

# Christian Ethics Today

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

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# Biblical Foundations of God and Money: A Post-Election Memo

By Ronald J. Sider

*I have been thinking and writing about faith and money, economic justice and poverty ever since my years at Yale Divinity School. Here I want briefly to describe our current situation, sketch some biblical foundations, and then outline a few of the key things American Christians should do during the presidency of Donald Trump.*

Globally, we have made stunning progress in reducing poverty – far more progress than I dared to predict 40 years ago in the first edition of my Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. The Human Development Index (an important measure of poverty) has improved 41 percent between 1970 and 2010. One of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals set in 2000 – to cut in half by 2015 the percentage of people globally living in poverty – was actually achieved five years ahead of schedule. The percentage of people living below the international poverty level (\$1.25 per day per person) has plunged by more than 50 percent since 1990. Central to this progress has been global trade and the widespread embrace of market economies, especially in Asia.

But it is still the case that today about 1.2 billion people struggle to survive on \$1.25 per day. And another 1.2 billion try to manage on only \$2 per day. We have made astounding progress, but about onethird of our global neighbors still struggle to live on two dollars or less per day.

The picture in the US is less hopeful. For decades, the richest nation in the world has had the highest poverty level of all Western industrialized nations – currently between 14 percent and 15 percent of the population. In the last several decades, the middle class has declined, and income and wealth have

become more and more concentrated at the top. From 1979 to 2007, 63.6 percent of all income growth went to the top 10 percent. In the last few years, over 90 percent of all growth in income has gone to the top 1 percent. Escalating inequality in income and wealth, a declining middle class, and a persistent high poverty level are central aspects of the US picture today.

## An Evangelical Response

*Escalating inequality in income and wealth, a declining middle class, and a persistent high poverty level are central aspects of the US picture today.*

I'm an evangelical Christian – no, not that kind, not the kind widely held in the public mind! I identify with the sort that fights racism, economic injustice and homophobia, and works to protect the environment without neglecting evangelism and historic Christian doctrines. As that kind of evangelical, my basic move, when confronting any social problem, is to look to the biblical canon for a normative framework. Four points are especially important for our topic.

First, the God portrayed in the Bible is on the side of the poor. Literally hundreds of biblical verses say that God and God's faithful people are actively engaged in seeking justice for those who are oppressed and poor. God measures societies by what they do to the people on the bottom. The Bible dares to suggest that those who

claim to be God's people but fail to show God's concern for justice for the needy are not really God's people at all.

Second, I find the following principle of economic justice in the Bible: God wants every person and family to have access to the productive resources of society so that if they act responsibly they can earn a decent living and be respected members of their community. One place in Scripture that shows this principle at work is in the discussion of the land in ancient Israel before the kings centralized political and economic power. The ideal portrayed is not a circumstance where the government or a few wealthy people own all the land. Rather, we see depicted a decentralized economic arrangement where every family owns its own land – which, in an agricultural society, is the basic productive resource. That paradigm, when applied in very different economic times and places, means that everyone should have access to the relevant productive resources of a nation, especially education in a knowledge-based society.

Third, I think the Scriptures provide some clues about the role of government in empowering poor people. I do not mean to suggest that the Bible offers any kind of complete political philosophy, but the Bible does say things that flatly contradict any libertarian view that suggests that caring for and empowering the poor is a task for individuals, religious organizations, and other NGOs but not government. Numerous biblical texts call on the king to seek justice for the poor. Nehemiah 5 is an amazing text where the top government official calls a special assembly of the people to denounce the rich for (legal) activity that resulted in large numbers of poor

people losing their land in difficult economic times. The ruler demands that the rich return the land immediately.

## The Personal, the Structural

One final theme regarding the causes of poverty and how we reduce it focuses both on biblical principles and an analysis of society. The Bible tells us that both bad personal choices and unfair structures, judicial and economic, lead to poverty. Biblical teaching and contemporary experience show us that combating poverty requires both inner personal transformation and structural changes. Typically, political liberals want to emphasize only the structural, and political conservatives stress only the personal. Both are half right in what they affirm and half wrong in what they ignore.

The 800 evangelical organizations that are members of the Christian Community Development Association founded by John Perkins embrace this holistic approach. And the official public policy document ("For the Health of the Nation") of the National Association of Evangelicals provides a concise statement about it:

From the Bible, experience, and social analysis, we learn that social problems arise and can be substantially corrected by both personal decisions and structural changes. On the one hand, personal sinful choices contribute significantly to destructive social problems (Prov. 6:9-11), and personal conversion through faith in Christ can transform broken persons into wholesome, productive citizens.

On the other hand, unjust systems also help create social problems (Amos 5:10-15; Isa. 10:1-2) and wise structural change (for example, legislation to strengthen marriage or increase economic opportunity for all) can improve society. Thus Christian civic engagement must seek to transform both individuals and institutions. While individuals transformed by the gospel change surrounding society, social institutions also shape individu-

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als. While good laws encourage good behavior, bad laws and systems foster destructive action. Lasting social change requires both personal conversion and institutional renewal and reform.

Unfortunately, many American Christians have paid little attention to the hundreds of biblical verses about God's special concern for the poor. Equally problematic, those who have developed some genuine concern in this area often fail to understand the structural causes of poverty. We need more courageous preachers who talk as much about the poor as the Bible

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Our situation has been complicated by a presidential campaign that saw most major figures denounce global trade agreements instead of proposing to fix genuine problems – problems such as the neglect of workers' rights and environmental concerns in global trade agreements, and the failure in the US to offer meaningful assistance to US workers who lost their jobs because

of global trade. Donald Trump and his party seem to promote important changes that will significantly harm the people whose votes elected him.

## Hopes and Fears

In my (occasional) optimistic moments, I think some progress is possible under President Trump. Some leading conservative intellectuals, such as Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, have chastised their conservative political colleagues for their failure to embrace an agenda that would empower poor people. Candidate Trump promised economic improvement for (largely white) less-educated, lower-income working Americans who supported him so enthusiastically. Just maybe his threats about destructive trade wars were mere campaign rhetoric.

But I fear a much more negative outcome. If this president turns America inward and away from global responsibilities, he will slash humane and successful economic foreign aid that under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama has saved the lives of millions of poor people in other countries. If he turns away from global trade, hundreds of millions of poor people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America will suffer. If he abandons global and national measures to avoid dangerous global warming, the entire planet will suffer, and hundreds of millions of our poorest neighbors will suffer the most.

Nationally, if he cuts Medicaid, Food Stamps and Pell Grants, privatizes Medicare, and reverses the expansion of health insurance that was enacted under President Obama, then tens of millions of poorer Americans will suffer. And if he implements his proposed tax cuts (which overwhelmingly benefit the richest 10 percent), then the gross, unjust trend of economic inequality will only increase.

If President Trump and the Republican Congress take this second route, then Christians committed to biblical teaching about the poor must resist in every possible peaceful way.

We may need to allow Dr. Martin Luther King to teach us again the power of nonviolent protest, including civil disobedience. As part of the professionally educated segment of the US public, we will certainly need to learn again how to respect, communicate with, and join arms with the rest of our country.

No matter what the cost and how difficult the challenge, biblical Christians must live today the central biblical teaching that God demands justice for all, but especially the poor. ■

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*30 books, including Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity (sixth edition, Thomas Nelson, 2015), Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement (second edition, Baker, 2012), The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion and Capital Punishment (Baker Academic, 2012), and Nonviolent Action: What Christian Ethics Demands but Most Christians Have Never Really Tried (Brazos, 2015). He is also the founder and president emeritus of Evangelicals for Social Action.*

### **From Thomas Jefferson**

To messers. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

...Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson

Jan. 1. 1802.

## **Responsible Capitalism: Moral Solutions to Economic Problems Today’s Politics Won’t Fix**

By Gary Moore

*“There is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits.” Milton Freidman, Nobel laureate Economist*

*“It is futile to argue, as does the American economist and Nobel laureate Milton Freidman, that a business has only one responsibility: economic performance. Economic performance is the first responsibility of a business. A business that does not show a profit at least equal to its cost of capital is socially irresponsible. But economic performance is not the sole responsibility of a business.” Peter Drucker, Post-Capitalist Society*

We’ve all heard a lot of talk recently about making America great again. A lot of it involves strengthening our economy. Before we put too much faith in politics to do so, it might be good to remember the great observer of American culture Alexis de Tocqueville predicted: *“I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers...in her fertile fields and boundless forests. . . in her rich mines and her vast world commerce. . .in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution — and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.”*

This article will therefore argue the primary reason so many believe America has lost its economic greatness is that during recent decades our mainline pulpits have grown silent about economic morality while evan-

gelical pulpits have undermined the biblical ethic regarding the root of all evil by focusing almost exclusively on sexual morality while proclaiming so-called prosperity theology.

That’s not to say we agree America’s primary problem is a lack of economic strength. Before he began pandering for votes, even President Trump hosted a Discovery Channel special in which he criticized those who

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bemoaned America’s wealth, which he estimated to be \$280 trillion after all debts were paid off. While notoriously generous in his estimates of wealth, there is no question in my mind that America has long been the richest nation on earth, at least economically. Our true poverties are moral and spiritual.

Much of those poverties are because most CEOs and investors during recent decades have wittingly or unwittingly embraced the narrow economic ethic of Dr. Freidman. His worldview, along with the teaching of the arch-atheist and hyper-individualistic philosopher Ayn Rand regarding “the virtue of selfishness,”

the title of one of her very influential books, has turned many business leaders and investors into what is often termed “homo economicus,” people who believe the moral purpose of their lives is to make money, too often without consideration of neighbor.

Friedman’s idea has been so pervasive, the respected Wall Street investment firm GMO, which manages over \$100 billion for investors, recently published a white paper on Freidman’s so-called “shareholder value maximization.” GMO called the philosophy, “The World’s Dumbest Idea.” GMO took the title from a quote from Jack Welch, the revered former CEO of General Electric. He had called Friedman’s idea “the world’s dumbest idea” in a 2009 interview with the *Financial Times*. Nevertheless, it has guided most of corporate America, and particularly most Wall Street investors, during recent decades.

Fortunately, some CEOs and investors have consciously embraced the “neighbor as self” worldview of legendary management consultant Peter Drucker by embracing socially responsible business and investing. Their numbers are still relatively small. But they have been increasing quite rapidly due to the morally “unbridled capitalism” that precipitated the Great Recession and nearly destroyed the world’s economy. *The Wall Street Journal* recently said twenty percent of professionally managed money now considers ethics. And the trend is so strong most Wall Street firms are jumping on the bandwagon. Even President Trump apparently believes our major corporations have a social responsibility to keep jobs in America, even if they must be bribed

with tax credits to do so. While I’ve never been a fan of Mr. Trump as a businessman or candidate, he’s now my President and I wish him well, especially when advocating corporate social responsibility. Unfortunately, the thought of Peter Drucker suggests today’s politicians are again straining gnats and swallowing camels, to use a biblical phrase.

Those of us who care about the country our grandchildren will inherit might take that very, very seriously. Steve Forbes wrote: “Peter Drucker’s ability to prophesy, almost always correctly, was uncanny.” Peter may have been the world’s most astute observer and critic of corporate management. And he was usually politically incorrect. Politicians often need an “other” to blame for our economic problems. But Peter was far more concerned about over-paid American CEOs than low-wage Mexican laborers. When Peter wrote his book during the mid-nineties, he thought CEO compensation was like watching “pigs at the trough.” Peter didn’t think any CEO was worth more than twenty times what the average worker earned, which was how it was in America until the mid-60s.

It was about that time that most incoming freshmen at our colleges first told surveys they were more interested in learning how to make money than how to live a meaningful life. They are now our nation’s elites. And MBA now stands for “Me Before Anyone.” By the time Peter wrote his book, CEOs who were “down-sizing” the number of workers in American companies to increase profits for shareholders were widely reported to be earning over three hundred times what the average worker earned. Yet Peter wrote: “I believe it is socially and morally unforgiveable when managers reap huge profits for themselves but fire workers. As societies, we will pay a heavy price for the contempt this generates among middle managers and workers.”

Peter also wrote the “worship of high profit margins” was likely to damage or destroy businesses. Yet while the Protestant Reformers said earning five percent or more of interest or profit margin was greedy, corporate profit margins today are over twice that. Even as a percent of GDP, they are nearly three times today what they were during the mid-1980s. And that ratio has been rising strongly lately while wages have stagnated for decades. Yet Peter was no socialist, or more accurately no statist. He also wrote: “I am for the free market. Even though it doesn’t work too well, nothing else works at all. But I have seri-

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ous reservations about capitalism as a system as it idolizes economics as the be-all and end-all of life.”

Peter therefore visualized something quite different from both what we call socialism and a capitalism unbridled from traditional Judeo-Christian ethics. He wrote the future post-capitalist society will retain most of the institutions and structures of capitalism but CEOs, of all organizations, will increasingly manage with a greater consciousness of employees, customers, communities, and the environment, as well as shareholders, rather than simply those who pay their salaries. To understand how crucial that is in the corporate arena for inequality, consider that

ten percent of Americans, including myself, owned over eighty percent of our nation’s stock at the beginning of this decade. (Disclaimer: I’ve sold my over-priced American stocks and reinvested in lesser developed countries.) The primary reason is that America’s much discussed *income* inequality is now at levels seen just before the Great Depression but our inequality of accumulated *wealth* is even worse. A recent survey said nearly sixty percent of Americans cannot afford an unexpected expense of five hundred dollars. Yet many single-issue Christian voters remain concerned only with sexual issues. They might consider that our five hundred largest public companies produce over *seventy percent* of our nation’s GDP. If they were a country, they’d be the second largest economy on earth, after only America itself. Walmart alone has more revenue than nearly 150 *countries*. And there are nearly twenty thousand *public* American companies. Even that doesn’t include many huge *private* companies.

Like our federal debt, such immense corporate wealth is impossible for most of us to comprehend. So few voters are conscious that despite Mexico’s recent growth, largely due to “trade not aid” with the U.S., the typical Mexican still earns a fraction of what we Americans do. Their wealth probably fares far worse. *The Economist* recently said the average human has a *net worth of \$2,222*. Half therefore have even less. And that number includes the great wealth in the U.S. and other developed countries. Peter therefore prophesied: “The developed countries have a tremendous stake in the Third World. Unless there is rapid development there—both economic and social—the developed countries will be inundated by a human flood of Third World immigrants far beyond their economic, social or cultural capacity to absorb.” But as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr famously wrote, nationalism

is. “One of the effective ways in which the modern man escapes life’s ethical problems.”

Jack Kemp, on whose advisory board I served, was a one-time GOP candidate for vice-president. He was Christian and the god-father of “compassionate conservatism.” But over breakfast one morning, he threatened to fight me if I ever used the words “rich Americans” again. Yet he knew my ministry was to help dispirited Americans feel more grateful for our economic blessings so they could deal with our real problems. But like conservative politicians since, President Trump can’t tweet about, much less seriously discuss, the many social pathologies caused by our huge and still increasing economic inequalities. Wealthy Americans invest heavily in elections and legislation favorable to themselves. These days, billionaires increasingly work in the White House.

Small wonder tax cuts for the wealthy are at the top of President Trump’s agenda, even if it means millions more of Americans are uninsured for healthcare. That should surprise no one who’s watched the economy the past several decades. But it has long surprised me how many of my conservative Christian friends who are anything but wealthy recently ignored the fact that when God wanted men of the people to lead Israel, God looked to Moses, who was described as “the humblest man on earth” (Numbers 12:3), the poor shepherd boy David; and a carpenter’s son from the backwater town of Nazareth. They therefore also ignored Peter’s prophecies by voting against their own economic interests, thereby actually exacerbating the economic inequality at the root of so very many social pathologies, including the divorce, abortion, consumer debt and stagnation in charitable giving about which conservative Christian leaders rail.

That’s quite odd as Peter’s think-

ing was essentially a modern version of traditional Judeo-Christianity. In fact, Peter once taught theology. So he understood that when the Hebrews were nearing the Promised Land, Moses said God wanted the land to be divided as equally as possible (Numbers 26: 52-56). Knowing some would then lose their land, Moses commanded that all land should be returned to its original owner each fiftieth year, known as the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:13-23). He thereby assured every child of God would have abundant resources to steward. That’s similar to my mentor, the legendary mutual fund manager Sir John Templeton, advocating a 95% estate

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tax as he’d not seen inherited wealth do any good for its beneficiaries and a high tax rate would encourage the wealthy to give their wealth to charity. Warren Buffet basically shares that philosophy.

Unfortunately, those who’d avoid such egalitarian ethics, particularly with nationalism, have long asked the question “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus answered that question by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. That must have struck many of his Jewish contemporaries as it would strike many conservative Christians today for a prophetic figure to commend the good Mexican. But Jesus’ idea of neighbor wasn’t about the nice Jewish fellow who lived next door. That is a difficult reality for conservative “Bible-believing”

Christians who voted for the nationalism of “America First.” Yet *Christianity Today* has cautioned its readers that the more we read the Bible, the more we understand it is a “left-leaning text.” I expect that’s particularly true about economics, which is why so few conservative Christians hear much, if anything, about what the Bible says about economics. Credit management, tithing and giving yes. Economics no. I’ve personally begged *Christianity Today* for more than a decade to broach the subject but to no avail. And like Peter predicted, our society, including many readers of *Christianity Today*, is now paying for that sin of omission. And probably the greater sin of religious pride.

Conservative pastors, like televangelist Joel Osteen, often begin services by swearing allegiance to the Bible. So “Bible-believing” Christians usually think they take all the teachings of the Bible literally. But the reason most evangelical leaders, like Joel, so seldom, if ever, talk about economics is that capitalism turned many of the economic teachings of the Bible up-side-down. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “There is one bit of advice to us by the ancient heathen Greeks and by the Jews of the Old Testament and by the great Christian teachers of the Middle Ages, which the modern economic system has completely disobeyed. All these people told us not to lend money at interest; and lending at interest—what we call investment—is the basis of our whole system.”

Lewis went on to explain that doesn’t mean capitalists can’t be Christian. But the clear implication is that theologically speaking, even politically conservative Christians today are *economic progressives*. That’s particularly evident in the various shades of prosperity theology taught within evangelicalism despite the Bible’s teachings about the root of all evil and the eye of the needle. That dichotomy would cause consider-



able dissonance if we were aware of the “dualism,” as it’s called, in our thinking and living. But we aren’t. As I learned when exploring seminary thirty years ago, sociologists consider economic dualism a key dimension of “post-modern” life in post-Christian America. We may go to church on Sunday but it doesn’t seem to matter at work and when investing. I’ve even grown convinced that we Christians are more prone to dualism than Wall Street. Wall Street knows very well what god it serves: money. For historical reasons, things aren’t always as clear on Church Street.

Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth* essentially convinced American Christians that God doesn’t care how we make money as long as we give it away before we die. That concept has been so embraced, perhaps most of all by our clergy, that *God the Economist* called the industrialist, whose steel company was nearly hell on earth to work for, America’s most influential *theologian*. Our religious leaders have recently seemed quite reluctant to look a gift horse in the mouth, something that Jesus strongly commended we do (Matthew 5:23). We laity have therefore increasingly given little or no thought to how we make money, particularly in our CDs, IRAs, mutual funds, and so on that are invested in public companies. Yet our giving then often goes to problems of our own creation. For example, I’ve had affluent Christians tell me they’ll make money by investing in cigarette companies but then give to the American Cancer Society. (I use that example as when I was young, virtually everyone I knew grew tobacco. A few years ago, I watched my wife’s father and mother die tormented deaths from smoking.)

Such dualism permeates our churches and therefore our political-economy. Many affluent Christians cherish mortgage and charitable giving deductions and government-guaranteed investments while deplor-

ing welfare for the needy. Prominent religious leaders often advocate charitable relief for less-developed nations but seem to see economic development in them as a threat to us. Both dualisms virtually guarantee more poor than necessary will be with us always. For American charity is a mere drop in the bucket compared to the capital invested in the world’s companies. That is why the world’s major religions used to advocate, and should still advocate, the peace and clarity of holistic thinking and living rather than the stress and confusion of dualism. For example, Gandhi observed: “One man cannot do right in one department of life whilst he is

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occupied in doing wrong in any other department. Life is one indivisible whole. I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields. All act and react upon one another.”

Yet when I contemplated seminary, the church’s psychologist told me I was the typical Western businessperson in that I unwittingly reflected the dualism of Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonalds, whose fortune went to charity but also said: “I believe in God, family and McDonalds. And in the office that order is reversed...If any of my competitors were drowning, I’d stick a hose in their mouth and turn on the water. It’s is ridiculous to call this an industry. It’s not. It’s rat eat rat and dog eat dog. I’ll kill ‘em and I’m going to kill ‘em before

they kill me. You’re talking about the American way, the survival of the fittest.”

I actually served on the board of a major Christian ministry at the same time as Ken Lay, the founder of Enron. He was a generous giver but likely headed America’s most irresponsible corporate implosion. Dualism such as his and Mr. Kroc’s prompted Peter to write: “Business ethics assumes that for some reason, the ordinary rules of ethics do not apply to business.” So today, health care professionals are increasingly making the connections between America’s proliferating fast food companies and obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, dementia and the expenses bedeviling America’s healthcare budget and politics. (I use that example as my doctor helped me lose forty pounds by viewing fast food as “poison.”)

Such dualism is also deadly for our faith. Professor David Naugle has written these words about how dualism has led to America becoming church-going but post-Christian: “This mega-problem of dualism is the chief cause for the reduced, powerless versions of Christianity that are commonplace in too many Christian communities today.” While futilely trying to teach economics within evangelicalism the past twenty-five years, I’ve grown convinced economic dualism is a primary reason *Christianity Today* recently explained the standing of evangelicalism has declined among Americans more than any other expression of Christianity, and even non-Christian religions and atheism.

So let’s take a quick look at the more holistic economic worldview of early Judeo-Christianity. Most of these concepts will particularly surprise Bible-believing Christians. For as *Christianity Today* has also confessed: “Obviously, we live in a post-biblical era where general knowledge of the Bible cannot be assumed. But what about the church? What about the evangelical church? If it’s true that

biblical illiteracy is commonplace in secular culture at large, there is ample evidence that points to similar trends in our churches.” I will only mention those concepts that might heal the deepest wounds in America’s political-economy today.

The bull has long been the symbol of Wall Street. My favorite Bible verse about responsible wealth creation is therefore: “If a bull gores someone to death, it is to be stoned but its owner is not to be punished. But if the bull has been in the habit of attacking people and its owner had been warned but did not keep it penned up, then it is to be stoned and its owner is to be put to death also” (Exodus 21:28). That passage can be found in the modern *Good News Bible* under the heading “The Responsibilities of Owners.” It clearly affirms Moses was deadly serious about socially responsible wealth management. Yes, I expect the Hebrews complained their one bull was insignificant, in the scheme of things. The most popular conservative Christian financial celebrities are argued the same during recent decades even though our mutual fund holdings are far more substantial. But Moses knew the future problems of the Promised Land would be the sum of the things that were wrong with Hebrews individually.

Notice that Moses was realistic enough to know that while bulls can be quite dangerous, they are still essential for wealth creation in an agricultural society. He also knew such risks cannot be removed, only managed. So it was only when irresponsible behavior happened repeatedly and was ignored that it became morally irresponsible. One doesn’t have to be a theologian to understand how that might apply to the cigarette industry and other socially harmful activities.

Moses also understood that we worship whatever we believe provides for our future security. To the ancient Hebrews, bulls were assurances of

future plenty, much as Trumponomics is to conservatives today, the Federal Reserve Board has been to Wall Street recently, and securities used to be for investors. But most of us can’t have enough economic security, even though Mother Teresa wisely observed the only true security is owning nothing anyone will steal. That’s why the Hebrews always wanted to dualistically worship both Yahweh and that little gold bull known as Baal. But Moses knew there was no security in that bull, just as we should know the presidency, the Fed and securities are important but will never provide feelings of true security. The prophets therefore railed about the Hebrews

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***With tax-cuts for corporations and the wealthy, increased military expenditures, wall building, deportations of foreigners and de-regulation of Wall Street apparently on the political agenda, such teachings face increasing stress during coming years.***

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worshipping both Yahweh and Baal more than they railed about atheism.

The prophets knew people always worship something, be it a golden bull, a rock, governments, or money. In post-Christian America, that god for most of us is surely money and what it can buy. With the exception of Catholic nuns and Mennonites, studies and my experiences over four decades of investment counseling therefore suggest there is very little, if any, difference in how most Christians and non-Christians invest their IRAs, education funds, family foundations and so on. That’s largely due to the silence of mainline pastors and the

most popular conservative Christian financial advisors, such as Ron Blue and Dave Ramsey, who have argued over the years *against* Christians having ethics when investing as they thought ethics would cost us money. Ironically, a recent academic review of over two thousand studies said they strongly indicate socially responsible investing produces equal or greater returns. Most studies also suggest they do so with lower risk. Still, if we only embrace ethics in order to produce higher risk/return, we’re more reflective of Freidman than Drucker. We should embrace ethics as we love God and neighbor as self.

Moses clearly understood more holistic economic thinking would help produce the more abundant life, as did Jesus when he said such laws are eternal. In fact, there was no asset class I can think of that Moses didn’t command the consideration of other, and particularly the needy, as self when managing wealth. He told those who owned fields to round the corners at harvest time so the poor could harvest what was left. Similarly, he told those who owned vineyards to leave the second picking for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). He even said if you dig a pit in which to cook or store things, you must cover it or you will be financially responsible if someone or something falls in (Exodus 21:33). He also shared the extreme law to let the land lie fallow each seventh year so it could restore itself while feeding the poor and alien (Exodus 23:10-11). Those religious leaders who’ve let politics convince them that God’s love ends at our borders might read their Bibles more closely.

Most importantly for our money culture, a primary ethical concern was about borrowing and lending money. In ancient times, interest-free lending (see Exodus 22:25) to the needy was actually preferred to charity. Few thought of lending to those wealthier than themselves. Interest-free lending to the needy showed confidence in

the borrower that his or her need was only temporary and he or she might repay, thereby giving them greater dignity. That was detailed by the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides when discussing his various levels of economic tzedakah, or righteousness. But since capitalism developed around five centuries ago, most of us with savings rarely think about lending to the needy. Instead, we loan it to banks, corporations, and governments by investing in CDs, savings accounts, money market funds, corporate bonds and EE savings bonds. Even religious endowment funds usually choose those paying the highest rate of interest, a primary cause of the savings and loan crisis of the eighties and nineties, as well as the sub-prime mortgage crisis that ignited the Great Recession.

Yet Moses refuted Ayn Rand's selfish teaching that we only need to care for others after a shipwreck or other catastrophe. He said: "If there is a fellow Israelite in need, do not be selfish. Be generous and lend him as much as he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). Moses then prevented loans to the needy from becoming burdensome to them. He said: "At the end of every seventh year, you are to cancel the debts of those who owe you money" (Deuteronomy 15:1.) He added that if we didn't loan as the year of forgiveness was near, God would deem it "evil." Jesus summarized those teachings on the Mount when he said: "If you lend only to those from whom you hope to get it back, why should you receive a blessing? No! Lend and expect nothing back" (Luke 6:35). Yet a very influential conservative Christian financial leader has inexplicably argued for years that all borrowing must be repaid, even if the borrower was burdened by being laid-off, incurring medical expenses and was granted

bankruptcy protection. Jesus would surely be appalled that secular law too often now seems more compassionate than a cultural Christianity that is more concerned about affluent lenders than needy borrowers.

As government is a major factor in any economy, Moses also commanded, "The king is not to have a large number of horses for his army" (Deuteronomy 17:16). He added: "Do not mistreat a foreigner; you know how it feels to be a foreigner, because you were foreigners in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). And King Solomon cautioned: "When the king is only concerned with money, he will ruin his country" (Proverbs 29:4).

With tax-cuts for corporations and the wealthy, increased military expenditures, wall building, deportations of foreigners and de-regulation of Wall Street apparently on the political agenda, such teachings face increasing stress during coming years. Those of us who steward prosperous businesses might therefore hire an extra employee or two to "harvest the corners of the fields" while easing the pressures on current employees. *The Wall Street Journal* has just said: "An always-on work culture, combined with feelings of job insecurity and directives to do more with less—even when business is booming—has driven workers to the breaking point. And the problem appears to be worsening, resulting in steep turnover and health costs."

As such problems usually begin with the demands of investors, all investors might consider the very proven mutual funds from American, Pioneer and Templeton that avoid the "sin stocks" of alcohol, tobacco and gambling companies. Even more conscientious investors might consider socially and "Biblically-responsible" options for our IRAs and endowments. Pacifists might consider a Praxis mutual fund from the Mennonites that will not

invest in weapons manufacturers. More conservative investors might consider making an insured deposit in a "community development financial institution" that makes loans that create jobs and wealth among the needy in our inner-cities, Appalachia, native American areas, and so on. With American stocks being in bubble territory, we might invest more in mutual funds that finance growth in developing and Third World "frontier" markets. We might even give or loan some money to Christian "micro-enterprise" organizations like WorldVision and Opportunity International that make tiny loans to the desperately poor in the Third World.

Wall Street has long dismissed such responsible investing options as simple "do-good" stuff. But it seems we're increasingly being reminded that if we want our capitalistic economy to be great again, Tocqueville was precisely correct that far more of us will simply have to do more good with our money. ■

*Gary Moore has a degree in political science and recently retired after forty years on Wall Street. He is a former Republican who is now a registered independent and has authored several books advocating Judeo-Christian approaches to wealth management. His books in the early nineties told us the fear-mongering over our five trillion dollar federal debt was political terrorism. Those of the late nineties told us the fear-mongering over Y2K was the same on the part of the media that was ignoring Wall Street's new-age ethics. He now believes those same ethics and inequality are our most serious moral, social and economic problems. This is a preview of his next book, title and publisher yet to be determined. He lives in Lakewood Ranch, Florida and can be reached at [Garmoco@hotmail.com](mailto:Garmoco@hotmail.com).*

## Money, Morals, and the Cry of Matthew 25

by Kenneth Briggs

***"The crisis of the church ... is not the crisis of the church in the world, but of the world in the church."***

H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Church Against the World* (1935)

Without cushioning, the Bible's sayings about money can be jolting. They're as blunt and categorical as Scripture gets. "Woe" to the rich, the deluded who think they can serve both wealth and God, the haughty who lord it over poor people, the greedy who place faith in possessions, including bigger barns to hold their largesse. Many more passages lie in wait – at least 70 New Testament references alone – to ambush the reader and hearer of Scripture.

But most of us have become bullet-proof through years of religious conditioning of one kind or another. We're ready for the stun gun, as it were, by resorting to "explanations" that take the edge off the message. For moderate and liberal Protestants, the historical-critical investigation of the Bible has produced a neutralizing confusion. Scholars have disabused many of us of assumptions that Jesus actually uttered those hard sayings or that they came from any single source. They are not necessarily to be taken at face value, so relax. Either he was using hyperbole, or someone later inserted troubling verses to make a certain point. One way or another, their vinegar gets diluted.

### Escape Hatch

As I discovered during research for a book on the Bible in America, much of that first-rate scholarship has had the unintended effect of eroding the authority of Scripture, rendering the money passages relatively harmless. Escapes hatches are there for the taking: "He didn't really say it or mean it."

More literal-minded Bible interpreters aren't moved by such academic testimony, but they are no less ready to deflect the blow. One Sunday morning in a sparkling Iowa evangelical congregation, I heard the preacher draw on the "where your treasure is" portion of Matthew 6. He carefully dissected our choices: Either trust material goods or God Almighty. The former was tempting, to be sure. Society's confidence in "things"

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***Churches of all stripes that I attended across America are virtually silent about the power and purposes of a money economy.***

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these days has created idols that draw people away from worship of the true God. Treasuring goods rather than Christ is fraught with dire consequences. But keep in mind, said the eloquent preacher, that St. Paul didn't say money was evil – rather, the "love" of money is what did you in. St. Paul's bailout passages in First Timothy have allowed countless Christians to exhale. **Seamless and Silent**

Churches of all stripes that I attended across America are virtually silent about the power and purposes of a money economy. The attachment to free enterprise across Christian traditions has been seamless and unquestioned. Rightly or wrongly, the fundamentals of our economic system have been absorbed into our Christian way of life.

The history of this acquisition is remarkably uncomplicated, fueled largely by convictions of early

European settlers that God had seeded the New World's promise of freedom with the basic principles of capitalism. Noted church historian Mark Noll concludes that American Christianity has had nothing significant to contribute to the country's economic thinking since the late 19th century. By then, Marx's Das Kapital was rattling economic foundations which, in turn, encouraged new religious social reforms, including the stirrings which became Catholic social doctrine. The influence of economic reform ideas in American churches took place mostly on the margins, in the form of backing for organized labor and social welfare causes embodied most prominently in the Social Gospel Movement.

Entwined as the themes of money and faith have been over the centuries, the money part of congregants' lives unfolds separately from their faith lives, usually with little or no advice from the churches. Church finances occupy a circumscribed place in most Protestant parishes. Members may see budgets, hear appeals, make decisions about tithing and the amount of their pledges, and respond to special needs. Otherwise, worshippers fend for themselves, rarely seeking a theological assessment of economic suppositions that drive the nation.

### A Great Exception

During periods of economic distress – recurrent recessions, wars, revolutions in productivity – the mandates of Matthew 25 resurface to highlight human suffering and the church's call to reduce it.\* Such attention always exposed deep flaws in the system, but so far no crisis has fomented major reform. The Social Gospel cause and Catholic movements for social justice remedied material ills and stirred

protest but couldn't substantially shift economic priorities. The great exception, of course, was the Great Depression in the 1930s, but the counterassault against that national insertion of quasi-socialism began in the second half of the century and seems poised now to achieve most of its goals.

American denominations do admit to pronounced differences on matters of the common good, but mainly they exhibit variations on a consistent theme of loyalty to capitalist convictions. American Christianity has shown little ability or conviction to nudge the economy one way or another, except to direct occasional energies to incremental policy changes or specific programs such as food stamps. The dominance of free enterprise values goes unchallenged. Does this acquiescence agree with gospel purposes or does Christianity have its own lessons to impart? If so, is it too late?

Stout defenders of capitalism as an adjunct to the faith continue to hold serve. Arthur C. Brooks, head of the American Enterprise Institute, sums up the case for compatibility in the Feb. 20, 2017, issue of *America*. Despite its need for repairs, Mr. Brooks argues, capitalism promotes the Christian ministry of mercy by serving as the greatest generator of trickle-down wealth ever conceived. The portion of the world's poorest people living on \$1 a day has shrunk by 80 percent in recent years on the strength of free-market activity, he notes. The degree to which that achievement has fostered a better way of life in Christian terms goes unexamined.

#### Christian Realism?

Skeptics seldom renounce free enterprise as such but attempt to modify or redirect policies that in their view can better serve Christian ends. Reinhold Niebuhr, as depicted in the new documentary, *An American Conscience*, adopted broad

reform in his early years by becoming a socialist but later focused on holding economic and political practices accountable to the exacting imperative of justice as handed down by biblical tradition. Niebuhr believed that pressing such religious imperatives on a large scale makes worthy ends possible in a fallen world where perfect love is unachievable.

The 2016 election has put this long debate in sharper relief. According to most post-election analysis, Donald Trump won the White House by channeling the public anger of American workers against economic policies fomented by elites that robbed these voters of jobs, living

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*During periods of economic distress – recurrent recessions, wars, revolutions in productivity – the mandates of Matthew 25 resurface to highlight human suffering and the church's call to reduce it.*

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wages, and the consideration they deserved (grievances which Bernie Sanders likewise sounded from the left, with similarly rousing effect). At the opposite end of the income scale, many affluent Americans saw Trump's pro-business, anti-regulation bent as a chance to boost their own coffers.

#### Faith-based Base

Faith-based America went for Trump: more than 80 percent of white evangelicals, as well as slightly more than half of Catholics and mainline Protestants. Was that a verdict favoring a capitalist system of less social service and health care? A passionate expression of faith in a free market with fewer restraints? Or an assault on voters' self-interest?

Answers are hard to come by, even as political and religious turmoil spreads. But for those in the pews who are troubled by faith's apparent silence, churches can still take up the challenge. The economic anxieties of worshipers clearly constitute a pastoral concern that warrants a fresh look at the fertility and promises of faith. Circle back to those intimidating passages in the Bible that approach questions about money through parabolic, metaphoric, symbolic, and rhetorical windows. Under conditions of free thought and open imagination, the temptation to treat those verses with "fight or flight" simplicity can be confronted and transcended.

To make that possible, a mature lay approach to biblical scholarship is necessary. Gifted research findings that overturn long-held assumptions about the authorship and contents of Scripture have too often been reported in ways that spawn disillusionment about the Bible's reliability, as if its myriad writings are little more than a random assemblage of disparate pieces with no central purpose, a pile of fragments rather than a coherent jigsaw puzzle.

#### Credible Testimony

Bible research isn't about affirming or destroying faith, however. It draws on objective, scientific methods to uncover knowledge about authorship, purposes, and development. Greater contact between scholars and church people could reduce misunderstanding and restore the Bible's credibility, not by softening scholarship but by placing it within wider testimony of how Scripture is received and understood. Some scholars do that. In my opinion, more interactive Bible study is needed to reconcile scholarship and piety. If Scripture is to be worthy of trust among 21st-century Christians, we need to approach it with an open mind that allows it to escape the caricatures, stereotypes, and suspicions that encase it in irrelevancy and doubt.

Most churches will have to go even further if they want to take seriously the wider dimensions of faith and money in Scripture: They should look at conditions beyond their immediate surroundings. Churches typically reflect the income levels, classes, and race that surround them, narrowing perceptions of what would serve the common good (see Bill Bishop's outstanding book, *The Big Sort*). Watching the 10 o'clock news won't suffice for closer exposure to real-life struggles of people far from our comfort zones. Such isolation shapes both thought and action regarding the

economy's purposes.

Anxiety around money (material, spiritual, vocational) deserves the kind of careful pastoral attention that goes to parenting, loss of loved ones, or addiction. Yet it normally receives nothing like that. Congregants and clergy are left to the relentless pounding of a consumer-driven system without sufficient Christian rebuttal. The potential for critical response remains, however, in Jesus' appeal to love our neighbor as ourselves. Eventually that leads to what we do with our money and the cry of Matthew 25. ■

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## Ask Not for Self

Ask not for elevation of self, ask for openness to truth,

A caring and just society as a devoutly sought goal,

An aim, though never perfect, producing its own proof,

In the long march of history worth its weight in gold.

—James A. Langley

# The Johnson Amendment: Religion flourishes in United States because we keep it separate from government

By Randall Balmer

Donald Trump's promise to "totally destroy" the Johnson Amendment, delivered at the recent National Prayer Breakfast, is a totally bad idea, one that compromises the First Amendment.

The Johnson Amendment, passed by Congress in 1954 and named for Lyndon Johnson, then a U.S. senator, is a provision in the tax code that prohibits tax-exempt organizations from openly supporting political candidates. In the words of the tax code, "all section 501(c)(3) organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office."

I have no doubt that Johnson, consummate politician that he was, had his own reasons for pushing the legislation in 1954; he was running for re-election and didn't want adversarial groups working against him under cover of tax-exempt organizations. But those motives should in no way diminish the wisdom of the measure.

Leaders of the religious right in recent years, however, have been pushing for a repeal of the Johnson Amendment. They argue that pastors should be able to make political endorsements from the pulpit without jeopardizing their churches' tax exemptions. The fact that they cannot now do so, they argue, represents an infringement on their religious freedom.

That's utter nonsense.

The Johnson Amendment merely ensures that taxpayers do not subsidize partisan politicking. It also ensures that tax-exempt organizations do not serve as the conduit for tax-exempt contributions to political candidates.

Kvetching from the religious right is really just an attempt to confuse voters with sleight of hand. Even as they com-

plain about the supposed limitations on their freedom of speech, these leaders fail to acknowledge that tax exemption is a form of public subsidy.

The vast majority of the nation's religious organizations - churches, mosques, synagogues - pay no taxes other than Social Security taxes on wages. So, no income or corporate or property taxes.

We can have a vigorous debate about whether or not such an exemption is a good thing. (I think, on balance, it is; the founders recognized the value of voluntary associations and sought to encourage them.) But that discussion aside, the bottom line is that taxpayers in any given community effectively subsidize religious groups by paying extra taxes to support municipal services such as police protection, firefighters, parks, snow removal, road maintenance and the like.

These institutions certainly benefit from those services. If a fire breaks out at a church or synagogue, the fire department responds - even though these organizations pay no property taxes to support firefighter salaries. Local taxpayers take up the slack for the tax exemption on property that would otherwise be quite valuable.

All the Johnson Amendment requires is that, in exchange for a subsidy, the beneficiaries refrain from partisan politicking.

Various entities, including the Alliance Defending Freedom, have nevertheless urged pastors to defy the law and endorse political candidates. For example, Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, asserts that the Johnson Amendment "prevents religious leaders from truly exercising their constitutionally-protected free speech rights when they act in their official capacity as a pastor or head

of a religious, tax-exempt organization." More nonsense.

Pastors, or any other religious leader, can make political endorsements from the pulpit or in any other forum. Their employer need only to renounce their tax exemptions - their public subsidies - and they are free to be as partisan as they wish.

But there is another reason why the Johnson Amendment is a good idea and should not be repealed.

Religion has flourished in the United States as nowhere else around the world precisely because the government has, for the most part, at least, stayed out of the religion business, and vice versa.

Despite the religious right's persistent attempts to circumvent it, the First Amendment is the best friend that religion ever had. It ensures that there is no established church, no state religion, and that religious groups can compete for adherents on an equal footing. Evangelicals, by the way, have historically fared very well in that free marketplace.

The Johnson Amendment both derives from, and builds upon, the First Amendment. It reinforces the wall of separation between church and state that was advocated by the founder of the Baptist tradition in America, Roger Williams.

We also should remember that Williams wanted a "wall of separation" between the "garden of the church" and the "wilderness of the world" because he feared that the integrity of the faith would be compromised by too much entanglement with politics.

That's a lesson worth recalling today.

*Randall Balmer of Dartmouth College first published this article in the Houston Chronicle 2/11/17. It is reprinted with permission of the author.*

# The Mistake Christians Made in Defending Bill O'Reilly

By Katelyn Beaty

Institutions plagued by sexual assault scandals tend to look alike: They are usually insular organizations that resist external checks and revolve around authoritative men.

This characterization fits Fox News, which recently fired its host Bill O'Reilly after sexual harassment allegations against him (and pressure from advertisers) mounted.

But it also applies to the white evangelical Christian community. This group is not a monolith, but its social hierarchy often functions like the military, a university or private business. It's not a coincidence that conservative evangelical leaders tend to resist taking harassment and assault claims seriously.

Eric Metaxas, a best-selling Christian author, tweeted after the firing that Mr. O'Reilly's ouster was "tremendously sad" and that his show had been a "blessing to millions." When people responding to his tweet noted that he was silent on the harassment itself, he wrote "Jesus loves Bill O'Reilly" and told his followers to pray for their enemies. He wrote: "The news about Bill O'Reilly is tremendously sad. His fairness, boldness & radical commonsense on the show have been a blessing to millions."

Many Christian leaders responded to Donald Trump's bragging about sexual assault with a similar line of defense. Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University, the country's largest Christian college, said that "we're all sinners" and that Mr. Trump had apologized. (In fact, Mr. Trump has said that he doesn't ask God for forgiveness and didn't need to ask his wife for it either.) Mr. Falwell later claimed to have proof that the women accusing Mr. Trump of sexual harassment were lying.

David Brody, a correspondent with the Christian Broadcasting Network, excused Mr. Trump's language at

the time by saying, "We all sin every single day." Jim Garlow, a prominent California pastor, refused to "cast any stones" at Mr. Trump, invoking Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John. He then called Hillary Clinton a modern-day Herod who would kill all the unborn babies if elected.

Within the ranks of conservative church leadership, this default empathy for powerful men is coupled with tone deafness for victims. But the phenomenon is also a misapplication of the Christian teaching on forgiveness. Mr. Metaxas wrote a biography of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, so he is surely familiar with his teaching on cheap grace — "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance." Cheap grace wrongly separates absolution of sin from acknowledgment of that sin. In Christian teaching, God forgives people before they confess wrongdoing. But among individuals, groups and nations, there can be no forgiveness when wrongdoing isn't named.

In cases of sexual assault, cheap grace is doubly dangerous: It can allow a guilty party to continue his abuse while victims stay silent in fear of punishment.

In churches, a quick forgiveness for perpetrators often dovetails with strict standards of purity for women. From a young age, many Christian women are taught to dress modestly so as not to cause men to "stumble." John Piper, a prominent pastor and theologian, has said that "a lot of Christian women are oblivious to the fact that they have some measure of responsibility" in managing men's lust. The moralizing about dress and behavior can be a setup for victim-blaming wrapped in a spiritual veneer.

Perhaps churches have been slow to address sex crimes out of a belief that such offenses couldn't happen among

their own. It's assumed that the culture of harassment at a place like Fox News would never come to infect a community serving God. This thinking is both naïve and theologically irresponsible: Christians, of all people, acknowledge the depths of human depravity.

In recent years, undeniable scandals at Bob Jones University, Sovereign Grace Church and Bill Gothard's family ministry, among others, have awakened many conservative Christians to the reality of sexual assault in their own ranks. Boz Tchividjian, a grandson of the evangelist Billy Graham, is a law professor who runs Grace (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment). While the organization focuses on child abuse, Mr. Tchividjian speaks regularly on sex crimes in general. He critiques Christian organizations that respond to abuse with "institutional self-protection," often by couching self-protection as "protecting the name of Christ."

If conservative Christians want to protect the faith — especially in a time when they fear loss of cultural power — they must show preferential care not for the powerful but for victims. They must be just as quick to extend empathy to women who have been harassed as they are to extend forgiveness to harassers.

This is the hard work that epitomizes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conception of "costly grace." An application of costly grace would mean showing perpetrators that their actions have real consequences. It would also ensure that victims are heard and given tools for healing long before there is any talk of restoring their abusers. ■

*Katelyn Beaty was the youngest and first female managing editor of Christianity Today and is now an editor at large. She is the author of A Woman's Place.*



# The Conservative Tradition of Welcoming Refugees

By Gene Zubovich

As we waited to cross the border, my mother held her breath. She clutched my hand, with my father and brother beside us, as we sat on an old bus that crossed over from the Soviet Union into Poland in September, 1989. We celebrated my brother's birthday in Warsaw and, the following day, left for Czechoslovakia, spent two weeks in Austria and several months in Italy, where we waited for permission to fly to the United States as Jewish refugees.

Crossing the Soviet border was nerve-racking. After a decade of paperwork, pleading and stonewalling, we had the documents lined up. But the Soviet bureaucracy was capricious and the border agents were often petty and anti-Semitic, so we had no peace of mind from the papers that said we were allowed to leave and that we would be welcomed in the United States. The months-long limbo we endured as we traversed Europe, sometimes sleeping in bus stations on top of our luggage, provided little relief. It was not until we landed at JFK airport months later that my mother could finally exhale.

Now, nearly three decades after my family came to the United States, refugees today anxiously hold their breath because what seemed certain to us—that we would be welcomed in our new home—is no longer so obvious.

We were certain that America's doors would be open to us when we landed in our new home because of wise American leadership, which understood that inviting Soviet Jews to immigrate to the United States was a foreign policy boon during the Cold War. America's refugee policy dramatized desperately the lack of religious freedom in the USSR; it encouraged

the activism of local human rights groups; it created a terrible brain drain for the USSR. Encouraging Jews to get out and welcoming them as refugees helped hasten the Soviet Union's collapse.

That policy was crafted by conservatives who understood that American power depended on a humane refugee policy. It is a lesson worth remembering today as we fight the war on terror.

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*Nobody did more to publicize the plight of Soviet Jews in the 1970s than Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, whom historian Barbara Keys calls “the grandfather of neo-conservatism.”*

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Nobody did more to publicize the plight of Soviet Jews in the 1970s than Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, whom historian Barbara Keys calls “the grandfather of neo-conservatism.” Jackson, a hawkish Democrat, worked to undermine détente between the United States and the USSR. And, since he feared that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were cutting trade and arms deals with the Soviet Union while ignoring the plight of Jews in that country, he crafted bipartisan legislation that increased refugee quotas for Jews, tied trade policy to the observance of human rights, and limited executive power to conduct deals without congressional oversight. It was a shrewd move with lasting consequences for America and for my family.

Jackson's invitation for Jews to flee the USSR and come to the United States overcame longstanding fears of the dangers of immigration—fears as old as the nation itself. In the 20th century alone, Americans worried that the wave of Italian immigrants before World War I was full of bomb-throwing anarchists. In the 1930s, State Department officials wondered whether Jewish refugees were really German fifth-columnists in disguise, and they turned away thousands—including Anne Frank's family. In the 1950s, more than a million Chinese fled the communist takeover of China and many of them applied for American asylum from Hong Kong. Suspecting that these desperate refugees were in fact communist infiltrators, the State Department implemented extreme vetting. According to historian Mae Ngai, asylum seekers were asked to perform absurdly difficult tasks, like listing “all the people who lived within five houses on all sides of your last place of residence in China before you came to the U.S., stating their relationship to you if any.”

Hysteria about immigrants is nothing new. But Senator Jackson understood that reasonable desires for security could be balanced with openness to refugees that highlighted America's moral high ground.

A recent State Department dissent memorandum called the balanced approach to refugees “Secure Borders and Open Doors.” The Trump administration's first executive order banning travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries, they rightly argued, makes Americans less safe. It will sour relations with Muslim nations, stoke anti-Americanism worldwide, undermine humanitarian efforts,

and negatively impact the American economy. In sum, the executive order “runs counter to core American values of nondiscrimination, fair play, and extending a warm welcome to foreign visitors and immigrants.” The revised executive order continues to run counter to American values and to the conservative tradition of “Scoop” Jackson.

Fears of immigrants as terrorists, infiltrators, and fifth columnists willing to join our enemies to fight against our own country, are alive and well among conservatives today. But the importance of a humane program that improves America's image and serves to protect our strategic interests abroad is in danger of being lost. We need a smart and humane refugee program more than ever.

It is not too late to reverse course. Liberals have a long tradition of support for tolerance and human rights

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*Fears of immigrants as terrorists, infiltrators, and fifth columnists willing to join our enemies to fight against our own country, are alive and well among conservatives today.*

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on which to lean in these times. And conservatives, who recognize the danger to America the latest immigration ban poses, can begin to rebuild America's reputation by acting in the tradition of Jackson.

Now is the time for action in Congress. Before courts adjudicate the latest version of Trump's so-called Muslim ban, our legislators need to step up and formulate a sound

immigration policy that enhances America's place in the world. Leaders on both sides of the aisle must reassert congressional control over refugee policy. Refugees face enough uncertainty already. We have an obligation to make JFK and airports across the country places where desperate families fleeing conflict can finally exhale again. ■

*Louis Gene Zubovich is a postdoctoral fellow at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Follow him @genezubovich. This essay first appeared in the March 14, 2017, issue of the online journal, **Religion and Politics**, which is a project of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis and is reprinted here with permission.*

## About Grief and Being Human

By Robert Guffey

This week our families have gathered in Mississippi due to a significant change in the health of Angie and Patti's mother, Sue, who is nearing the close of a long and faithful life as a child of God, sister, wife, mother, teacher, grandmother and gracious friend. We are in place to be present to her and help in partnership with an excellent, compassionate hospice team. Your thoughts and prayers for Sue will be appreciated.

In my life and ministry, I have learned a lot about grief. What I have learned that is most important about grief can be summed up in a few sentences:

Grief has no rules... and that is okay.

Grief will be a most unexpected

companion.

Grief is real and a sign of love.

Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time.

Grief can become a cause for gratitude.

Grief can become a way we honor those we have lost.

Grief tells us we are human, but being human is who God created us to be – and only a little lower than the angels.

When others are grieving, what we do is usually more important than what we say – and the most important thing to do is simply show up with love and care. (While well-meant in the saying, God did not need another angel, she or he may be in a better place but those who grieve the loss are

not. An “I love you” or “I'm sorry” and, where appropriate, a hug says it all.)

It is okay to grieve a loss even as we celebrate the life of the person we have lost. We can say “THANKS BE TO GOD” for those we have loved and for the perfect healing they now experience in the presence of God as children of God. We can say, also, “O Lord, be with us, too, as we memorialize their lives in our own, and as we go forward with our lives, learning to trust and love You as your very own children.”

Thanks be to God. ■

*Robert Guffey is Senior Pastor Freemason Street Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia*

# Let Us Reason Together

By Wendell Griffen

*Editor’s Note: Much attention was directed at the state of Arkansas during the past weeks regarding a rush by the governor and legislature to execute 8 prisoners who had been sentenced to die. The expressed need for a rush to execute was explained as being due to the eminent expiration date for the drugs to be used in lethal injections.*

*Meanwhile, the drug manufacturer filed a property suit claiming that the drugs they had sold to Arkansas Department of Corrections were not intended to be used to cause death. The manufacturer sought a Temporary Restraining Order until the property matter could be heard and resolved. That legal matter was filed in the court of Judge Wendell Griffen in Palaski County. Judge Griffen ruled that, indeed, sufficient evidence appeared to show the manufacturer did not sell the drugs to Arkansas for the purpose of causing death, and granted the temporary restraining order. That happened on Good Friday.*

*Later the same day, Judge Griffen participated in a previously scheduled a vigil/demonstration opposing capital punishment outside the governor’s mansion. Politicians favoring capital punishment and supporting the hasty executions using the soon-to-expire drugs publicly criticized Judge Griffen and called for his removal from office. This has become a matter of utmost importance in Arkansas and Judge Griffen is being “investigated” by the state legislature which is dominated by death penalty advocates. Judge Griffen is a friend of mine, a member of the Board of Christian Ethics Today, and a prominent Christian preacher and writer. A full assessment of the public efforts to unseat Judge Griffen from his judgeship can be found at [www.arktimes.com](http://www.arktimes.com) or [www.swtimes.com](http://www.swtimes.com). Also, you can see and hear an interview with the judge on the May 8, 2017 Democracy Now broadcast ([www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org))*

*The following is Judge Griffen’s explanation of his actions as a judge, citizen, and follower of Jesus.*

When I was a child, the King James Version (KJV) of the Holy Bible was the only one found in our home (in Delight, Arkansas), read in our church (Harrison Chapel Baptist Church), and quoted by most people I knew (parents, pastors, other preachers, relatives, friends, neighbors, and strangers). So when people read or quoted Isaiah 1:18, this is what they read and said: *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD.* The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) rendering of that passage reads: *Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD.*

The passage is a call to engage in honest and thoughtful conversation. It reminds us that humans are blessed with the capacity to contemplate situations and experiences involving ourselves and others, including our Creator. Indeed, the passage is an urgent call from our Creator to engage in that effort. *Come now, let us argue it out.* I grew up in a family, neighborhood, church, and around elders of people who valued

and enjoyed thinking, debating, re-thinking, and challenging the thinking of others.

I suspect that was one reason I became a lawyer, a minister of the religion of Jesus, a legal educator, a judge, and a strategic consultant about cultural competence and inclusion. I have long enjoyed pondering the possible interpretations and meanings of what others do, write, and say, and weighing facts, ideas, values, and competing arguments and interpretations about the situations and conditions that we call life.

Along the way I learned that the words that John Adams spoke in December 1770, while defending soldiers charged in the Boston Massacre, are true. “Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” As a lawyer, pastor, judge, law professor, and consultant, I work at learning facts, weighing competing facts, and deciding whether facts prove what people

claim to be true.

When a judge gets a motion for a temporary restraining order (TRO), the judge considers whether facts show some imminent and irreparable harm is threatened unless the judge issues an order that preserves things as they are – “the status quo” – until the judge can hold a full hearing and consider all the available evidence. The law requires that judges determine whether the party that claims it is threatened by a situation that poses imminent and irreparable harm is likely to succeed on the merits of the dispute before issuing the TRO. If no facts are presented showing that an imminent and irreparable harm is threatened, the TRO must not be granted. But even if facts are presented showing that an imminent and irreparable harm is threatened, if the facts do not show that the threatened party has a legal claim that is likely to succeed, the TRO must not be granted. No matter what the judge’s personal views may be about the dispute, the judge must be governed by wheth-

er the facts show some imminent and irreparable harm is threatened unless a TRO is issued *and* whether the party seeking the TRO has a legal claim that is likely to succeed.

On Friday, April 14, 2017, I was preparing to join other members of New Millennium Church for a Good Friday prayer vigil outside the Arkansas Governor’s Mansion when I received a motion seeking a temporary restraining order. The moving party was a distributor of medical supplies and pharmaceutical products. Its motion was accompanied by a verified complaint, meaning a pleading signed under oath.

In that verified complaint, the moving party declared that the Arkansas Department of Corrections had purchased vercuronium bromide – a pharmaceutical product sold by the distributor – under false pretenses in violation of Arkansas law. The moving party declared in its verified complaint that it attempted to retrieve the vercuronium bromide after learning what the Department of Correction had done. The moving party declared in its verified complaint that the Department of Correction had refused all requests to return the vercuronium bromide after the moving party refunded the purchase price and provided a pre-paid return mail container. And the moving party declared in its verified complaint that the Department of Correction was going to dispose of the vercuronium bromide on April 17, three days later, unless a TRO was issued.

The issue was plain: whether a party who claimed that someone else was wrongfully in possession of its property and about to dispose of it was entitled to a court order directing the other party to preserve the disputed property and not dispose of it until a full hearing could be conducted on the dispute. Under the facts shown in the verified complaint and supporting sworn testimony, the moving party was entitled to the court order if that

moving party was likely to succeed on its claim of ownership of the disputed property under the law that governs ownership of property. If the moving party was not likely to succeed under property law, it was not entitled to a TRO. If the moving party was not threatened by imminent and irreparable harm, it was not entitled to a TRO. A TRO was only justified if, and only if, the moving party was threatened by imminent and irreparable harm *and* was likely to succeed on its legal claim concerning the disputed property.

I understood the facts. I understood the law. Under the facts shown by the verified complaint and property law, I concluded that the moving party was entitled to the requested TRO. My order directed the Department of Correction to preserve the vercuronium bromide – meaning not use it or otherwise dispose of it – until I held the hearing. My court assistant scheduled the hearing for Tuesday morning, April 18, at 9 AM., even though I was already scheduled to begin a two-day non-jury civil trial on that date.

I attended the Good Friday vigil with other members of New Millennium Church. In solidarity with Jesus, the leader of our religion who was put to death by crucifixion by the Roman Empire, I lay on a cot as a dead man for an hour and a half. Other members of New Millennium Church were present. They led other persons in singing *This Little Light of Mine* and *Amazing Grace*, songs long associated with the religion of Jesus.

Property law is property law, no matter whether one supports or is opposed to capital punishment. My job as a judge was to apply property law to the facts presented by the verified complaint and decide whether the medical supplier moving party was likely to succeed on its property law claim for return of the vercuronium bromide. If the medical supplier was not likely to succeed

on its property law claim, it was not likely to succeed whether I support or am opposed to capital punishment. If the medical supplier was likely to succeed, but there was no proof that the vercuronium bromide was in imminent risk of being disposed of before a hearing, then there was no reason to issue a TRO whether I support or am opposed to capital punishment.

And whether the medical supplier was entitled to a TRO or not, I was entitled to practice my religion on Good Friday. I was entitled to practice my religion if there was no TRO motion. I was entitled to practice my religion whether I granted the TRO or not. I was entitled to practice my religion as a follower of Jesus with other followers of Jesus from New Millennium Church. I was entitled to practice my religion as a follower of Jesus with other New Millennium followers of Jesus in front of the Arkansas Governor’s Mansion.

So because I am a follower of Jesus and a citizen of the United States and Arkansas, I portrayed a dead person – the Jesus who was crucified by the Roman Empire on what we call Good Friday – by lying motionless on a cot in front of the Arkansas Governor’s Mansion. The hat shown in photographs of my prone figure covered a black leather bound King James Version of the Bible, the book that my parents taught me to read and love as a child.

Whether I attended the Good Friday vigil or not does not change property law. Whether anyone approves or disapproves of me attending the Good Friday vigil does not change property law. Whether I support or am opposed to capital punishment does not change property law. I am entitled to practice my religion – whether I am a judge or not – even if others disapprove of the way I practice it.

There is nothing improper about applying the law to facts. That is what judges are supposed to do. There is

nothing improper about applying the law to facts in cases where people have strong feelings. That is what judges are supposed to do. There is nothing improper about judges who support or oppose capital punishment hearing and deciding cases involving property law disputes about the right to ownership of drugs used for capital punishment. Property disputes about ownership of drug products are property disputes, not decisions about the morality of capital punishment, the method by which persons who have been convicted of capital murder are put to death, or whether doing so violates the Constitution of the United States.

People have strong views about capital punishment. I know that. I have strong views about capital punishment also. But none of our views about capital punishment, whatever they may be and however strongly we may hold them, affect the facts in the TRO motion I reviewed and decided

on Good Friday. None of our views about capital punishment, whatever they may be and however strongly we may hold them, are relevant on whether anyone has a legal claim to recover property that has been wrongfully obtained and is threatened to be imminently and irreparably used despite the demand of its rightful owner.

Whether you approve or disapprove of my religion, how I practice it, or what influence my religious beliefs have on the way I understand life, I hope you'll ponder my decision to grant the TRO motion in light of these realities. I hope you'll remember that my sworn duty as a judge on Good Friday 2017 was to apply property law to the facts shown in the TRO motion and decide whether imminent and irreparable harm would happen – meaning that the rightful owner of the vercuronium bromide would lose the chance to recover it forever – unless I issued an

order to the Arkansas Department of Correction to preserve the vercuronium bromide until we could hold a full hearing.

I was not supposed to think about whether making the correct legal decision would be popular to anyone, including myself, the moving party, the Department of Correction, or anyone else. I was supposed to focus on the facts and the law.

That is what judges do, whether we are religious or not. That is what judges do, whether we support or oppose capital punishment. This is what judges do, whether other people like it or not.

That is what I did. ■

*Judge Griffen is a member of the Board of Christian Ethics Today and a frequent contributor. This essay was first posted on his blog at [Justice is a verb!](#) On April 19, 2017 and is reprinted here with permission.*

From Colleen Walker Burroughs

I'm humming this in my heart today...sad for our broken world.

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.*

—George Mattheson

## Religio-Secular... Again

By Martin E. Marty

We called the thesis about religion in American public life, which is *Sightings'* interest: The “secularization thesis.” The term is helpful when one is explaining change in religious institutions, practices, ideas and influence. But it has its limits. The presumably contrary “America-as-religious thesis” similarly helps observers and participants in American life to understand much of what goes on. But it too has limits. Interpreters fish for or invent other terms in efforts to be more encompassing and accurate. Sociologists and theologians rely on their bases of expertise, while we historians and journalists try to report on the American past and present with necessarily messier, less-defined theses.

Messy historian Martin E. Marty (myself) occasionally tries to name the enduring situation. For example, we've tried the hyphenated “Religio-Secular”—the title of an earlier *Sightings*. The term is inelegant, not catchy and has rarely been picked up. We've tried other “messy” approaches, including attempts to speak of “syncretism,” but the dictionaries want us to restrict its use to the “religious” side of things. So...?

“Religio-secular,” or some other term like it, would denote that when dealing with myriad phenomena in America, one cannot isolate “religion” or the “religious” from “secularism” or the “secular.” “Everyone knows,” we are told, that the media, by and large, are secular. Similarly, “everyone knows” that churches, etc., are religious. But tug at or unearth almost anything labeled “religious” and you will find strong secular elements. How “religious” are the “religious” when they make political or con-

sumer choices? How “secular” are the “secular” when they want to do justice to American culture and society by simply overlooking religion and the religious?

A case study: Last weekend, at the end of Holy Week—and a holy season for Christians, Jews, etc.—even those media regularly deemed most secular naturally made room for a nod at religion. Take, for example, the Sunday issue of the *New York Times*, widely portrayed as the citadel and promotional center of rampant secularism. We read the Sunday Review section of that “secularist” publication. On one page, former President Jimmy Carter responds to an interview headlined “President Carter, Am I a Christian?” and does so in predictably (for him) and firmly Christian terms. Below that interview is a column by Peter Wehner, who evangelically quotes the book *American Grace*, which finds “Christians and other religious Americans” to be “generally better neighbors and ‘more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts,’” but “‘less tolerant of dissent than secular Americans.’”

To the left on that page, though not in outlook, is Ross Douthat, whose “Save the Mainline” headline suggests that liberal Protestantism is almost beyond saving because its constituency has been too friendly to the secular. He urges relaxed, lapsed and former mainline Protestants to sign up again: “Just go to church, guys. The... doors are open.” Then he promises to “talk about the Church of Rome,” his spiritual home, “next Easter.” The “Church of Rome,” of course, manifests the “religio-secular” as much as others, being simultaneously at home

with both of those adjectives linked by a hyphen indicating tension.

Elsewhere in the Review section, two young Muslim refugees, in a serious cartoon, try to make sense of life in a mosque-less neighborhood where Muslims are real but disguised. Half of another page is devoted to the story of Robert J. Bentley, the Alabama “Love Gov” who preached Baptist pieties but was dethroned because of a sex scandal. (News of sex scandals has to be, alas, “religio-secular” in its cultural reach.) Finally, historian Molly Worthen intelligently expounds on “post-truth,” relativism, and messiness in politics under the headline “The Evangelical Roots of Post-Truth.” How does one disentangle the conflicting realities visible to observers and interpreters without seeing what the adjectives on both sides of the hyphen represent: religio-secular America?

Last, a plea: Provide us with a more elegant term for that obvious reality. ■

*Martin E. Marty is well known to all students of religion and to readers of Christian Ethics Today. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to single out any individual as prodigious a writer or as influential a scholar and churchman alive today. This essay first appeared on April 24, 2017 in Sightings: Religion in Public Life, an online publication edited by Brett Colasacco, a PhD candidate in Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. You may subscribe online to receive Sightings in your inbox twice a week. You can also follow on Facebook and Twitter.*



# The Broken Grace of Leonard Cohen

By Paul DeCamp

Among the numerous notable passings of 2016, the death of Leonard Cohen was especially poignant for many observers of religion and culture. Cohen’s iconic song “Hallelujah” was recently identified as a “secular hymn” in a *Journal of Media and Religion* article coauthored by three communications scholars at Brigham Young University, Professors Steven R. Thomsen and Quint Randle and master’s student Matthew Lewis. “While nonreligious in nature or intent,” they write, “the secular hymn is a pop song that allows the listener to experience the numinous by creating an affective state that parallels a spiritual or religious state of mind.”

Cohen’s “Hallelujah” has been covered by numerous artists, is played at all sorts of memorials and remembrances, and has been used frequently in film and television. From *The West Wing* to *Shrek* to *Saturday Night Live*—where it was sung post-election by Kate McKinnon as Hillary Clinton—the tune is ubiquitous and used to evoke moods ranging from somber remembrance to resignation. In fact, many of Cohen’s songs can be said to have the qualities of a “secular hymn” as defined by the study’s authors. Yes, these songs are hymn-like, but are they truly “secular?” I would argue that even a cursory glance at the late songwriter’s life and work shows Cohen to occupy a space somewhere between the sacred and profane.

Cohen, who died on November 7th at the age of 82, once wrote to his publisher that he wished to reach “inner-directed adolescents, lovers in all degrees of anguish, disappointed Platonists, pornography-peepers, hair-handed monks and Popists.”

At the time, he was 25-years-old, already long-considered a prodigy. He

would find some of those discontented seekers he mentioned as well as droves of other philosophically and spiritually inclined souls. A poet, author and songwriter of massive import, Cohen touched the lives of many. His influence is vast and stretches across continents and generations.

Literature and music can often be interpreted as having religious modes, as well as themes and issues considered “theological.” But Cohen

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*He engaged the divine throughout his career, at a time when the power of faith had arguably been diminished by the despair of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Vietnam.*

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regularly tapped the well of religion with a seriousness of purpose that few popular artists before him or after could match. He engaged the divine throughout his career, at a time when the power of faith had arguably been diminished by the despair of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Vietnam. Cohen was raised in Judaism by parents who told him he was a direct descendent of the high priest Aaron. He was also an ordained Zen monk, an appreciator of Christianity and Gnosticism, and a reader of Hindu philosophy. Among his peers, Cohen’s religiosity made him somewhat of an anomaly. He exhibited a rare spiritual seeking that could not be reduced to mundane curiosity or fashionable affect, and he undertook this journey with the severity of a scholar, but went

beyond pure theology.

Among his greatest feats was the constant placement of irony and cynicism (defining features of his cultural moment) in tension with a deep and abiding sense of awe. His poetic sense was profoundly Jewish, and therefore biblical. His work feels very old, but always, at the same time, very new. It is steeped in the lyricism of the Psalms as well as the folk revival of the 1960s, drawing as much from the Hebrew prophets as from Bob Dylan; in the process, he closed the distance between the two—a holy irreverence tempered by measured faith.

Another tension, that between the sensuous and the ascetic, was also a hallmark of Cohen’s career. His narrators often found themselves faced with women who were repositories of wisdom and mercy. Sex was spiritual incarnation, and there was salvation to be had in the flesh. But while a sensualist, Cohen was also wont to seek mortification as a Zen disciple. For six years he lived atop Mount Baldy with his roshi just outside Los Angeles, where he was said to keep a menorah in his cabin near the zendo. Once asked by an interviewer whether he was religious, Cohen simply replied: “I am religious in that I know the difference between grace and guilt.”

Cohen passed the day before the presidential election and, for some, his departure came to symbolize their despair over that Tuesday’s results. A gentleman of depth and grace had exited at a time when his presence was most needed. Among religiously inclined commentators, this verse from his song “Anthem” also emerged in online remembrances:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.  
Offer what things you can, he seems to say.  
Keep hope alive. We are one in our broken nature.

To seekers of wisdom, students of literature and observers of religion in culture, Leonard Cohen’s oeuvre still offers great fathoms waiting to be explored. Huge in both output and scope, we have only begun to crack its surface. Whether spiritual or worldly, his concerns were classic and timeless, universal in both their reach and aspiration. For those who discover it, his work may offer a respite from the bodied politics of religion, our second-rate discourses and polemics. Our brokenness.

On his last album, released a matter of weeks before his death, Cohen appeared to be preparing for the next stretch of his journey. In the title track “You Want It Darker,” he addressed God one last time in the languages of Jewish and Christian prayer he knew so well:

Magnified, sanctified be thy holy name  
Vilified, crucified in the human frame  
million candles burning for the help that never came  
want it darker – Hineni, hineni, I’m ready, my Lord.

Ultimately, Cohen’s surrender was to the mystery of a void that contains some hope for enlightenment. A voice crying out in the wilderness, he managed to render the sacred profane and the profane sacred in a way we are unlikely to see again in this generation.

May we never grow too accustomed to a world without him. ■

## Resources

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Paul DeCamp, has previously published in *Sightings*, as well as in the *National Catholic Reporter* and *On Being*. This essay first appeared on April 13, 2017 in *Sightings* and is reprinted with permission.

## Furies Over Immigration

Cardinal Cupich on immigration: “*Let’s see where Christ is leading us...It’s immigrants who have made America great...When so many want to make us afraid of diversity, of the migrant, of the immigrant... Let us not be afraid.*”

Respectful debate? Dialogue? Readers of responses to the cardinal’s stand on immigration might say, “Fat chance!” (or “Slim chance!”). One sample—many are available—is a vast collection that one can google from Free Republic (see Resources.) Sampling that sample from 2010, one can read an attack by someone who assumes that Catholics supported progressive immigration law reform so “the Church can make more money.” Others write: “Allowing our nation to be over-run, Northern White European influence destroyed, Christian religion to be relegated to subservience to Islamic beliefs, is not Biblical”; immigrants are “invading barbarians. The Bible doesn’t require you, or your nation, to commit suicide”; “God is a contract, blood, covenant God... He follows the Law.”

Source: Martin E. Marty in *Sightings*, January 16, 2017



# Sunday School at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia

by Marion D. Aldridge

Here's the bottom line: If you've never attended Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, to hear President Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school, you need to put that on your short term bucket list.

This is a unique experience. One-of-a-kind. Unparalleled. This humble Christian, former President of the most powerful nation on earth and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, stands in front of a sanctuary full (about 300 people) of pilgrims to Plains almost every Sunday. He delivers, without notes, his understanding of a selected Bible text.

Maranatha Baptist Church invited me to preach for them today (April 30) and next Sunday (May 7). Home from my four months in Connecticut, I gladly accepted.

Long an admirer of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, I've looked forward to being in Plains at the same time as the Carters so I could participate in Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church. My daughter Julie and I attended the Baptist World Alliance in Birmingham, England, in 2005, and President Carter taught the Sunday school lesson there to a couple thousand of us gathered in a civic arena of

some sort. That was a good, but different, experience.

The church members of Maranatha, a small congregation, are the unsung heroes of this ministry. They arrive at the church as early as 5:30 on Sunday morning to begin their hospitality ministry to out-of-town, out-of-state, and out-of-country guests. This morning, worshipers gathered from half a dozen or more countries and twenty or thirty states. The locals are gracious in sharing their church with visitors from afar, as well as with Secret Service agents. Before Sunday school, the church's guests are given an often-humorous lecture about protocol, what to expect, and what not to expect. No clapping. You don't clap for your Sunday school teacher, after all, do you? Today, Jill Stuckey gave the speech. She charmed everyone, but she was also clear about appropriate behavior. This is a Baptist church, after all. You can't be too careful.

After church, members and guests are likely to adjourn to The Cafeteria, a local eatery owned by Jody Monts. I ate supper there Saturday night, pork chops and turnips, and she asked me if I was in town to go to Sunday school. I told her I was preaching. I

ate lunch there again today, baked chicken, dressing, collards, and sweet potato pie. There were other choices, but snails were not on the menu if you're hoping for French food. This is Southern cooking. I'll weigh four hundred pounds by this time next week.

I've not been in Plains for twenty-four hours yet. But I'm enthusiastic about being here. Nearby is Koinonia Farms and I'm going there tomorrow with a church member. I'll report on the remainder of the week, I'm sure, but I wanted to get this message across:

Plan a trip to Jimmy Carter's Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. You'll thank yourself later! ■

*Marion Aldridge is a preacher, teacher, former CBF-South Carolina executive, writer, pastor and mentor to many. This essay was posted on April 30, 2017 on his blog, Where the Pavement Ends: Exploring Worlds I Know Little About... which is available at marion-alldridge.wordpress.com/author/marion-alldridge. It is reprinted here with permission.*

## Reviews

### A movie review: The Shack

Reviewed by Bob Mulkey

I read *The Shack* by William Paul Young years ago, but it did not make much of an impact on me. Because I had somehow been prepared for it, the movie affected me much more deeply. Now I want to see *The Shack* again, and I want to read the book again.

*The Shack* forces you to think about the fact that we are all subject to the horrible possibilities of chance and that grief is raw pain that must be faced and experienced if it is to be healed. A father takes his three children on a camping trip while their mother stays behind to do some work. As the capsizing of a canoe in which his two older children are playing distracts Mack and other campers around a lake, his beautiful little daughter is kidnapped and killed in a shack deep in the woods.

After he and his family have just begun their mourning, Mack finds a mysterious note in his mailbox inviting him to the shack. It is signed with the name his wife gives God, "Papa."

His decision to accept the invitation and go back to the place where investigators found his little girl's bloody dress leads to his encounter with the goodness of God despite the unfairness of life, and the healing love of God within and through the relationships of Papa, Son, and Spirit (Her name is Sarayu.) – the Trinity.

The scenes that unfold in a place made beautiful by "The Relationship" of the three brings you into direct contact with these realities: faith is not certainty; expressing anger at God can clear the way for the healing of grief; forgiveness is not overlooking the pain somebody has caused you; and forgiveness is healing the hurt that you don't deserve so that you can love and forgive others.

Apparently for dramatic effect Mack, the grieving father, does a lot of whispering. Not a good technique in my opinion. I found it very difficult to hear some of the dialogue. As to the theology of *The Shack*, I am glad to say that it speaks to the need we all have to get beyond the thought that God is sitting off somewhere up above. As Papa assures Mack, God is always with us. I love the movie's depiction of God as a black woman, a

Jewish man, and an Asian woman – a mysterious and beautiful metaphor for the Trinity. Good theology, according to William Paul Young, who wrote the book on which the movie is based, is relationship and mystery.

The final scene has us back in church with the family. The camera pans up to a cartoonish stained glass window depicting God as an old man with a long white beard. We have just seen in Mack's experience at the shack that God is not like that at all. God is not a being way off in the distance that we have to invite into the world in order to see God do some miracles. God is the Mystery in which "we live and move and have our being." God is the loving Relationship into which we are invited.

*The Shack* is a good attempt to tell a powerful story that helps people feel some new feelings about God and think some creative thoughts about God. I want people to see this movie because it will give them a vision of God as the mysterious Relationship within the Trinity. ■

*Bob Mulkey is Pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church in DeLand, Florida. He is an ethicist, writer, and preacher.*

### The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age

by David Cloutier.  
Georgetown University Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Chris Caldwell

Jimmy Carter's idealism seems about as much at home on today's political landscape as a bison at the beach, which is why it's a tad jarring to see a Carter quote lead off David Cloutier's *The Vice of Luxury*. But the shock gives way to—dare I say

it?—awe when we hear Carter's prescient thoughts from the oft-maligned "Malaise Speech" of 1979:

*"We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose." Carter warns of danger ahead: "Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and*

*immobility. It is a certain route to failure.*

Whether that road leads to failure is debated; but that our nation has chosen that road is obvious. For this ailment, Cloutier offers questions aimed at a remedy: What is too much? What is excessive? Why? More importantly, why not emphasize morally disciplined spending as a way to approach problems and effect change?

Cloutier's stock-in-trade is character ethics, or virtue ethics. For him,

EDIT TO THE DONOR LIST

Apologies to John G. Ragsdale, Jr. for misstating his name

healthy ethics is internal, not external, because looking to external forces to solve a problem excuses personal moral accountability. Public policy is not his leverage point, and neither is the nature of the Church or its teachings. But the quote is Jimmy Carter’s, and he is appealing to individuals to collectively effect change by reforming how we view and respond to luxury and its attendant risks. Cloutier notes that early Christians deemed both greed and luxury dangerous.

Today, we still shun greed but accept luxury as an amiable comforter. This first passive mistake allows luxury to sidle up to us unnoticed. He next looks to “happiness studies” and other studies to show that luxury doesn’t deliver the promised life satisfaction, but instead “degrades us, our work, and our communities.” The philosophers among us will enjoy in this portion of the book his recounting the battle between Hume’s utilitarianism and MacIntyre’s practical reason.

Moving on from the historical and philosophical toward the theological, Cloutier shows how luxury spawns “neglected sacramentality” and “blocks a spirituality of material goods.” My Baptist mentor, James Hatley, once told me that Catholic chaplains got him through World War II, because their spirituality was rooted more in reality. This nicely grounded section challenges us to weigh the moral decisions we make with every purchase, and to see how those decisions shape us and God’s

world.

Next comes the economic debate about whether luxury really helps the economy. Here he defends some tough terrain. We preachers extol the virtues of thrift and modest consumption, but economists point to the havoc we’d wreak if our parishioners began listening *en masse*. (They don’t seem alarmed by the prospect of this happening soon.) He makes a good point, but this challenge to his thesis remains significant. Cloutier gets around to defining “luxury” about halfway through the book as follows. For Cloutier, luxury is:

The disposition of using surplus resources for inordinate consumption of private goods and services in search of ease, pleasure, novelty, convenience, or status.

That cumbersome explanation probably demonstrates why you don’t see Cloutier being interviewed on TV. But it also reveals the nature of the book—a case put forth carefully and thoroughly. The final chapters ask who has “too much” and how much “too much” is. It turns out that many more people have access to luxury now than they did only 100 years or so ago. Of particular interest to Christians is the difference between Jesus’ day and ours. In ancient Rome, only three percent of people had significant surplus resources, and only up to 15 percent had modest surplus resources. Compare that to roughly 30 percent in each of those categories today. As for how much is too much,

he aims for a middle ground between harsh asceticism and corrupting luxury. That sweet spot is found in the vicinity of \$50,000 in annual income, which is what Cloutier takes as the money needed to provide the basic necessities of American life.

Having more than that is not in and of itself wrong, but it moves us into the land of risky ethical choices. He concludes by defending a few virtuous forms of spending beyond necessities, and signs off by inviting us to “resist with discipline and respond with hope.”

Cloutier typifies the diligence and careful argument I have come to associate with Catholic scholars, which means the book is not a quick or easy read. It is, however, clearly written, although Cloutier has the scholar’s bad habit of sometimes burying vital statements mid-paragraph.

The ultimate question, of course, is whether his book will have an impact. Will his view carry the day in the contemporary United States? Well... did Jimmy Carter defeat Ronald Reagan? Even so, at a time when only a true dolt would look to Washington for help in reining in American selfishness, Cloutier offers real steps Christians can take to effect change, no matter where political currents take us.

May his tribe increase, and may our constantly ginned-up wants decrease.

■ *Chris Caldwell is senior pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.*

senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

This is not a book for fast reading. It offers a thorough and carefully researched treatment of various previous theories of how and why secularization has transpired in the Western world during the past five decades. Eberstadt agrees to the roles played

by: the enlightenment, rationalism, the industrial revolution, urbanization and technological advancement. The trends that describe the remarkable decline of religiosity – Christianity in particular – is clearly cited for the Western world on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, beyond these traditional factors she proposes the more significant cause in the demographic development of the decline of natural family. The theme is carefully delineated to show the corresponding relationship between religiosity and family. The matters of the falling rates of marriages, births and the increased rates of divorce, single parenthood,

out-of-wedlock births, and same-sex marriage parallel the diminishing presence of “the home of two biologically related parents” (19). In this way the modern trends of declines for both religion and the natural family are intertwined is a two-way cause-and-effect relationship. It means the faith factor interacts with the family factor and visa versa. The author takes great pains in making a compelling argument that, “family and faith are the invisible double helix of society.” (22)

The concluding chapters present future indications for both pessimism and optimism. In conclusion Eberstadt affirms the ultimate resil-

ience of Christianity. She writes, “the end of the story of Christianity in Europe and other parts of the West (USA) remains to be written, and that brighter days than these remain to come. Therein – and only therein – lies the case for optimism about the future of family and the faith.” (191)

In offering this summary I urge you to get and read the book in order to gain the advantage of its informative and insightful development of a significant theme. ■

*Earl Martin is a man of the world, a scholar, missionary, missiologist, professor, and mentor.*

## Counseling Hispanics through loss, grief, and bereavement: A guide for mental health professionals.

By Ligia M. Houben. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2012. Paper, 293 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-8161-2556-9.

*Reviewed by David F. D’Amico*

The book is a welcome addition in the area of pastoral care, especially, since Hispanic American evangelicals tend to spiritualize death and dying.

As a pastor of a Hispanic-American church during the 1970s, I conducted funerals and weddings. In the process, I had to overcome customs, and traditions embedded in the culture. Once, I conducted a funeral in front of open casket of a Cambodian man full of vegetables and fruits, and I

tried through an interpreter to provide comfort to the family.

Any book attempting to instruct Hispanic churches will be read with the subjective suspicion of nationalism, especially since each country of Latin America has unique views about death and dying. The influence of Roman Catholicism affects people’s views and death rituals.

The author of the book is from Venezuela. She provides a very helpful guide to ministers and laypersons that many times are at sea when trying to minister on death and dying amid superstition and cultural mores that may be more provincial than biblical.

The book contains four parts: Socio-cultural aspects of Hispanic culture; Loss and grief; Hispanic immigrants: are they all the same, and Conclusion. It is based on the author experience in teaching persons in Venezuela, her native country. Thus, the book is explicitly contextual.

One favorable feature the book is the inclusion of case studies of persons going through grief and bereavement.

As such it is a welcome source, a guide, that may be helpful for many pastors, who are bi-vocational and may not have had an opportunity for graduate theological education. Based on my personal experience, many Hispanic churches in the US emphasize evangelism more than pastoral care.

As a primer in Pastoral counseling, and dealing with death and dying, the book may be useful in the increasing Hispanic church development of bilingual churches in some areas of the United States. ■

*David F. D’Amico is retired pastor, professor, missionary, and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s representative to the United Nations in New York City. He lives in Louisville, KY.*

## How the West Really Lost God

by Mary Eberstadt, Templeton Press, 2013.

*Reviewed by Earl Martin*

Recently while sharing supper with some friends I mention I was beginning to read the book, “How the West Really Lost God,” indicating

a new theory of secularization. One of my friends said, “Give us a summary of its content and meaning.” Now that I have completed a careful perusal of the book I’ll try to honor the request. I am witing this also for friends who were not at the table but might be interested.

The author is Mary Eberstadt, a

# Truth the Essence of Life

By James A. Langley

Beyond price, truth is the essence of life;  
To reject the truth is to opt for strife  
And disorder within, without, breaking the ties  
Binding humankind, with a cascade of lies,  
Undermining human freedoms, ordained to be rife.

Truth is the universe’s moral foundation,  
The bedrock from generation to generation,  
Through Orion to the most distant stars,  
The core of integrity standing above all that mars;  
The stars for right still fight for confirmation.<sup>1</sup>

A Mind, a Heart, a Will behind it all?  
More surely than the existence of this terrestrial ball,  
Or that the primeval world was fashioned *ex nihilo*,  
Worlds within worlds, around, above, below,  
Marred, wittingly, early and late, by man’s great fall.

The acts of God are true and righteous altogether,  
He calms the storm, wings the eagles and sows the heather,  
The poor are championed, women elevated, slaves are freed,  
God’s high aim is transforming man to a new breed,  
The Master was predestined to be our bellwether.

Aid for the hurting, the poor, the least, is the true,  
The Almighty’s way, with the world in purview,  
While truth denied or ignored makes a desert of the soul,  
Opening for forces of corruption ways to control;  
The Redeemer is Truth with pow’r forever to renew.

The curse of prevarication and the double tongue---  
What appalling destruction and grief these have wrung,  
For men and nations the catalogue is long,  
Happiness stolen, untruths paving the way for graver wrong;  
What tragedy has been averted when to truth men have clung.

Slander is a grievous abomination,  
It reaches a demonic low in desecration,  
Once practiced by supposed friends on the patriarch Job,  
And now against opponents including those wearing a robe;  
Surely the angels weep at such vilification.

Railers, dissemblers, the bitter, the cynical,  
Rejecting our shared humanity and evidence empirical,  
May distort and stymie truth yet not defeat it,  
Friends of truth may lose a fight, but must not forfeit;  
Truth is a bulwark against the reprehensible.

When is truth done, a failing light? Never.  
Born in eternity, truth lives forever,  
It will rise and flourish though appearing spent,  
It abides in spite of shunning, and seasons turbulent,  
Soaring versus the earthbound malicious or merely clever.

When demagoguery befouls the public square,  
A nation suffers in ways that are difficult to repair;  
Misguidance in religion produces a diabolical sway,  
Leaving full many with a terrible price to pay;  
These malevolent palls bring young and old to despair.

‘Dewey’s win over Truman’ is a classic case  
Of false news;<sup>2</sup> but fake news intends to debase,  
Adding a sinister element to the run of news,  
Sacrificing truth to promote opposing views,  
Fostering a social and political malaise.

Overwhelming evidence points to man-made climate change,  
Yet obscurancy leads to the debunking of that range,  
Unpleasant facts are set aside for ‘alternative facts’,  
Coupled often with *ad hominem* attacks;  
Exceptionalism touters rejecting science is passing strange.

Repeatedly Scripture warns against being deceived,  
But charlatans pander to be believed,  
Drawing crowds of the susceptible eager to hear  
Support for their passions, but mainly what they fear,  
Fomenting lasting harms they little conceived.

Declared Disraeli: “Justice is truth in action”;  
The stirrings of defense for the weak give truth traction,  
They light a fire of hope among the distressed,  
Challenging a stand for truth and right to the rest,  
Bidding well to bring high heaven’s acclamation.

Truth may be simple: a circle’s not a square,  
Both are valued, but a surgeon is more than an au pair,  
Truth is often complex, hidden in the Eternal  
Who passionately desires to guard us from the infernal,  
Yet rewards seekers of truth who are willing to dare.

Truth at times appears in the form of paradox,  
Not surprisingly, given the sacred Scriptural *vox*;  
“The greatest truths can only be expressed in paradoxical form,”  
Thus did the inspired Pascal highlight a biblical norm,  
Truth that shines with the Grecian flair for *dox*.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of truth rises exponentially  
At the highest level of leadership nationally;  
As no man is an island, so with a nation,  
There irresponsible behavior may risk a world conflagration,

Speaking truth to power is our charge providentially.

Can truth be spoken truly without compassion,  
Truth expressed in rhetoric but not in action?  
St. Paul lifts up a dimension of truth from above,  
Such truth requires speaking the truth in love,  
Truth prospers when lived with an energizing passion.

Knowing all truth is far from the province of any man,  
No matter how learned or status how grand,  
Our knowledge of the universe is little more  
Than a few grains of sand on an infinite shore;  
Humility befits us, awaiting God’s eternal plan.

None of us is right in all we think,  
Saintly biblical characters validate this link,  
All the more reason for self-effacement,  
And to be on guard when tempted to vent,  
The overcoming life depends on more than instinct.

Pilate’s question about truth remains germane  
In every age, but shorn of his spirit profane,  
The cynicism that undercuts the earnest quest  
For truth, with light and goodness suppressed,

Truth the purveyors of that mind contemptuously disdain.

What is truth? Not the absence of ambivalence,  
Nor only the tested triumphs of vaunted science  
That lead to, but not into, the inner sanctum,  
Truth demands unending dedication to plumb,  
Truth is the Word and Way originating in transcendence.

“Each new grain of truth is packed, like radium,  
With whole worlds of light,”<sup>4</sup> rarely noted on vellum,  
But enshrined forever by the Giver of light,  
Here and hereafter taking the faithful to each new height,  
Thus to share in God’s boundless truth with Him. ■

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1 “The stars in their courses fought against Sisera” (Judg. 5:20)—the writer’s powerful way of declaring that the universe is “on the side” of right and truth.  
2 On November 3, 1948, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, believing it had a scoop, published an edition with the mistaken bold head-line: “Dewey Defeats Truman.”  
3 The Greek word *doxa* means ‘glory’.  
4 Alfred Noyes, *The Torch-Bearers: Watchers of the Sky—Copernicus*

# Christian Ethics Today

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

Dear Readers and Friends:

As I consider the issues we face as followers of Jesus Christ today, I cannot help but be grateful to Foy Valentine for establishing *Christian Ethics Today*. Through the years this journal has had relevance. Some issues change, others remain the same.

Sometimes, however, we are faced with such momentous challenges that we cannot sit still or be silent, and we eagerly step into the fray. For such a time as this, as ethical stances are mocked as passé and truth is being attacked from every side, *Christian Ethics Today* is uniquely suited to stand up and be counted.

Today our society is engaged in epic public discourse on issues of human sexuality. America has public policies regarding executions of the mentally disabled, youthful, and sometimes erroneously convicted criminals. More people are living below the poverty line in America than at any time since the 1960's. People are being killed in faraway Syria and in the nearby Mexican border territory. The number of American military dead has reached 2000 in Afghanistan, with thousands more suffering terrible physical, psychological, and soul injuries caused by war.

Even the creation itself is groaning under the weight of pollution, climate change, and destruction. Politicians lie, trust is violated by ministers, coaches and corporate boards. There is an anti-ethical pandemic that will continue to ravage our country until something is done.

Therefore, the *Christian Ethics Today* Board of Directors has taken a stand and is inviting you to stand with us. **More than ever before, our Directors have committed financial resources to challenge the need, committing more than \$70,000 toward the 2017 annual budget...and they have asked me to extend a challenge to you to match it.**

Special friends have supported this ministry through the years, with little impetus other than simply receiving and reading the Journal. *Will you join them by contributing to this matching gift effort?*

In times like these we need a word from the Lord, and in the pages of this journal readers consistently find reflections by fellow believers who take time to focus their minds and hearts and understanding of Christian faith on various issues. While many religious leaders took refuge behind legal pronouncements, Jesus faced the issues of his day head on, face forward. **Will you do the same today, alongside *Christian Ethics Today*?**

Thank you so much for receiving and reading the journal, and for sharing it with others. And thank you for any stance you can take at this time!

Sincerely,



Pat Anderson

Editor

*Christian Ethics Today*

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# 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 in 1995, 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, 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 four times annually.

From the beginning *Christian Ethics Today* has been sent without charge to anyone requesting it, "as money and energy permit." 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. Gifts are tax deductible.

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