Americans. Further, we are impatient in our high speed, multi-tasking techno-existence. We rarely sit still or focus our attention long enough to assimilate, let alone appreciate, a good story, assuming we can still find a storyteller.

**D**uring my seven years in the South Pacific Islands, I heard some good stories—usually in connection with rituals of farewell, welcome, mourning, reconciliation, birthdays, or various ethnic group celebrations. Many of these tales were told in connection with the ancient ritual of *kava* drinking. *Kava* is a drink made from steeping a local root in water. Consumed steadily in moderate amounts over several hours, it has a mildly sedative effect. It’s relaxing and it’s conducive to storytelling.

It was around the kava bowl one night that I heard the story of Willi, a college student from Vanuatu. Willi was traveling with his family on a small inter-island ferry between islands. As night fell a major storm developed. As the seas churned the ferry capsized. Willi and his two daughters leaped overboard and managed to hold onto a piece of wood in the open sea. Willi’s youngest daughter, not quite two years old, became weaker and weaker. Finally, she couldn’t hold on any longer, and when she disappeared under a huge wave, Willi dove for her. Grasping the limp body for several hours, Willi too was losing strength. In desperation his ten-year old daughter, Vivian, pleaded with her father, “Let her

go, Daddy.” In the middle of that vast ocean, Willi improvised a funeral service for his little girl and let her go home to the depths of the sea.

Drifting for the rest of the night, growing weaker by the hour, they cried out to God in prayer. When dawn broke, Willi suddenly remembered an ancient song his father had taught him to “call the dolphins.” Willi sang this song, and after awhile a dolphin appeared with a coconut and plopped it down near him. Willi cracked a hole in the fruit with his teeth, breaking two teeth in the process. But now drinking the lifesaving coconut juice and eating the nourishing white meat within the husk could replenish him and Vivian. From then until a passing boat finally rescued them, some forty-eight hours after they were tossed into the sea, the dolphins continued to swim in a protective circle around them.

After their rescue, Willi learned from a young woman named Roslyn how the dolphins had also befriended her. After the boat sank, Roslyn found herself in the stormy sea with nothing to hold onto. When she called for help, two dolphins appeared with *bele* (a nourishing leafy vegetable) in their mouths, which they gave to Roslyn. Then the dolphins swam to either side of her, each gently nudging a fin beneath her arms. In this way they carried her for many hours, only swimming away when the rescuers’ hands pulled her aboard the rescue boat.

Although both episodes in the story sound so “miraculous” that they strain credibility, I have every reason to believe that they are true stories. Willi, then training to enter the Anglican priesthood, spoke with an authority and seriousness that could not be lightly dismissed. But there was also “truth” in another sense. When told in the context of the Christian community in the Pacific Islands, these stories evoked in the listeners a reaffirmation of a profound relationship to the natural world. Not only were Willi and the other islanders interconnected with the dolphins, but also the dolphins represented salvific agents. Reflecting theologically on his experience, Willi spoke of the dolphin that brought the coconut as “the Dolphin Christ.” Here is a radical sense of the immanence of God in the animal kingdom. When Willi calls out to the Dolphin, it responds with Christ-like compassion, presenting the lifesaving coconut.

**T**his interdependence of human and animal life, which is reflected in many other stories from the South Pacific, as well as from Native American and African traditions, has profound implications for the way we in the West relate to the natural world. Viewed in relation to Willi and his daughters, we in the West are alienated from a primal, basic relatedness to non-human life. In fact, we function as if completely autonomous from creation. We see dolphins as something to eat, admire, study, or preserve, but not as co-partners, let alone as salvific resources. We use animals rather than entreat them. We consume animal flesh rather than honor the life force within.

I am not trying to make a case for animal rights, nor argue for vegetarianism. Nor am I suggesting that North Americans should try to talk to fish. In any event, we would have to search long and hard to discover cultural resources that could help us, even if we were still capable of such communication. The point is, that given our modern scientific orientations and



fascination with technologies, we have distanced ourselves from other life forms in the world. This has resulted in a “not knowing” of those other forms, just as we do not “know” our global partners. We have made ourselves tragically alone in the world. Since we no longer know how to depend upon other life forms, we fear for our very survival. We try to ensure massive energy supplies. We drain the earth of its mineral resources. We genetically alter plant life to guarantee food surpluses. And in our fear for survival, we are systematically knocking out our life support system (what some Native Americans refer to as “Mother Earth”).

This is not the place to chronicle the ways we are killing the earth. That has been done elsewhere. Our concern is, “What is the import of listening to such stories for Christian ethics today?” In the first instance, before asking about what is right, good, or true (that is, before doing normative ethics), we need to re-situate ourselves in the world. The teacher and prophet, Parker Palmer, says that we are living in a “culture of disconnection.” Encouraging us to “think the world together,” Palmer quotes the Catholic mystic, Thomas Merton:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity,  
a dimmed  
Light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This  
Mysterious Unity and integrity is Wisdom, the  
Mother of all.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than thinking in terms of polarities—of animate *or* inanimate, of spiritual *or* material—we need to re-imagine the world as an interconnected whole. We think we are only dealing with fish or inanimate water—with biological units or elements on a periodic table—when our global neighbors are trying to tell us we are dealing with agential forces and spiritual beings—with the Dolphin Christ himself.

Christians in the “Two-Thirds” world are also calling us to re-discover our prophetic roots. While teaching in South Africa, I heard an extraordinary story about the renowned anti-apartheid activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu was preaching at an evening service in a township near Cape Town. There was great roar outside as a mob of youth moved by, intent on bringing a suspected informant to justice. Tutu stopped preaching and went outside to see what was happening. When he reached the crowd, things were in a fever pitch. The suspect had been badly beaten and doused with gasoline. A youth was throwing a tire around his neck. Tutu cried out, “In the name of God, let him go!” There were murmurings in the crowd. One man said, “The one who

speaks for a traitor is himself a traitor.” But Tutu, in danger for his own life, held firm. Finally, the crowd parted. Arm in arm, Tutu and the suspect walked away unharmed.

I recall the story of Sister Lewis in Jamaica. She was a hard-working mother of three, loyal church member and Sunday school teacher. Sister Lewis made her living by sewing clothes at home on a foot-powered sewing machine. She worked long hours, taking sheets of fabric and transforming them into beautiful dresses for little girls. Embroidering fine needlework on sleeves and collars, she labored six hours per dress. One day I asked her how much she received for each dress. She responded that she got a dollar a dress. When I looked incredulous, she said that that wasn’t bad because she only paid forty cents for the material. One day I happened to see one of her dresses in a shop in Kingston. It had a label stapled on it, “Made in the U.S.A.” Beneath the label I recognized Sister Lewis’ familiar stitching pattern. The price? Thirty dollars.

After that experience I could never look at a purchase in an overseas tourist shop in quite the same light. Usually, we have no idea of how we unwittingly participate in systems of economic injustice simply by purchasing pieces of clothing. Yet this experience is magnified millions of times each year when we North Americans profit from the sweat and labor of our global neighbors in the “Two-Thirds” world. Of course, the problem is a complex one. Not every situation is as manifestly unjust as that of Sister Lewis. But my point is that if we really begin to get to know our global neighbors, these are precisely the kinds of stories we are going to hear.

As we enter the new millennium, the phenomenon of globalization poses two major ethical questions. How can we protect and sustain our eco-system? And, how can we more equitably share the wealth generated in our global community? We need to begin by getting to know our global neighbors. After all, we Americans have always prided ourselves on being good neighbors. We need to listen to the stories they tell us. And we need to allow ourselves to be transformed by what we hear. I believe that if we listen carefully, the stories of our global friends will provide important points of departure, if not essential clues, for a constructive Christian ethics that can creatively respond to the challenges of our time. ■

**ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., “Hagia Sophis,” in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 506.



---

## A Seamless Garment of Love: A Review and Reflection on *Is the Fetus a Person?*

By Wilton H. Bunch, Professor of Christian Ethics  
Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama

The divide between advocates of fetal rights and women's rights advocates is deep and wide. These differences rest on explicitly defined, but not always well articulated philosophical assumptions.

Fetal rights advocates assert that there is no fundamental difference between a day-old single-cell embryo and a twenty-five year old man. Each has the requisite forty-six chromosomes that determine a person's unique genetic identity. As one has said, "Contained within the single cell who I once was, is the totality of everything I am today."

In contrast, women's rights advocates believe that the interests of the fetus cannot be separated from those of the woman. Just as the fetus and woman are biologically united during pregnancy, so should their interests be viewed as unitary, and the woman should be empowered to make decisions for both. To women's rights advocates, the distinction between a day-old, one-cell fertilized ovum and a twenty-five year old man is patently obvious; to deny this difference is the worst form of biological reductionism.

Intertwined with these assumptions of what it means to be a person are two narratives concerning the intentions and motivations of those who advocate fetal rights. The pro-life narrative is that fetal life is sacred and must be nurtured and protected. The strength of this fetal rights position is its moral imperative that society must take care of its weakest and most vulnerable persons. The pro-choice narrative is that this talk of concern for the fetus is nothing but a smoke screen for the continued subjugation and oppression of women.

Jean Reith Schroedel, in *Is the Fetus a Person? A Comparison of Policies across the Fifty States* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000) looks for data that might suggest which of these two narratives is more creditable. The first aim of this study is to compile and understand the legal policies of the various states regarding fetal protection. The second is to examine the relationship between state fetal policies and the role of the states in protecting society's most vulnerable citizens. By examining what citizens *do* through the police, courts and legislatures one is able to infer what citizens *believe* to be important. This study is conducted to determine if there is a consistency between what the citizens of a state say about fetal status and how they act toward it.

The pro-life advocates have as their guiding principle that every innocent human being has a right to life. It should follow that states where this view is widely believed would have laws and legal practices that make fetal well being a top priority. Policies that protect and nurture human life would protect the fetus from harm and provide good prenatal medical care.

Pro-choice proponents believe that most "fetal protection" policies are hypocritical because the real purpose is subjugation of women, not a defense of the fetus. If this view

is correct, states with a large pro-life population may support criminal actions against pregnant drug users because the policies target women for punitive actions, but there is no reason to treat battering of pregnant women as two crimes or to expect them to support benign policies such as adoption and prenatal care.

Schroedel and her graduate assistants have combed the laws, court cases and arrest records, state by state, to develop an impressive data base of actions concerning the fetus. The book contains extensive compilations of information on laws restricting abortion, laws and police actions against pregnant women who abuse drugs or alcohol, and laws against third parties (men) who batter pregnant women. She has uncovered information about state support for prenatal care, adoption, and early education. Finally, she correlates this with the 1988-1990 National Election Series Senate Panel Study that provides information about what people say concerning abortion and protection of fetal life.

Schroedel found a great deal of variation in the actions taken by the various states, but there are general trends that can be summarized. Pro-life states are more likely than pro-choice states to adopt restrictive abortion laws for both adults and minors. Local district attorneys in pro-life states are far more likely than those in pro-choice states to prosecute pregnant women who use drugs or alcohol, often using existing criminal statutes, such as child abuse laws. There is no relation between the strength of the pro-life opinion and laws concerning battering women that results in the death of the fetus.

Having gathered and analyzed the data, Schroedel returns to relate it to the two narratives. If the fetal rights narrative is correct, we should expect pro-life states to have bans on abortion, laws against maternal drug use and third-party killings. Also, because of the moral imperative, saving lives should outweigh secondary considerations such as the cost of such policies. Conversely, if the women's rights story is accurate, states should differ in the protection they accord fetuses, with policymakers caring deeply about fetal life threatened by the actions of the woman and caring less when that life is threatened by men who commit acts of violence against pregnant women and their fetuses.

She concludes that, overall, the evidence supports the women's rights proposition because pro-life states do not consistently treat the fetus as a person in these other areas of the law. This opinion is buttressed by finding that the percentage of low birth weight babies is higher in pro-life states. There is an inverse correlation between adoption subsidies and pro-life sentiment of states. Foster care payment rates are lowest in pro-life states. The willingness of the state to aid needy children who remained with their mothers was negatively correlated with pro-life content of the

laws. In other words, pro-life states are determined to prevent women from having abortions but seem unwilling to provide a decent level of support for those children after birth.

The final measure of state willingness to aid children—the level of education spending per child enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade—also was negatively correlated with the pro-life content of state abortion statues. In fact, it appears that the pro-choice states are more committed to providing for the society’s weakest and most vulnerable than are the pro-life states.

Schroedel has thrown down the gauntlet to people who claim to be concerned about the life of children. Her data clearly shows a complete disconnect between opposition to abortion and a more global concern for protection and care for the fetus and child. This cries out for a response of action.

I believe that such a response can be based on three assumptions. First, that people who oppose abortion do so from a genuine concern for the fetus. Second, the great disparity between the vocal concern for the fetus and the lack of supportive actions has been unrecognized and unintended. Third, any response should have a scriptural basis. We now turn to a tentative outline of how Scripture might lead people to think and respond.

I would suggest that, in the past, the scriptural basis for opposition to abortion has been based on an appeal for justice, a constant theme in both Testaments. Justice is rooted in laws that produce obligations, but also provide rights. Thus, it was appropriate to frame opposition to abortion as respect for a “right” to life and as an obligation of society to provide that right. It was appropriate to include unborn children within the commandment against killing the innocent. These were legitimate, but had the consequence of focusing all of the attention on abortion and missing the larger issues of protection and support of fetal and early life.

Another approach to using Scripture to guide our ethics is to remember and respond to the love of God as manifest in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus. This is summarized in the new commandment given at the final meal with his disciples: “As I have loved you, so you should love one another.” This command was not only for the original disciples, but also for all subsequent Christians, who also share in the obligation to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

The Gospels are filled with examples of how Jesus modeled for his disciples, and for us, what it meant to love. Specifically, he welcomed children to him and rebuked those who tried to keep them away. He was attentive to women in need (Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well). These provide guidance as to how we might express love for women and children.

The term “seamless garment of life” was developed by Cardinal Bernardin as an attempt to link together all human life as valuable. We can have a more modest goal as we think about a “seamless garment of love” for children, born and unborn, and the women who nurture them.

A seamless garment of love for children could include laws to restrict abortion including waiting times and, in the case of minors, parental permission. It would include medical treatment, not incarceration, for women addicted to drugs or alcohol. Love would take this stance recognizing that drugs are widely available in prisons and that babies born to prisoners are frequently of low birth weight and do not thrive. This seamless garment of love for unborn children would demand severe laws against men who batter their pregnant wives.

A seamless garment of love for unborn children would recognize their need for medical care similar to all children and demand that pre-natal care be available to all pregnant women. It would anticipate and pay for preventative care such as immunizations for the young child. It would assist in adoptions when the mother could not adequately care for the child and provide support if the mother kept the child despite difficult circumstances. A seamless garment of love for children would support education.

Doubtless there are other ways to respond scripturally to the challenge presented by the data of this book. Others may find more creative ideas to link opposition to abortion with a program of broad support for life. But there must be an active response. The world for those who oppose abortion is not the same as it was before Schroeder’s research. No longer can opponents of abortion focus on the fetus and forget the child. Schroedel has shown that, at the present time, “anti-abortion” and “pro-life” are not synonyms. They must become identical in meaning if opposition to abortion is to remain a respected moral enterprise. ■



---

# God's Name In Vain

*Stephan L. Carter, Basic Books, 2000*

Book Review by Darold H. Morgan

The well-known law professor from Yale University, Stephen L. Carter, has authored another timely book which will challenge students of the volatile church and state issues in contemporary American life. He announces bluntly in his introductory paragraphs the theses of his volume, and he rarely is far from these as the book unfolds. "First, that there is nothing wrong and much right with robust participation of the nation's many religious voices in debates over matters of public moment. Second, that religions—although not democracy—will almost always lose their best, most spiritual selves when they choose to be involved in the partisan, electoral side of American politics" (p. 1).

These are commendable objectives, but the author's treatment somehow leaves a sense of dissatisfaction. This reviewer's conclusion does not come from the obvious fact that this is a well written, thoroughly researched book. Carter's solid reputation is enhanced even by these pages. But the peculiar ambivalence, the lack of specificity about proposed solutions, the perception of bias in favor of the so-called diminishing Christian right in America, are among the reasons for this discontent.

In spite of these negative reactions the student interested in this exceptionally important subject of religion in American politics will profit from reading Carter's new book. Reasons for this are apparent. His chapters on Fannie Lou Hamer and the Abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century are among the best in the book. Both chapters point to Carter's timely and appropriate writing about Black Americans, "the most religious people in the Western world" (p. 35). His approach to their voting as overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic and to white evangelicals, who tend to vote Republican, makes for some of the most provocative reading in the entire volume. References to religious leaders and their involvement, both African-Americans and white evangelicals, in relation to such issues as school vouchers, classroom prayer, abortion rights, racial justice produce to some degree one of Carter's most helpful conclusions: "If history has taught us anything, it is that religions that fall too deeply in love with the art of politics lose their souls—very fast" (p.18).

Here is where the ambivalence begins to show up. Ample evidence is quoted throughout relative to the Christian Coalition, the Moral Majority, and the fascinating manipulations of Ronald Reagan. There are abundant references to failed prerogatives by religious leaders in the midst of a complicated multiculturalism and an obvious

presence of liberal leaders. The inference abounds in the strong contention that religious leaders must keep on trying despite all failures and rejections by a majority of the American public. Not to do so is to invite some depressing results.

Much has happened in the political arena since Carter published his book. Bush's Republican administration has strongly affirmed the voucher issue. It has also with much fanfare launched its "faith-based" approach with federal assistance as part of its public welfare program. So far the issue of separation of church and state has come more to the forefront of public debate than ever before. Using references to Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson and others, Carter could have gone on to reaffirm the time-honored walls erected early in American history between church and state. But this affirmation never quite gets into the focus now urgently needed when diversity, the innumerable moral issues, and multiculturalism seem to mandate other directions.

Assuredly, religion in America should participate in "debates over public moments." From the days of Roger Williams to Carter's one-sided presentation of Paul Weyrich, religious leaders have been anything but reluctant to get into the heart of the moral action, regardless of the matter at hand. Perhaps the most urgently needed message for folk who feel they must be a part of the on-going debates involving church-state challenges is Carter's vivid and repeated reminder of the inevitable compromise of the church if one ignores both the historical elements and the tragic loss of prophetic insight.

Granted the religious diversity and moral complexity of the United States are major givens today. Religious leaders of all faiths must speak prophetically and perceptively to this never ending list of issues. Can this be done in the context of the wisdom of our constitutional forefathers who erected wisely walls of separation between state and church. Carter's book would be considerably stronger if he had ended on that theme.

As far as one can see into America's future, one will conclude that this religious political debate will intensify. These emotionally charged issues will provoke many attacks on once solid walls of an historic and essential separation. Any book or article that addresses our history and

heritage with balance and insight will be welcomed. An informed public is still the best defense to keep these hallowed walls high and intact. ■

...religions that  
fall too deeply  
in love with the  
art of politics  
lose their  
souls—very  
fast."

---

# Two Essays on Pride and Prejudice

*By Lawrence Webb*

Minister and retired College Professor, Anderson, South Carolina

## The 'Truly Blessed' Cadillac

Let me make three confessions up front:

- I have never driven a Cadillac.
- I have ridden in Cadillacs very few times.
- I probably am prejudiced toward Cadillacs and their owners.

Now, on with the harangue.

My wife and I had spent the night in a motel. We ate breakfast, loaded our car, and climbed in to head for home. As I cranked up the car, I glanced across the way at a bumper plate on the front of a Cadillac which was parked facing us. The tag said, "Truly Blessed."

I thought, "Yeah, I guess a person who drives a Caddy can brag about feeling truly blessed." We pulled out of our parking space, and I noticed the license tag on the Buick next to us had a "handicapped" symbol. My judgmental attitude really kicked in as I contrasted the messages on those two cars: the Buick with the "handicapped" tag and the "Truly Blessed" Cadillac. I could see a good illustration shaping up for speaking or writing.

To confirm my prejudice against the Cadillac driver, I drove out of my way around the parking area so I could get behind the Cadillac and look at its license tag. I expected to see a vanity tag there as a companion to the "Truly Blessed" tag on the front bumper. The wind left my sails as I saw the Cadillac's official license plate also had the "handicapped" symbol. I had my illustration, all right. But not the one I thought.

I don't go much for bumper messages on cars, but the front and the back tags on the Cadillac were a perfect example of a person's being able to give thanks in a situation where we might not expect it. Coupled with the "handicapped" symbol, the "Truly Blessed" tag spoke a message of thanksgiving which made me ashamed that I had jumped to a conclusion.

Let me help you understand my prejudice: When I was growing up, our family did not own a car of any kind. The ritual of getting a driver's license at age fifteen or sixteen was simply not part of my expectation. Most of my peers in high school were driving, but I just considered it a given that their families had things my family did not have, including cars and drivers' licenses for teenagers.

Lee Roy, my brother who is four years older than I am, bought a car when he went to work full-time. One Sunday afternoon, he offered to teach me to drive his straight-shift vehicle. He drove out on a road which was not heavily traveled, and we traded places.

I made several attempts to coordinate the clutch and the brake and the gear shift. Each time, the car responded to my effort by chugging, jumping, heaving, and dying. About the same time, after several abortive attempts, Lee Roy and I reached the mutual conclusion that this was not going to

work. We were both relieved as we returned to our legitimate positions: he as driver and I as passenger.

I did not learn to drive until I was twenty-five and in my first full-time church. I had gotten behind the wheel only once in the intervening years since Lee Roy's lesson. On that occasion, I wrecked a used car which I had just bought. So driving was put on hold.

After I got my license, driving became a routine part of my life. But my history has given me an atypical outlook toward automobiles.

So why am I so prejudiced against Cadillacs? It's not just about Caddies. I probably would have had the same initial reaction to the "Truly Blessed" sign if it had been on a Lincoln Town Car or a Beamer or a Mercedes, to name a few. I guess my reaction stems from my conditioning in those "car-less" years of growing up. A big, expensive auto seems ostentatious. When I saw only half the message from that handicapped driver, I felt he (or she) was bragging about being able to drive the fancy car.

If I had read "Truly Blessed" on a Chevy bumper or an economical Ford, my reaction would have been different. Even on an old beat-up Cadillac, I would not have considered the sign as braggadocios. But on a shiny new model, that's different.

I like a dependable car to get me where I need to go. The car I'm currently driving was new when I bought it two years ago. We paid a deplorable price for it, but I justify it by saying we will probably drive it for ten years. At my age, it may well be the last car I drive. It is a Honda Accord, the nicest car I've ever owned.

We bought the car before I retired from college teaching. My students noticed it parked in the space formerly occupied by my ten-year-old bottom-range Buick. They commented about the Honda with perhaps a mixture of admiration and envy. I was embarrassed. I guess you could say I felt "Truly Blessed" to be driving the Accord, but I certainly wouldn't put a sign like that on the front bumper plate. On the other hand, I keep the dealership tag on the front. People may look at that tag and think I am boasting.

I have dear friends whose financial resources enable them to drive new Cadillacs. I do not consider them ostentatious. The difference is that I know them. In a similar vein, our prejudices toward people of different races, religions, and geographic backgrounds are usually based on lack of knowledge. If we know someone close-up, our stereotypes toward his larger group do not apply to him, because we know him.

Someone has defined prejudice as "being down on something you're not up on." That was my problem with the "Truly Blessed" Cadillac. ■

## Prejudice in Two Colors

Until I moved to South Carolina in 1959 at age twenty-five, after growing up in Texas, I didn't realize the Civil War was still being fought nearly a century after Appomattox. This is not to suggest we were free of race prejudice in Texas. In fact, prejudice in Texas came in two primary colors: black and brown. I grew up hearing the "N" word for blacks on the lips of my parents, relatives, and neighbors. I also heard Mexicans referred to as "Meskins," basically a lazy pronunciation similar to "Nigra." We had prejudice in two colors. But not all prejudice is equal. Prejudice against Mexicans was not all-encompassing as it was against blacks. For example, Mexicans went to "our" schools in the 1940s. Blacks did not.

Two incidents are etched in my memory, exemplifying racial attitudes which were common among "our" kind in West Texas.

James, the middle-aged deliveryman and janitor at Levy's Department Store, was an African-American, or Negro, as his race generally preferred to be called in the 1940s. Levy's was on the south side of the courthouse square in Sweetwater. I saw James just about every Saturday for several years as I came in to town from the farm. With five children to clothe, Daddy bought from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward much more often than from Levy's. But Levy's was just a couple of doors down from the Texas Theater where, as a teenager, I often went to the two o'clock show.

In my round of window shopping at stores on the square, I would hang around the theater for a while in the morning, studying the posters and promotional pictures for that day's movie as well as for "coming attractions." So I often saw James in the alleyway between the department store and the movie house as he disposed of packing boxes or put packages into the store's black station wagon for delivery.

This gentlemanly, gentle black man watched me grow up, and we often exchanged pleasantries in our comings and goings. Before I finished high school, our family moved to town as Daddy left farm work and found steady work with a building contractor, so I often saw James almost every day. When I went to college, I often came home on weekends. Then, when I went to Kentucky to seminary, my returns to West Texas were much less frequent. Still, when I came back home, I maintained an on-the-run friendly acquaintance with James.

I confess, I do not remember his last name. Given the racial structure of the 1940s and 1950s, it was acceptable for white children and youth to call this black man, who was old enough to be my father, only by his first name.

On a visit home from seminary, I had a chilling conversation with James. We talked about my ministerial studies and our mutual concerns for equality of opportunity. He recalled how he had watched me grow up, and he mentioned other little white boys he had related to in much the same way as he had related to me over the years. Then he told of an encounter with one of those little white boys with

whom he had sought to be friendly and courteous.

"One day, the little white boy walked over to me, reached out and touched my hand, jerked his hand back, looked at his own hand, and sounded surprised as he said, 'Momma said it would rub off on me.' I said, 'Young man, I'm sure you misunderstood your mother.'" But James told me, "I said that because I didn't want to tell the boy his mother deliberately misled him so he would keep away from black folks."

Through no deliberate choice on my part, I had stayed a distance away from people of color most of the time. Growing up in rural areas of West Texas, we rarely saw blacks except when we went to town. There were few, if any, blacks in the farming communities where I spent the first fifteen years of my life. Though the "N" word was commonly used in our family, my actual knowledge of blacks was abstract.

I had more contact with Hispanics, but this, too, was limited. My closest and most endearing association with a Mexican in my formative years was with another middle-aged man, perhaps near the same age as the department store janitor. Victor Ortiz came to the Wastella community on weekends during the cotton harvest to conduct church services in Spanish for Mexican migrant workers. He was recruited for this ministry by the white pastor of Wastella Baptist Church, Brother Marvin Burgess (the common courtesy title for Baptist preachers in West Texas).

Brother Burgess sought to develop acceptance and respect for the Mexican minister, who attended Sunday school and the morning worship service with us and then conducted Spanish services on Sunday afternoon at the church.

In time, most of the members of the small country church spoke of "Brother Ortiz" about as readily as they referred to "Brother Burgess." Most members, but not all.

When I was about 12 years old, I was in the home of a friend the same age. As we talked, Bill referred to "Brother Ortiz." Bill's mother overheard him and interrupted our conversation, insisting, "Ortiz is not my brother."

I was shocked by those negative comments regarding the black janitor and the Mexican preacher, even though I was not free from racial prejudice myself. Most of my impressions about other races were stereotypes, based on generalizations I heard from white adults. I felt differently toward James the Janitor and Brother Ortiz because I had personal contact with them, unfiltered by interpretation from other people.

Will Rogers, the cowboy philosopher, is often inexactly quoted as saying, "I never met a man I didn't like." If we harbor generalized prejudices toward people of other races and ethnic groups, we will be more likely to like individual members of those groups as we get to know them. As I came to know those two men during my impressionable years, my acceptance of them taught me to accept others of their race also. ■

## Wisdom

*By Foy Valentine, Founding Editor*

The genre which I have generally used in writing for this journal has been one of intentional low voltage. (Admittedly, this has not been a strain for me for low voltage is one of my very best things, my *modus operandi*, as it were.) Other contributors have provided the meat of strong doctrine, while still others have addressed the weightier issues of Christian social ethics. I have tried to focus on such things as Paul, I imagine, must have envisioned when he wrote the wonderful insights of Philippians 4:8, "Whatsoever things are . . . lovely . . . think on these things."

In recent times, however, I have been so driven to wade more daringly into the deep waters of the concept of wisdom and so compelled to try to find ways to communicate the importance, if not the primacy, of wisdom that I simply cannot now be disobedient to what I have perceived to be this "heavenly vision." Woe to me if I preach not this gospel.

A few months ago my motor was turned over regarding this business at hand when an acquaintance from another state wrote to ask me to respond to some penetrating questions and stimulating ideas about wisdom. It seems that he was writing a doctoral dissertation about wisdom and wanted a little input from an elder (I've turned 78 now) on the subject.

I gave it careful thought, and have continued to do so across several months. So, buckle up and hunker down. I'm fixing to make a run at wisdom.

Wisdom is a subject that deserves more attention than it has recently been given and obviously more than I can possibly give it here; but perhaps a quick look may prove to be better than no look at all.

Wisdom is that quality of personhood associated with good sense, gumption, judgment, discernment, knowledge, prudence, enlightenment, and insight. Wisdom distinguishes between good and bad and then between better and best. Wisdom tells the difference between right and wrong. Wisdom discerns the distinction between light and darkness, prudence and foolishness, aspirations and appetites, discipline and desire, timeless values and transient whims. Wisdom perceives the true and moves toward the true. Wisdom has to do with the exercise of sound judgment in choosing right means to attain right ends. Wisdom understands that you don't burn down a cathedral to fry an egg even if you have a ravenous appetite.

That wisdom is today in astoundingly short supply is not debatable. Its scarcity is evident in public life, in organized religion, in international doings, in economic affairs, in politics, and in family relationships.

The Bible teaches that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). The Bible's "wisdom literature"—Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—constitutes a major category in the Scriptures. And the New Testament's little book of James, the favorite

book in the Bible for many, might well be called "The Wisdom of James" for as Martin Luther grudgingly admitted after having omitted it entirely from his first edition of his German translation of the Bible and then included it in the second edition, for he said, "It has many a good saying in it." The dour monk was wise to come around.

Who is wise?

By asking this question, some specificity may be realized which would otherwise elude us. I hope we can agree that a person is wise who has at least the following characteristics.

*A wise person fears God and keeps his commandments.* That is, a wise individual respects God, honors God, obeys God, and loves God. When asked by the lawyer which was the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus answered wisely with the great Hebrew Shema, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment, and the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:29-31).

*A wise person sees.* That is, a wise individual is a consistent seer, a perceiver, a discerner, continually seeking knowledge, understanding, perception, and insight that will bring deliverance from pitfalls, the safety that comes from walking daily in the light, and a growing commitment to wholeness and holiness which leads more and more toward the perfection which our Lord has challenged his people to strive for. Did not Robert Browning glimpse this when he wrote, "Trust God, see all, nor be afraid"

*A wise person takes the long look.* That is, a wise individual is not shortsighted, is not foolhardy, counts the cost before embarking on a new enterprise, and looks before leaping.

*A wise person listens.* That is, a wise individual asks, hears, welcomes counsel, learns from others, and stays teachable so as to profit from the lessons of history, the advice of those with experience, and the accumulated lessons learned by those who have gone before.

*A wise person combines patience with enthusiasm.* That is, the wise individual's life and work are characterized on the one hand by calmness and composure in the realization that sometimes it is required of us that we wait on the Lord and on the other hand that fervor, ardor, zeal, and passion are qualities without which not much good ever gets done.

*A wise person does right consistently.* That is, a wise individual understands that honesty is the best policy, that purity is better than filth, that love is better than hate, that giving is better than getting, that building is better than burning, that peace is better than war, and that it is better to suffer for righteousness' sake than to compromise with evil.

*Continued Page 22*

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

A Journal of Christian Ethics

“We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers.”

Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

## MISSION

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

## PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
- Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues
- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
- Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

*Christian Ethics Today* was born in the mind and heart of Foy Valentine, as an integral part of his dream for a Center for Christian Ethics. In his words, the purpose of the Journal was “to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness.”

When the Center was transferred to Baylor University in June 2000, with the calling of a permanent Director, the disbanding Board voted to continue the publication of *Christian Ethics Today*, appointing a new editor and a new Board. The Journal will continue to be published six times per year.

From the beginning *Christian Ethics Today* has been sent without charge to anyone requesting it, six times per year, “as money and energy permit.” A new editor brings added energy to the mission. But more than ever before, your financial support is “greatly needed, urgently solicited, and genuinely appreciated.” The Christian Ethics Today Foundation is a non-profit organization and has received a 501 (c) (3) status from the Internal Revenue Service.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dr. Patrick R. Anderson, Chair

Dr. Tony Campolo	Dr. Fisher Humphreys
Dr. Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler	Dr. Darold Morgan
Dr. Carolyn Dipboye	Dr. David Sapp

**Contributions** should be made out to the Christian Ethics Today Foundation and mailed to the address that follows. Your comments and inquiries are always welcome. Articles in the Journal (except those copyrighted) may be reproduced if you indicate the source and date of publication. Manuscripts that fulfill the purposes of *Christian Ethics Today* may be submitted to the editor for publication consideration and addressed to:

Joe E. Trull, Editor	Phone: (512) 847-8721
101 Mount View	Fax (512) 847-8171
Wimberley, TX 78676-5850	email: jtrull@wimberley-tx.com

**VISIT US ON OUR WEB SITE: [www.ChristianEthicsToday.com](http://www.ChristianEthicsToday.com)**

CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY  
Post Office Box 26  
Wimberley, Texas 78676

**ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED**

NON PROFIT  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
DALLAS, TX  
PERMIT NO. 3648