

FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME

Is Conservatism Enough?

- ▶ **Christ or Conservatism?**
- ▶ **Opportunities and Dangers of the Current Cultural Movement**
- ▶ **Israel, Palestinian Arabs, and Christian Attitudes**
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It's been called today's "shot heard 'round the world."¹ The echoes from the rifle that murdered Charles James Kirk are still reverberating in discussions around the world. Charlie's arguments pierced where no assassin's bullet could ever go. His bold example of "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5) was admirable. Now, in the aftermath of his violent death, Kirk's video discussions and debates have stirred great interest in his political conservatism and Christian beliefs. His funeral featured advocates of both, and his quasi-political organization, Turning Point USA, is blending the two. But Christian believers must approach this recent emphasis with great care. Merging Christianity and conservatism will compromise the purity of the gospel. So the editors of this edition of *FrontLine* decided to frame the question this way: "Is Conservatism Enough?" Enough for what? Is political conservatism, which has recently dominated the airwaves through Christian radio and made waves in some churches, enough to turn America away from moral, economic, and social disaster?

In this edition of *FrontLine*, we give our readers a biblical perspective on this recent convergence of Christianity and conservatism. The article "Christ or Conservatism?" is designed to make clear distinctions between the two. Political conservatism insists that historic values and traditions must be preserved. But are those all worth saving? If not, how is one to determine which ones must be defended and what must be discarded? What is the standard? As the article notes, your nation needs Christ, His Word, and His followers; conservatism is not enough to put any nation on a God-honoring path. If your nation needs the gospel of Christ, then how can you start sharing Him with the people around you? The short article "Five Ways to Start Gospel Conversations" will give you practical ways to begin right now.

David Saxon's article, "Purpose or Result?" asks whether the moral transformation of society is a legitimate goal

of the church. Some have insisted that we should work to transform society and pray that genuine revival will come. But as the author notes, "morality unharnessed from the gospel not only does not save, but it can delude people into thinking they don't need to be saved." Therein lies the danger.

Ben Hicks explains that this moment in American history is filled with opportunities and dangers. The Lord has used the news of the recent assassination to produce great interest in the gospel, and this is cause for rejoicing. But now we must avoid political alliances that would cloud gospel clarity. The fact is that similar movements in the past confused conservatism with Christianity. Bud Steadman's article, "The Ultimate Failure of the Moral Majority," reminds us that, in America, the Republican Party and the movement known as the Christian Right once worked hand in glove to reform society. Did it work? You can read the evidence for yourself. The Moral Majority led many spiritual leaders to compromise their Christian position in order to promote political positions. That movement in the 1980s alerts us to the fact that the current struggle requires us to think clearly and biblically. The Bible gives a clear set of responsibilities to countries and another set of responsibilities to Christians. Thomas Alvis' article, "The Christian's Role in a Secular State," will help you to distinguish which is which.

In this edition, Kevin Bauder lays out a Christian viewpoint on the modern nation of Israel. Some Christians insist that this political entity is of no importance while others assert that it is of paramount importance. His article on "Israel, Palestinian Arabs, and Christian Attitudes" will help you decide the issue for yourself.

We hope that you will enjoy this edition of *FrontLine*.

Gordon A. Dickson, Associate Editor

¹ Quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn" describing a battle in the American Revolutionary War.

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Gordon A. Dickson

May Charlie be
into the merciful arms of
Jesus, our loving Savior.

Christ or Conservatism?

The recent assassination of Charlie Kirk has brought Christianity and conservatism into the national spotlight. Kirk was an arch-conservative and avowed Christian. Now, in the aftermath of his murder, the national discussion is blurring the distinction between Christianity and conservatism. This is why this edition of *FrontLine* asks, “Is conservatism enough?” In the United States, many advocate for conservatism as the answer to the nation’s many problems. Truth be told, many professing believers know more about political conservatism than they do about proclaiming Christ. But to find real answers, we must make clear distinctions.

Put plainly, our nation needs Christ, His Word, and His followers; conservatism is not enough to put your nation or any nation on a God-honoring path.

At its root, political conservatism emphasizes the need to conserve traditional values and institutions with only incremental changes. But is it enough to safeguard our societal norms, trusting our fond memories? Scripture warns, “Say not thou, ‘What is the cause that the former days were better than these?’ For thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.” (Ecc. 7:10). Traditions based on the world’s philosophies and principles are just as anti-Christian as ever (Col. 2:8). Mere conservatism will not put a country on a righteous path. Instead of trying to conserve something—even a good civil religion loosely based on Judeo-Christian ethics—the best approach is to return to Christ and the careful articulation of biblical principles. When nations recover their biblical “why,” they will find their way. Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, has revolutionized America and many other countries throughout history and we desperately need His transforming work again in our day.

Political conservatism cannot address the dire needs around us, but neither can political liberalism. Liberalism stresses the need for compassionate liberality toward others, especially the poor. Any Christian who studies 2 Corinthians 8–9 will understand the need for liberal giving, guided by careful accountability, to honor Christ. But today’s political liberalism virtually erases the biblical distinction between countries and Christians. The result is that liberals coerce liberality through government policies that use monies from hard-pressed taxpayers. This approach opens the door to fraud and abuse with little personal accountability. For instance, at this writing, the state of Minnesota is wrestling with the news of scams costing many millions of dollars. The very real problem of sin and rebellion against God cannot be corrected by a human government. Only the Christ who died for the sin of men and rose again can transform repentant rebels. Neither conservatism nor liberalism can hope to accomplish what God alone can do.

Some conservatives inadvertently confuse the issues by referring to America as a “Christian nation.” There is little agreement about what that term means. (Thus, critics have a heyday making scarecrows out of straw-man arguments.) By “Christian” do

THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD DESPERATELY NEED THE INFLUENCE OF SALTY, LIGHT-BEARING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES TO RESTRAIN CORRUPTION AND SHINE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS.

advocates mean the historic name which the disciples were first called at Antioch (Acts 11:26)? No, these conservatives use the term much more broadly. But during this church age, is it proper to refer to any nation with the ambiguous term “Christian nation”? Some conservatives say that America is a Christian nation because of its wonderful, historic Christian consensus. Others take the blessings on the United States to indicate that our nation is the new Israel. Most who refer to America as a Christian nation point to the significant biblical principles that informed the nation’s founding, noting that devoted believers were among the Founding Fathers. But does the powerful faith that so deeply influenced the Founders mean that America is “Christian”? In fairness to those who use the term, most do not mean that America is Christian in the same way that some republics are Islamic. They know that true faith cannot be coerced. Nevertheless, there are inherent dangers with using the term “Christian nation.” Returning to the faith of our fathers means returning to Christ and careful declarations of His Word, not merely trying to conserve the vestiges of former days.

Of course, we would earnestly desire that churches would be “Christian” and remain free to serve Christ without governmental intervention. In America, the principle of the separation of church and state was recommended by the Virginia Baptists. Though the words “separation of church and state” do not appear in the US Constitution, the concept certainly does. Having seen the immense difficulties with state churches, these congregations wanted governments—both conservative and liberal—to leave them alone to “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). Such churches seek to honor Christ’s great commandment in Matthew 22:36–40 and His great commission in Matthew 28:18–20. With never-ending grace from heaven, Christian congregations love the Lord and their neighbors and seek to make disciples throughout the world. But can these practices ever be the governmental

policy of a nation? No, there is a big difference between the roles of countries and Christians. But in light of recent events, political conservatism has a tendency, based on the idea of a “Christian nation,” to blur these important distinctions. Is it any wonder today that conservative Christians are accused of wrapping the Bible in the flag? Growing out of a European tradition, most of the original American colonies united the church and civil government. But Baptists such as Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island, rejected that unity, insisting that coercive conformity is incompatible with a conscience guided by Christ.

The nations of the world desperately need the influence of salty, light-bearing Christian disciples to restrain corruption and shine light in the darkness. Those of a more liberal persuasion are appealing for rapid changes, hoping to throw away biblical, foundational principles. Followers of Christ can resist such corruption by carefully articulating a biblical worldview (Prov. 22:17–21; 1 Pet. 3:15–18). They can and must speak to the issues of the day even as they pray for and communicate with their political leaders. They do so because it is Christ, not conservatism, that gives us hope for the future (Rom. 15:12–14).

Our nation needs Christ, His Word, and His followers; conservatism is not enough to put any nation on a God-honoring path. Likewise, liberalism cannot accomplish what the Lord alone can do. Christ alone can transform the hearts of citizens to make them into God-honoring saints. In this edition of *FrontLine*, you will find more articles to corroborate this essential emphasis.

After nearly four decades of pastoral ministry, **Gordon A. Dickson** continues to serve the Lord as an author, podcaster, and conference speaker. His most recent books include *TRUST. What Religions Don’t Tell You but God Wants You to Know* and *12 Ways You Can Make a Difference in This Crazy, Mixed-up World*, available as paperbacks, e-books, and audiobooks.



Purpose or Result?

Is the Moral Transformation of Society a Current Goal of the Church?

The history of revival—at least, large-scale revival of a community or nation—is replete with remarkable effects. This makes sense. Scripture is clear that a person's behavior or conduct undergoes transformation when the person gets saved. He is a new creation and will gradually evince transformed affections, thoughts, speech, and actions. It is certainly logical, then, to expect that if a large number of people get saved in a certain geographical area in a relatively short time, one would see a substantial impact on the society of which they are a part.

That area would presumably demonstrate improved morals, greater concern for the vulnerable, sharper focus on justice and integrity, and so forth. Large-scale revival (the better word for this is *awakening*) impacts culture, sometimes strikingly.

Examples in church history are not difficult to find. England experienced a profound awakening in the eighteenth century through the preaching of the Wesley brothers, George Whitefield, and a host of others. The evangelistic priorities of these preachers are quite clear in their journals and other records of the revival. They preached holy living, to be sure, but only as evidence of the new birth. One of their criticisms of the Anglican establishment was that it valued mere external morality over genuine spiritual transformation. Their great goal was conversion.

Nevertheless, the revival massively impacted British culture. J. Wesley Bready documents this impact in *England Before and After Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (1938). No part of British life was left untouched. Its language and laws showed Britain to be a far more moral place in which to live in 1830 than it had been in 1730. While causation in history is always complex, mere political and social categories cannot account for these sweeping changes in British life. A large number of people came to Christ, and Christian thinking came to bear on societal problems, resulting in substantial improvement.

The revival, traditionally known as the Second Great Awakening, swept the young United States, beginning in the 1780s and extending into the 1840s. Its impact on American culture would be difficult to overstate. The revival brought about the temperance movement, anti-slavery societies in the North, and voluntary societies devoted to a plethora of moral causes.¹ America was transformed by this Awakening.

On the frontier, the revival took the form of spectacular camp meetings, such as those at Gaspar River in July 1800 and Cane Ridge in August 1801. Despite reports of a lot of strange phenomena from these meetings, the salutary effects on the morals of Kentucky are well attested. David Rice, a Presbyterian pastor who investigated the impact of these camp meetings some months after they concluded, reported, “Drunkards, profane swearers, liars, quarrelsome persons, etc., are remarkably reformed. . . . A number of families who had lived apparently without the fear of God, in folly and in vice, without any religious instruction or any proper government [ordered lifestyles], are now reduced to order and are daily joining in the worship of God, reading his word, singing his praises, and offering up their supplications to a throne of grace.”²

A couple of decades after the Second Great Awakening died down, Jeremiah Lanphier launched his celebrated prayer meetings in New York City. Between the fall of 1857 and the summer of 1859, America was again convulsed by revival, eventually leading to an estimated one in every thirty Americans

COULD CHRISTIANS PURSUE CULTURAL CHANGE AND THEN HOPE THE IMPROVED SOCIETY WOULD FOSTER GOSPEL OPPORTUNITIES AND, ULTIMATELY, CONVERSIONS? . . . DISPENSATIONALIST BAPTISTS SHOULD EMPHATICALLY REJECT THIS REASONING.

professing faith in Christ. Every large city in America was impacted. Atlanta is said to have laid off half its police force due to reduced crime. The *Chicago Daily Times* reported on March 28, 1858, “One of the most hopeful features of this meeting was the large number of notorious and hitherto-supposed to be incorrigible sinners in attendance. We observed several well-known black-legs and libertines in the room, who appeared to be deeply impressed. John Wentworth (a former Chicago Mayor) stood near the rear end of the hall, and listened with great attention to all that was said. There can be no doubt in any mind that the revival is destined to work great good in this awful city.”

Examples could be multiplied. In short, it is hard to imagine a large number of people in a given geographic area genuinely coming to Christ and there being no discernible impact on the culture of the region. Awakenings change lives, and they change communities.

Is the *purpose* of revival, then, to effect cultural change? Revivals cannot be manufactured (Finney’s claims notwithstanding),³ and the changes awakenings bring are gradual and hard to predict or control. But surely cultural change is desirable and God-honoring. Can the process, then, be reverse-engineered? Could Christians pursue cultural change and then hope the improved society would foster gospel opportunities and, ultimately, conversions? Shouldn’t we just focus on transforming culture and pray that revival will also come?

Dispensationalist Baptists should emphatically reject this reasoning. Consider some important distinctions and reasons that the results of revival should not become the church’s purpose in this dispensation.

Many of the descriptions of revival impact focus on widespread improvements in general morality. Fewer incidents of drunkenness, crime, spousal abuse, and child abuse, along with a greater concern

about the plight of others, are among the many beneficial effects often reported among communities awakened by gospel preaching. When people become conscious of sin and its effects, that consciousness will extend beyond themselves and their families to their broader environment. Baptists join others in rejoicing in such an impact and expect it. They do not believe, however, that such changes to morality automatically signify that the gospel is the cause. Indeed, it has always been a central tenet of evangelicalism, and certainly of Baptist evangelicalism, that morality unharnessed from the gospel not only does not save, but can delude people into thinking they don’t need to be saved. Baptists don’t believe in therapeutic solutions to man’s sin problem; only the gospel truly transforms from the inside. Therefore, aiming at the effects of the gospel apart from the gospel itself is foolhardy. We are called to make disciples, not better and more moral sinners—although the gospel will produce an improvement in moral behavior.

In many of the revivals, however, especially the Evangelical Awakening in Britain, the political sphere was notably impacted. It is said that when William Wilberforce entered Parliament in 1780, three MPs (members of Parliament) self-identified as Christians—and fifty years later, over two hundred did so. Christians in the public sphere support moral causes; that is, they vote their conscience. It is unlikely that slavery would have been abolished in the British Empire apart from this massive transition in the British Parliament. The Clapham Sect in London became justly famous for its extraordinary efforts to reform morals in Great Britain. The list of moral initiatives into which they threw their efforts would swallow up this article, but most significant among their *many* causes were the following: penal reform, rescue of chimney sweep boys, reduction of capital crimes, reform of child labor laws, relief of the poor in the manufacturing sector, animal welfare, and, foremost, the

abolition of slavery. Clearly, their faith led them to improve Britain’s public morality, and the primary factor leading them to faith was the revival movement.

Are Baptists—who famously champion separation of church and state—comfortable with this degree of coerced morality through political power? Yes, of course they are. Most of the issues Wilberforce and Clapham fought for could be defended on the basis of reasonable interpretations of natural law, so they could convince non-Christians to support their agenda (with patience and occasional political compromises).

Therefore, a second distinction is important in this discussion. Not only is there a difference between broad adjustments to morality among a revived people and legal enactments to enforce such adjustments, but there is also a difference between legally enforcing natural-law morality and passing laws that require specific Christian ethical practices. Here, Baptists differ from many in the Reformed tradition. In the Clapham Sect, Henry Venn, in particular, championed Sabbatarianism as part of the reform agenda. On the other hand, Baptists like John Leland, an American contemporary, opposed blue laws on the basis that the government had no right to enforce strictly theological positions. Why should non-Christians and adherents of other religions be forced to set aside a day of rest and worship every week? One could argue, I suppose, that nature teaches that people need time off to rest, but the selection of the day relied entirely on Christian theology.

Baptists have always opposed the use of political power, whether through sanctions or incentives, to make non-Christians look and act Christian. Governments must legislate morality; Paul says their job is to reward the good and punish the bad (Rom. 13:3). Unfortunately, natural man often thinks he is spiritually adequate if he is moral. Moral societies can be more difficult to pierce with the gospel than immoral societies (hence, the value of prison ministry, for instance). But the problem is greatly compounded when a society is structured to make everyone look and act Christian: reforming societies to produce conversions is likely even to create a resistance to conversion. Baptists believe the history of

infant baptism is a record of calling unbelievers *Christian* and then hoping they actually get saved later.

Hypocrisy, though, is not the only danger in a state-mandated Christianity. Christians differ from one another in many areas, and a state church will always reflect a particular set of Christian interpretations. The history of state churches, then, is a history of persecution of minority viewpoints, not only non-Christian viewpoints but the dissenting viewpoints of other Christians. Baptists have tasted this persecution and believe freedom of conscience is too precious a gift to surrender for external conformity to be garnered. Roger Williams's protest against the Puritan establishment in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and John Leland's protest against the established Anglican Church of Virginia agree in seeing religious conformity as the enemy of obedience to Christ alone in matters of conscience. For instance, Williams wrote that the civil magistrate's duty is to grant the "free and absolute permission of the consciences of all men, in what is merely spiritual, not the very consciences of the Jews, not the consciences of the Turks or Papists, or pagans themselves excepted."⁴ Note that Williams refers to that which is "merely spiritual." Worship of God is outside the purview of government, and it has no right to interfere.

These distinctions—between general moral impact and legal attempts to enforce morality, and between legal enforcement of natural law morality and enforcement

of distinctly Christian ethics—are largely lost on or denied by those who want the church to pursue moral transformation of society without the prior cause of spiritual awakening. The only way to make a society more Christian apart from revival is legal intervention and enforcement of Christian ethics on non-Christians. Is it ever right to require ungodly people to be godly? Yes, when the government is a genuine theocracy. Jesus has that right. There was no separation of church and state in Old Testament Israel, and there will be no separation of church and state in the millennial kingdom. Dispensationalists see those examples and believe they demonstrate that no non-theocracy is qualified to enforce its Christian opinions on non-Christians (or to enforce a particular set of Christian opinions on other Christians who disagree). In contrast, others hold to Christian nationalism and, to a lesser degree, various Reformed Christians believe the church is Israel and the kingdom is now; therefore they believe enforcement of Christian morality is an appropriate response to the examples above. May Baptist dispensationalists not get caught up in such reasoning! Until the millennium's "new theocracy" is established, we are, at best, likely to produce more morally "good" people who may be even more resistant to the gospel.

Revivals cause social transformation. Praise God they do! But this truth does not justify seeking social transformation, especially via political power, as the church's present purpose.

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¹ Sydney Ahlstrom recognizes that these sweeping reforms were "by no means exclusively the child of revivalistic Protestantism. Men and women of every possible intellectual and religious persuasion undertook countless campaigns for various causes, and often joined forces." But he argues that Puritan and revivalistic concerns underlay much of it, even if indirectly. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Yale University Press, 1972), 428.

² Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Prentice-Hall, 1960), 262.

³ Finney, of course, is famous for claiming that "A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means." Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (repr., CBN University Press, 1978), 4.

⁴ Irwin H. Polishook, *Roger Williams, John Cotton, and Religious Freedom* (Prentice-Hall, 1967), 65. Polishook quotes from *The Hiring Ministry None of Christs, or A Discourse Touching the Propagating of the Gospel of Christ Jesus* (1652), in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, ed. Perry Miller (Russell & Russell, 1963), 7:178, updating Williams' original spelling and capitalization.

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Opportunities and Dangers of the

Certain moments come to define generations. People who are old enough remember where they were when Martin Luther King or JFK was shot, or where they were when the Twin Towers fell. For many, the assassination of Charlie Kirk will be one of the moments they never forget. The death of Kirk and his funeral were the culmination of a series of tumultuous events over the last several years of American life: the COVID-19 pandemic, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, two assassination attempts on then-presidential nominee Donald Trump, the clear impairment of the sitting president in a presidential debate, that president's removal as the Democratic nominee, and President Trump's reelection to office.

America feels different than it did two years ago. In many ways the current cultural instability has done much to soften hearts. Church attendance is on the rise, especially among young people.¹ More and more Bibles are being bought.² Some of Satan's more outlandish lies, such as the madness of transgender ideology, are slowly and quietly being shed. But when God is at work, the enemy is never far behind, sowing weeds among the wheat. You can be sure that Satan will be quick to show up so that he can confuse, distract, and derail what God is doing. For Bible-believing Christians

living at this time, there is much to rejoice in and much to be concerned over. There are opportunities to take advantage of, but there are also dangers we need to avoid.

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

As we think through the way Christians should engage today's world, it's important to begin by untangling the roles of government, church, and the individual Christian. The church exists to practice evangelism and discipleship; her role is primarily spiritual. The state exists to promote righteousness and justice by restraining wickedness; its role is primarily civic. At some level these missions overlap. Both are concerned with morality, but in different ways. The church focuses on change from the inside out as it helps believers grow, whereas the state looks to externally restrain evil.

In the middle of all of this we find the individual Christian. Christians are members of both the church and the state, and so have obligations to both. As Christians, then, we should care what happens in the public sphere, but in such a way that we are still seeking first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). It can be all too easy to conflate these roles in a way that ends up harming both. Even those who in principle believe in the separation of church and state can in practice blur the boundaries of these God-given institutions. Keeping their

distinctions in mind will be important for us to maintain our witness as salt and light, as we will see by looking at some related opportunities and dangers.

OPPORTUNITIES OF THE CURRENT CULTURAL MOMENT

In the time before Jesus returns and sets up His kingdom, there is no such thing as an unmixed good in any culture. But there can be genuine good. Our task as Christians is to recognize the good and seek to make it even better. So what good has been happening recently?

People have a greater sensitivity to spiritual things. Right now, people are asking questions about eternal issues and seeking meaning and purpose. Hard data as well as anecdotal evidence for this trend abounds. People who have not attended church in years are visiting again. Bible sales are up. These things are exciting, and we should capitalize on this heightened spiritual sensitivity. Now is the time to redouble our efforts in praying for the lost and sharing the gospel with them.

This is the example of our Lord. Jesus wasn't afraid to use the cultural events of His day to point people back to their need for personal salvation (Luke 13:1-5), and we shouldn't be either. Public assassinations have a way of dangling our own mortality in front of us. If friends, neighbors,



Current Cultural Moment

or even strangers on the bus begin asking serious questions about death and the meaning of life, we must be ready to grab a Bible and show them God's answers.

The culture is shifting back toward a biblical worldview. When God created the world, He programmed it with rules about how things are supposed to work. We call these “creational norms,” laws governing the physical world (as in the realm of gravity) and laws governing the moral/spiritual world (as in the realm of marriage). Creational norms might be rejected, but only for a time. You can deny the law of gravity for only so long before you start paying a price. Likewise, you can ignore God's laws for family, gender, and work for only so long before you start paying a price. By God's grace, some civilizations realize they are on a suicidal path and shift back closer to what God says.

When God's truth progresses in the public square, Christians should rejoice. After all, Proverbs 14:34 reminds us that “righteousness exalteth a nation.” We should be encouraged by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* or an executive order stating that there are only two genders. The growing realization that meaning is to be found in family and not success in a career is heartening. Whenever we are able, we should support and encourage these trends.

DANGERS OF THE CURRENT CULTURAL MOMENT

The influence of Bible-believing Christianity has waxed and waned throughout the history of America. Historian George Marsden quipped, “By 1980 . . . Ronald Reagan had just been elected, and fundamentalists seemed everywhere.”²³ I was startled when I first read that line, because by the time I grew up in the late '90s and early 2000's, that was certainly no longer the case. Having cultural power isn't a bad thing, but it's not enough. And there are real dangers that we must carefully avoid.

Allowing political alliances to cloud gospel clarity. Politics is all about building alliances. I want to get something done, and I need at least half the room to agree with me. By necessity, then, politics is about compromise and getting people on board. This doesn't mean politics is bad or that Christians can't participate. It does mean that when we participate, we must never do it in ways that cloud our gospel witness. Catholics, Jews, and Mormons agree with Baptists on a lot of moral issues. There might be times, in non-religious contexts, where we can work together to achieve common political goals. But such alliances must steer clear of any religious language that would confuse the lost into thinking

that those teaching a gospel of works are basically the same as those teaching a gospel of grace. To do so would betray the gospel and make an idol of politics.

Confusing political power with godliness. Political power can be intoxicating. Everyone loves winning, and winning in politics is no exception. While winning isn't wrong, winning can create a “high” that makes us careless. Winning should bring responsibility. Simply having “my team” in power does not mean that everything is fixed. Nor should we think that pushing through legislation aligned with Scripture is the answer to our problems. Our nation's laws are not insignificant when it comes to restraining evil, but that is the best they can do: restrain evil. If we want to see our nation truly be blessed, we shouldn't think victory will come from the ballot box. We need to look to prayer rallies rather than political rallies if we want to see God's favor on our country.

Confusing moral reform for spiritual revival. I recently had the opportunity to take one of our church's missionaries out to lunch. The conversation turned to America and everything happening. He wanted to know my perspective on what had been going on in the last few years. I described the general return to a biblical

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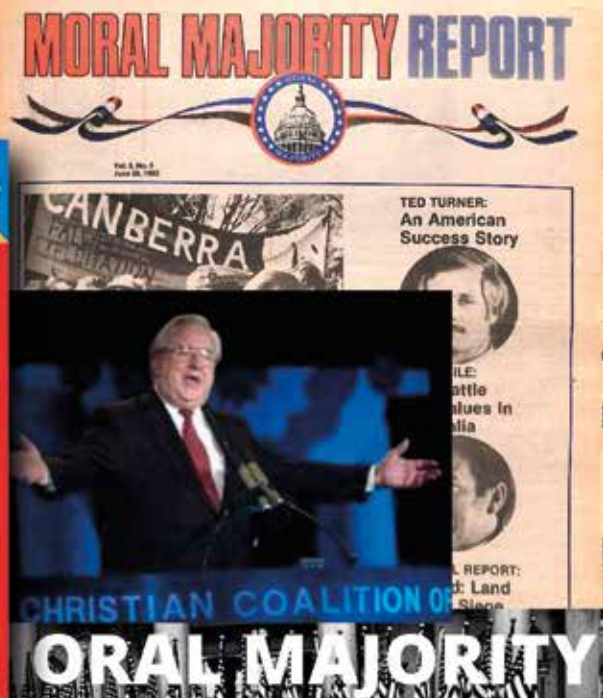
IS
CONSERVATISM
ENOUGH?

Bud Steadman



The Rise of the Religious Right

Evidence from the Moral Majority and the Jimmy Carter Presidency



The Ultimate Failure of the Moral Majority

THE RISE OF THE MORAL MAJORITY¹

In the late twentieth century, the Moral Majority became a dominant conservative political movement in the United States. Closely connected to evangelical Christianity and Republican Party politics, the organization was formed in 1979 under the leadership of Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell Sr. of Lynchburg, Virginia, and several of his political allies. While its activities declined by the end of the 1980s, during its peak years the Moral Majority helped organize conservative Christians into a national political force and played a meaningful role in Republican presidential campaigns throughout the decade.

The foundation for the movement had been laid a number of years earlier. Beginning in 1976, Falwell organized a series of nationwide events known as the

“I Love America” rallies. These gatherings focused on national cultural and social concerns which Falwell viewed as threats to biblical moral values. The idea of Christians confronting such issues politically represented a significant shift in thinking from the common Baptist tradition of avoiding direct political engagement. Falwell argued that the worsening moral climate in the country required religious leaders to take an active role in public life. The rallies allowed him to measure nationwide interest in organized political activism while simultaneously increasing his public visibility. His extensive connections with clergy and religious institutions provided the organizational support needed to build a national grassroots movement.

A key turning point in the birth and eventual growth of the Moral Majority took place in 1978, related directly to leadership

struggles within Christian Voice, a conservative Christian advocacy organization. During this dispute, the group’s president, Robert Grant, publicly denounced the religious right, claiming it was controlled by three Catholics and a Jewish individual. In response to this statement, Paul Weyrich, Terry Dolan, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips left Christian Voice, setting the stage for the creation of a new organization.

The following year, these men encouraged Falwell to establish a separate movement. They adopted the name “Moral Majority,” a term originally coined by Weyrich. Falwell worked alongside Ed McAteer, founder of the Religious Roundtable in Memphis, Tennessee, and Tim LaHaye, a nationally recognized clergy leader opposed to gay rights and associated with the John Birch Society. Both men con-

tributed to organizing and expanding the movement's structure.

The Moral Majority was formally launched in June 1979. According to Mike Huckabee—who was then serving as communications director for evangelist James Robison and who later became governor of Arkansas—the organization's first major public appearance took place at Robison's "Freedom Rally" at the Dallas Convention Center.

Although the organization initially drew most of its support from the southern United States, it expanded rapidly beyond that region—by 1980, the Moral Majority had established chapters in eighteen states. This growth was made possible by access to significant resources, including Falwell's national mailing list from his television program, *The Old Time Gospel Hour*. The organization also assumed responsibility for publishing the program's newsletter, *Journal Champion*. Throughout the 1980s, Falwell served as the movement's primary public spokesperson, and by 1982 the Moral Majority had surpassed Christian Voice in both size and political influence.

THE DEMISE OF THE MORAL MAJORITY

Closing its doors in 1989, the Moral Majority's demise was generally related to its inability to turn its massive cultural influence into actual governmental law. Its decline on a practical level can be attributed to a series of problems: dwindling bank accounts, internal bickering, and the difficulty of actually changing laws.

Specifically, the movement ran into several major roadblocks:

- **A legislative brick wall:** For all its lobbying muscle, the group's big wins were rare. They found that even with a friendly face in the White House, moving the needle in Congress was an uphill battle.
- **The Roe v. Wade standoff:** Reversing abortion rights was a significant goal of the movement, yet the ruling remained relatively unchanged. They did succeed, however, in making their pro-life stance a non-negotiable part of the GOP platform.
- **The school prayer debate:** Despite a huge push to bring mandatory

Christian prayer back into the classroom, the movement was largely blocked by constitutional challenges.

- **Winning the ERA battle, but losing the war:** While helping to block the Equal Rights Amendment was arguably the biggest success of the Moral Majority, the victory was somewhat of a defensive move. When it came to passing their own pro-family legislation, they could not find the same momentum.
- **Shifting views on the gay rights movement:** The movement fought hard to stop the momentum of the gay rights movement, but as the 1980s progressed, they found themselves increasingly out of step with the shifting secular landscape.
- **The Reagan effect on donations:** Paradoxically, President Reagan's success hurt their fundraising. Once their guy was in office, many donors felt the battle was already won and stopped sending checks.
- **Loss of independence:** By tethering themselves so closely to the Republican Party, the movement lost some of its moral authority. Critics felt they were becoming more partisan than pastoral.
- **Fragile leadership:** The organization was built almost entirely around Jerry Falwell's personality. Without a deeper leadership structure, the energy began to fizzle as Falwell moved on to other projects.
- **A branding problem:** It's hard to stay popular when your opponents' favorite talking point is that you're neither moral nor a majority. The public backlash eventually took a toll on their credibility.

Even though the organization disbanded, it had changed the map of American politics forever. They proved that the silent majority of evangelical voters could be a decisive political force—a legacy that outlived the group itself.

EVALUATION OF THE MORAL MAJORITY

During the era of the founding and high profile "success" of the Moral Majority, not all Christians were on board with Falwell

and his movement. Francis Schaeffer, whose theory of co-belligerency had provided conceptual cover for Falwell's turn toward politics, sought to ensure it did not become a synonym for compromise. Schaeffer moved even farther to the right in the final years of his life. His book *A Christian Manifesto* (1981) posited a kind of religious-political struggle between secular humanists and Christians. The former, Schaeffer deduced, were attempting to subvert the nation's Christian heritage. "As Christians," Schaeffer wrote in his call to arms, "we must stand absolutely and totally opposed to the whole humanist system, whether it is controlled by conservative or liberal elements."²

Closer to home for biblical fundamentalists, Dr. James Singleton, a pastor in Tempe, Arizona, and leader in the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship, published in the early 1980s an edited collection of statements by Baptist fundamentalists which gave an assessment of the Moral Majority movement. Dr. Ed Nelson, a pastor in Denver, Colorado, summarized most of the opinions of the book's contributors in these words:

I have watched the Moral Majority and its work with mixed emotions. As a Bible believer, I love America and believe all Christians should do what they can to save our nation. Therefore, I am thankful that those in the Moral Majority are standing for historic American patriotism. At the same time, I am distressed over spiritual problems the Moral Majority is bringing. . . . The Moral Majority has brought together diverse religious groups to save America. They sponsor meetings together which take on the aspect of a religious service with hymn-singing, prayer and a 'political' sermon. The danger is real and evident; various religious groups are being brought together in fellowship, but they are not in agreement concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . To try to bring these groups together with religious services carries with it the danger of ecumenical union with apostates, something the Bible strongly condemns. By joining with others to save America, we can open the door to further efforts together that can destroy our scriptural position of separation.³

A resolution passed by the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship, meeting June 10–12, 1980, at the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, stated the organization’s clear opposition to the Moral Majority movement,

The Fundamental Baptist Fellowship believes that government was ordained by God for the purpose of protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty, that good government is the will of God, and that Christians have a responsibility to be active in governmental matters as the salt of the earth, but views with alarm movements such as the Moral Majority which are a subtle ecumenicity in which Catholics, Jews, liberal Protestants, Pseudo-fundamentalists, and Fundamentalists are drawn together in a quasi-political union; we believe that the saving of America’s morals is a mere cosmetic treatment of the deeper problem of sin, that correcting the nation’s morals gives the false impression that America’s ills would be solved if her morality were reformed, that moral reformation is not the mission of the church but, instead, the preaching of the saving grace of Christ which takes care of man’s sin problem whereby man’s

morals become correct; therefore, we repudiate the false impression and the ecumenical union being promoted by the Moral Majority as unscriptural and therefore unworthy of consideration and cooperation by Bible-believing people.⁴

William Wilberforce, in commenting on the evils that spilled out of the French Revolution, stated, “Fruitless will be all attempts to sustain, much more to revive, the fainting cause of morals, unless you can in some degree restore the prevalence of Evangelical Christianity.”⁵ His statement is very much in agreement with the underlying principled sentiment of Francis Schaeffer and Dr. Ed Nelson—there can be no genuine morality without a biblical regeneration by the One who created the moral framework of the universe. Jesus said to a religiously conservative Jewish leader, “You must be born again” (John 3).

Dr. Nelson summarized the issue well: “God does not need a majority. All He needs is a handful who will not bow the knee. To have a so-called majority that are not yielded to Christ will not save America. We need to see this nation turned back to God.”⁶ That will not happen by a political movement, but by the faithful proclamation of a biblical gospel that calls to repentance and faith all

men who do not know Him, regardless of whether they are politically conservative or liberal. Failure to understand and build upon this truth was the ultimate failure of the Moral Majority. The history of the Moral Majority movement must be a warning to all of those today who are seeking to influence our nation spiritually and morally.

Bud Steadman is Missions Mentor with Baptist World Mission. He previously served as the Executive Director of Baptist World Mission from 2009 to 2023 and was a senior pastor for twenty-seven years.



¹ The broad strokes of this history follow the Wikipedia article on the Moral Majority, with additional research done for support.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Crossway, 1981), 77–78, italics removed.

³ James Singleton, *The Moral Majority: An Assessment of the Movement by Leading Fundamentalists* (self-published, no date).

⁴ Singleton, *The Moral Majority*. The text of the resolution may be found at https://fbfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Complete-Resolutions_2-15-22.pdf

⁵ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity* (1833; repr., Hendrickson, 1996), 215.

⁶ Singleton, *The Moral Majority*.



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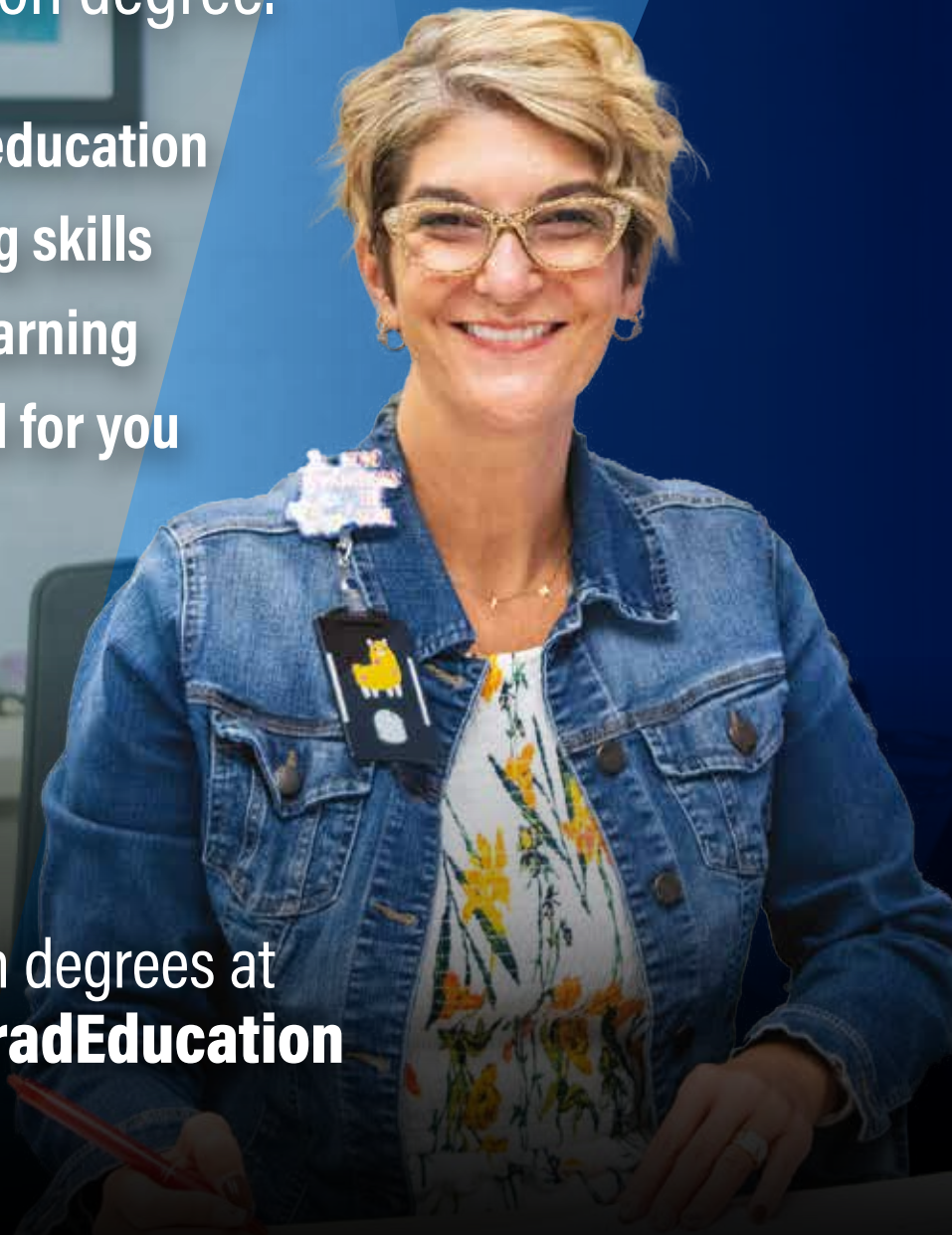
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The Christian's Role in a Secular State

In today's polarized culture, Christians often find themselves on opposite sides of contentious issues like abortion, sexuality, and social justice—sometimes even citing the same Scriptures. How can this be? Radically differing opinions about political involvement fill our pulpits and pews. Some advocate for revival through reform, while others take an “I don't do politics” approach. What are the answers? What is the biblical balance?

In a politically charged climate, where faith and governance often intersect, Christians are called to navigate these tensions with biblical wisdom and discernment. It is vital that we understand the distinct roles and responsibilities that Scripture assigns to government and those assigned to individual believers. Many people are blurring these distinctions. When these roles are misinterpreted or conflated, it can lead to confusion, compromised witness, and misplaced priorities. This article explores these biblical distinctions, highlights the consequences of blurring the lines, and calls believers to discernment and faithfulness in their public and private lives.

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Scripture affirms that government is one of three institutions established by God for specific purposes. Paul writes that “the powers that be are ordained of God” and that a ruler is “the minister of God . . . for good” who “beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Rom. 13:1–7). The role of government, according to Paul, is primarily judicial and protective—to maintain order, punish wrongdoing, and promote justice. The government is tasked with punishing evil and promoting good, ensuring a just and orderly society.

This theme is echoed by Peter: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them

that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Pet. 2:13–14). These passages emphasize the government's role in upholding justice and maintaining public order; governments enact laws and punish evildoers. One would be hard pressed to argue appropriately from Scripture that governments are designed by God to promote social equality, feed the poor, enforce personal piety, or dictate religious doctrine.

In the Old Testament, the role of the king was similarly focused on justice and governance. Second Samuel 8:15 records that “David reigned over all Israel; and David executed judgment and justice unto all his people.” Kings were expected to uphold the law, defend the nation, and ensure fairness among the people. The Mosaic law even provided kings with guidelines that emphasized humility, obedience to God, and impartiality (Deut. 17:14–20). They were tasked with governing the people, ensuring justice, and maintaining national security. While they were expected to honor God, their role was distinct from that of the priests or prophets, who were responsible for spiritual leadership and moral guidance.

From both Testaments, it is evident that while government is divinely instituted, its primary role is maintaining justice and order, not enforcing spiritual transformation.

THE BIBLICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS

Having explored the biblical role of government, we now turn to the responsibilities of the individual believer, whose mission is distinct yet equally vital.

God's command to all Christians is deeply personal, spiritual, and transformative. Christ Himself articulated who we are to *be* and what we are to *do* as kingdom citizens (Matt. 5:3–16).¹ Paul reiterates the message of Christ when he writes that we have been predestinated to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, that we are to have the mind of Christ, that we are to reflect the character of Christ, that we are

to “be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life,” and that we are to live as ambassadors of Jesus Christ involved in the ministry of reconciliation with the word of reconciliation.²

Commitment to the gospel message should never diminish our sensitivity to the needs of those in our communities. Addressing physical, financial, and emotional needs compassionately often helps to validate the gospel message. Matthew 25:31–46, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, and James 1:27 provide the biblical pattern that follows the example of the Savior. Micah 6:8 emphasizes that believers are to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. The Old Testament commanded God's people to love God wholeheartedly and to love their neighbor as themselves. Jesus added a new dimension when He declared that we are to love one another as He has loved us. Such love will be demonstrated by the bold proclamation of the gospel and compassionate interaction that seeks to minister to the needs of those around us. Jesus declared, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

While the focus of Christian mission is redemptive, we should not neglect the physical and emotional needs of the people with whom we interact. The early church understood this distinction and lived out their faith with sensitivity and compassion. While they respected and prayed for governing authorities (1 Tim. 2:1–4), and while they desired to live out their faith without governmental interference, they did not expect the Roman Empire to enforce Christian ethics. The New Testament apostles did not sit down and say, “Now what are the issues that need to be addressed in the Roman Empire?” They did not set out to change the world politically; they set out to proclaim the Christ

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To Those Who Desire to Advance Christian Formation in Education

As a retired Naval Officer and former Permanent Military Professor at the US Naval Academy—experiences I deeply cherish—I can wholeheartedly say I am blessed to work alongside my Bob Jones University colleagues equipping students to impact a world in great need.

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Jeffery T. King, PhD
Head of Department, Engineering
Bob Jones University

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tility toward Jewish people in general. The US tracks religious hate crimes. In 2024, Jewish people suffered more than two-thirds of these crimes.¹ Over 9,000 anti-Jewish incidents occurred that year—more than one every hour.²

CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT MODERN ISRAEL

Bible-believing Christians cannot avoid this problem. It is not only a political issue. It is also moral and theological. How should Christians think about Israel?

First, we must recognize that the modern state of Israel is not the biblical nation of Israel. Less than half of all Jewish people live in Israel. About the same number live in the United States. The largest Jewish city in the world is New York City.

Also, non-Jews make up more than a quarter of Israel's citizens. Over twenty percent are Arabs, including Palestinian Arabs. Roughly ten percent of Israel's governing body, the Knesset, are Arabs. While Israel is a Jewish state, it is not *only* a Jewish state.

Second, we must remember that ethnic Israel is still dispersed among the nations. This diaspora contains an element of divine judgment. Right now, Israel is not the people through whom God is doing His work in the world, though it will be someday (Acts 15:10–11; Rom. 11:22–28). Meanwhile, Jewish people (ethnic Israelites) are saved in the same way as Gentiles: by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 10:9–13).

Third, God is not fulfilling any end-times prophecy in or to the state of Israel today. The modern state of Israel is not mentioned in any biblical prediction or promise. No biblical promise depends for its fulfillment upon the survival of the state of Israel. None of our understanding of end times hinges on the state of Israel.

Fourth, God's covenant with Abraham still matters. God promises to bless whoever blesses Abraham and his promised descendants. God promises to curse whoever curses them (Gen. 12:3). This promise even holds true when God judges Israel. In the Old Testament, God sent foreign powers to punish Israel and Judah. Yet God held those nations accountable for their treatment of His people (Ezek. 25). In the future, God will judge the sheep and goats (Gentile nations) by how they treat Christ's brother Israelites (Matt. 25:31–46).

Israel, Palestinian Arabs, and Christian Attitudes

CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARD MODERN ISRAEL

The United States has recognized and supported the state of Israel from its founding in 1948. Now that support is wavering. We are seeing a new hesitancy and even hostility toward Israel.

This hostility comes from several sources. First, the US has welcomed massive immigration from countries that hate Israel. Second, the white supremacist movement disdains Jews. It denies that they are genuine Israelites and argues that they are under the curse of God. Third, a form of Reformed theology insists that the church has replaced Israel in God's program. Fourth, some think that putting America first means abandoning foreign interests. Fifth, enemies of Israel have learned slick marketing and fashionable activism. They have

used these to capture the “intersectional” crowd on the Left.

Israel's enemies portray it as an oppressive force. They claim that it occupies land that belongs to Palestinians. Some demand a separate Palestinian state. Others want Israel dismantled and its territory placed under Arab control.

Opponents of Israel promote the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions) movement. They equate Israel to the old South African practice of apartheid. They also promote direct violence. This violence reached a new peak when Hamas fighters invaded Israel on October 7, 2023. Hamas destroyed property and killed both soldiers and civilians. It also captured 251 hostages. Hamas then executed many of these hostages in captivity.

Since then, international hostility toward Israel has spiked. So has hos-

Whoever touches Israel touches the apple of God's eye (Zech. 2:8).

Such verses tell us how we should treat Jewish people. We should always bless them and stand ready to help them escape harm. We should give them the gospel of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ. Almost half the world's Jewish people live in the state of Israel. Jewish people have only two refuges in the entire world: the United States and the land of Israel. Blessing the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob requires us to bless the state of Israel.

THE HISTORY OF MODERN ISRAEL

Does the state of Israel have a right to exist? Or is it an aggressor state? And what about the Palestinian Arabs? A bit of history helps to answer this question.

The label *Palestine* is a geographical designation, not a political one. There never has been a country of Palestine. There never has been a distinctly Palestinian people. There never has been a specifically Palestinian culture. "Palestinians" are Arabs. These particular Arabs inhabited the region of Palestine before Israeli statehood.

GOD PROMISES TO BLESS WHOEVER BLESSES ABRAHAM AND HIS PROMISED DESCENDANTS. GOD PROMISES TO CURSE WHOEVER CURSES THEM (GEN. 12:3).

Before World War I, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of the Middle East. Its territory covered modern Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and Sudan. The Turks began to lose territory the moment they sided with the Central Powers. When the war ended, the Allies dismantled the empire. Various European nations administered different parts.

Near the war's end, the British issued the Balfour Declaration. This declaration called for the creation of a Jewish homeland. After the war, the League of Nations included the Balfour Declaration in its Mandate for Palestine. The Mandate authorized the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Arabs were eventually granted much of the rest of the Middle East. They now control Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Palestine was supposed to become a Jewish homeland. The British accepted the

responsibility of creating the Jewish state. Before they did, they decided to set up a state for Palestinian Arabs. They peeled off more than three-quarters of Palestine to do it. The Palestinian state became modern Jordan. It still occupies more than three quarters of the land designated as a Jewish homeland.

By World War II, the British still had not established the mandated Jewish homeland. Then the war ended and the world glimpsed the horrors of the Holocaust. The pressure for a Jewish homeland became irresistible. Jewish people began emigrating into the territory west of the Jordan. Still the British did not set up a Jewish state. Instead, they abandoned their mandatory authority to the United Nations.

The UN did something astonishing. They proposed creating a second state for Palestinian Arabs. They suggested dividing the land west of the Jordan. The UN was going to remove still more territory from the Jewish homeland. The Jews were not thrilled, but they accepted the proposal. The Palestinian Arabs did not. They wanted all the land, not part of it.

The British withdrew from Palestine in

1948. Israel immediately declared its independence. Both the US and the UN recognized the new state. The surrounding Arab nations did not. They invaded Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973. In the first invasion, Jordan seized control of the West Bank and tried to annex it. Israel recaptured this territory in 1967. It remains under Israeli control.

Israel has full right to all land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. Israel can rightfully claim the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian Arabs have no legal claim to this territory. They rejected the two-state solution when the United Nations proposed it.

Israel has tried to make room for Palestinian Arabs. They can become Israeli citizens. They sit in the Knesset. Israel has granted them territories to govern themselves. Palestinian Arabs have made these territories (especially Gaza) into hotbeds of terrorism.

THE DEFENSE OF MODERN ISRAEL

As a nation, Israel has the right to defend itself. It has the right to stop terroristic threats emerging from Gaza. Hunting down terrorists is not the same thing as genocide. People who accuse Israel of genocide are bearing false witness. So are people who accuse Israel of overreacting. Survival is a daily business for Israel. It faces rocket barrages, suicide bombers, and armed invasions from Palestinian Arabs. What kind of response could be an overreaction?

Does the US have an interest in defending Israel? Yes. Israel is our only reliable ally in that part of the world. If the US could not rely upon Israel, to whom would we turn? Syria? The Saudis? Yemen?

Israel is also the only state in that region to share a common cultural heritage with the US. We have common commitments in arts and letters, jurisprudence, statecraft, philosophy, and education. None of Israel's enemies share these commitments. This difference becomes most obvious in the use of "human shields." Israeli soldiers place themselves between their citizens and the enemy. Hamas places its citizens between itself and the enemy.

We do not have to defend any wrongdoing by the Israelis. All nations do wrong at one time or another. No government stands above justice, including our own. But the state of Israel is not an oppressor. It is a tiny nation fighting for its existence. Most of its people are descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We ought to stand with them, defend them, and bless them.

Kevin T. Bauder, DMin, PhD, is the pastor of Bible Baptist Church in East Bethel, Minnesota.



¹ "FBI Releases 2024 Reported Crimes in the Nation Statistics," Aug. 5, 2025, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-2024-reported-crimes-in-the-nation-statistics>

² Carl Campanile, "American Jews faced a record 25 antisemitic incidents per day last year—more than one per hour—with most related to hatred of Israel," *New York Post*, Apr. 22, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/04/22/us-news/american-jews-faced-a-record-25-antisemitic-incidents-per-day-last-year-one-per-hour-with-most-related-to-hatred-of-israel>.

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News From All Over

Pastor Dave Byford

retired after forty years of ministry at Faith Baptist Church in Manhattan, Kansas. Dave and his wife Anne came to Manhattan and founded the church in January 1986. God's abundant blessings have been on Faith Baptist Church throughout the years. Nathan and Karis Herbster came to Faith Baptist in June 2021, and the church voted in January 2023 for Nathan to become the new senior pastor after a three-year transition. This strategy gave him increased responsibilities throughout the transition, preparing Nathan to become the new pastor of Faith Baptist Church in January 2026.



Pastor Tim Coley served at Bethany Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Ohio, for over thirty-five years as senior pastor. In March 2025, he retired from the senior pastorate but remains on staff part time as Visitation Pastor. A graduate of Bob Jones University (BA, MA), Tim desires to continue edifying the saints by accurately dividing the Word of God as he visits and serves the flock God has set before him. He and his wife, Leesa, have two adult children and six grandchildren. Pastor Josh Lobach began serving as Senior Pastor at Bethany Baptist in March 2025.

Pastor Jim Houtz recently retired from Sunnyside Baptist Church in North Rose, New York, where he pastored from December 2003 to October 2025. Throughout his thirty-five years of pastoral ministry, Jim pastored four different churches in the states of Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and New York. Thus far he has also had three opportunities to teach Bible classes at People's Baptist College in Trivandrum, India. He is a graduate of Bob Jones University and is planning on continuing to serve the Lord through the Gospel Fellowship Association's Interim Pastor Ministry.



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HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

FIRST PARTAKER

“The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:6)

The Prayer Life of Our Lord

Each fall our church’s pastoral staff, lay elders, deacons, and interns enjoy a 24-hour leadership retreat in the mountains of western North Carolina. Some of Saturday afternoon is designated as free time for fishing, hiking, playing board games, and fellowshiping. But starting at 8:00 p.m. Friday and running through 5:30 p.m. Saturday, we pack in six major working sessions.

Generally, at least two or three of these are dedicated to a specific emphasis within one of five broad categories: personal life, family life, church life, leadership, or contemporary issues. Our emphasis this year fell into the category of personal life and focused on one narrow aspect of personal prayer: the ministry of *intercession*. We gave this emphasis the title “Loaves and Fishes,” using two of our Lord’s parables in Luke 11 as foundational motivations for increasing the commitment that each of us has to intercessory prayer—not just for church members’ weekly urgencies, but for the successful advancement of Christ’s kingdom all throughout the world (Matt. 6:9–10; 2 Thess. 3:1–2).

And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? (Luke 11:5–6).

If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? (Luke 11:11).

Preparing for this emphasis for six weeks or so previous to the retreat, I consulted the books on prayer in my library that over the years have most enlightened my own understanding or been the greatest inspiration. One of these came into my hands in Edinburgh, Scotland, over twenty years ago in a way that I can’t take the space to relate here. The bookdealer’s asking price was twenty dollars for a little volume scarcely four by six inches in size, and only ninety-four pages in length. Had it not been a hardback, and if I hadn’t skimmed the introductory memoir of the author, I almost certainly would have left the book in Edinburgh.

Two things caught my attention in the memoir, one about the author (David M’Intyre) and the other about his father-in-law. *In 1891 he was called to become colleague and successor to the saintly Andrew A. Bonar. . . . Nearly two years after the lamented death of Andrew A. Bonar, David M. M’Intyre married Jane Christian Bonar, the third daughter of his late senior colleague.*

Now, Andrew Bonar’s *Diary and Life*, edited by another of his daughters, Marjory, is widely acclaimed as one of the classic historical records of a praying minister. At some point in the 1990s I attempted to make an exhaustive listing of every reference to prayer in the sixty-four years included in Bonar’s diary. It was one of the most impacting devotional exercises I’ve ever experienced. So the discovery of a book on the same subject by his son-in-law seemed at the time to be a special find.

But the thing that most appealed to me about this book was something to which it testified about M’Intyre himself. The memoir’s opening paragraph related, *Preeminently David Martin M’Intyre was a man of prayer. He lived in the presence of God. A few pages later the memoir continued that M’Intyre was known for a deep devotional life, focused on prayer’s transformative power, and that he was*

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conspicuously a man of prayer. He walked and talked with God.

We all recognize that there are two kinds of authors on prayer (and all the other devotional exercises as well): theoreticians and practitioners. An author may be both, of course. But when he seems to be mainly one or the other, the difference in the “feel” of his writing is something like the difference between light and heat. I’ve profited from both kinds of authors. But for my money that particular afternoon (twenty dollars!), it was the promise of warmth that decided my bringing the book home, where it now lies open beside me all these years later.

It’s titled *The Hidden Life of Prayer*. Its excellence lies in its many historical anecdotes and quotations from the lives of other practitioners of prayer. If you’ve been preaching on prayer for many years, and need fresh, inspirational illustrations for Wednesday nights, you’re likely to find in this little book a great many which you haven’t yet used.

David M’Intyre (1859–1938) not only succeeded Andrew Bonar as senior minister of Finnieston Free Presbyterian Church in Glasgow, but from 1913–1938 he was also Principal of the Bible Training Institute, a discipleship school which placed many of its graduates on foreign mission fields. *His students loved him. As a father he cared for them all. He may have spoiled them, but it was an extreme of generosity to admire and perhaps to defend.*

I’m presently reading a lesser-known work of M’Intyre’s entitled *The Prayer Life of Our Lord*. It differs from *The Hidden Life of Prayer* in having almost nothing to relate about anyone else’s prayer life other than Christ’s. And that, of course, is its particular strength.

The following is the introductory chapter in the slightly abbreviated and edited form that I recently handed out to a fellowship of ministerial students that meet in my study one Wednesday night a month. There are some really rich insights here that you’re not likely to find by only skimming. But if you’ll slow down and process what you read, your concentration will be repaid. Once or twice you’ll encounter a statement which you may be inclined to question. But it may be that we’ve just not yet fully apprehended the experiences possible to a Person with, not one, but two entirely perfect natures.

As you read, keep in mind that this is M’Intyre’s introductory overview of the entirety of the landscape of Christ’s prayer life during His years of incarnation here on earth. M’Intyre chose to survey this landscape in a generally chronological sequence. But within this frame, his primary intent is to highlight certain features that characterized the praying of the only perfect intercessor in all of human history. Some of those features are, due to Christ’s perfection, impossible of imitation (though not of aspiration). But all are instructive. And the ones of which we are least capable are the most

comforting. M’Intyre does not himself call these applications to our attention, but they emerge under their own power, and with great blessing to the degree that we are both spiritually minded and hungry.

THE PRAYER-LIFE OF OUR LORD

Chapter 1

Introduction

As prayer is the most exalted experience of which the mind of man is capable, so it is the least patient of analysis. The manner in which the Spirit of God acts upon the human spirit must ever remain a mystery. For ourselves, we have not made much progress in the exercise of prayer if we are not acutely sensible of the insistence of desires so vast and formless that they fail to convey a distinct image to the mind. At such times our supplications express themselves in groanings that cannot be uttered. Nor shall we be able rightly to estimate the prayer life of someone else until we have first sounded the depths of his personality, our insight piercing to the dividing of his soul and spirit.

How impossible, then, must it be for us to speak worthily of our Savior’s intercession! The secret of His wondrous Person is treasured and safeguarded in His life of prayer. It is revealed as yet only in part. *For no one knoweth the Son save the Father.*

Our Lord entered into creaturehood and was manifested in the likeness of sinful flesh. He was born under law. He bowed with submission before the Divine will. His spiritual life was nourished, as ours is, by means of grace. As the Son of Man, He preserved communion with the Father through prayer.

We are privileged from time to time to overhear His priestly utterance before God. But we are rarely admitted into the oratory where His private requests were offered. Such joyous intimacy, such earnestness, such filial reverence as were displayed in those high communings with the Unseen, must far transcend our narrow experience. Never man prayed like this Man.

FEATURES OF HIS PRAYERS

(1) In one important particular the prayers of the Lord were unlike those of other men. He who knew no sin, but always did the things that pleased the Father, **had no confession of unworthiness to offer** to God. His was *the only conscience without a scar*. There could, therefore, be no bar to communion with the Holy One, no distance required to be surmounted, no way of access to be devised and secured. At the close of His earthly life, He lifted up to the Father for acceptance the full tale of His sinless years, saying,

I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self. (John 17:4–5a)

(2) The prayers of the Lord Jesus, though little is said of this in Scripture, **must have been radiant with thanksgiving**. Even in that dark hour when Capernaum, His own city, rejected Him, He rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said,

I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes. Yea, Father, for so it was well pleasing in Thy sight. (Matt. 11:25)

His grateful devotion pierced the clouds and poured forth under the blue heavens a song of adoring praise, sweeter than the hymns of the angels. Even when He stood within one hour of Gethsemane's agony, within a day of Calvary's thick darkness, He testified to the buoyancy of His spirit:

Now I come to Thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. (John 17:13)

And the disciples understood. They knew that there was no happier man in Jerusalem that night than He who was thus anointed *with the oil of gladness above His fellows* (Heb. 1:9, quoting Ps. 45:7).

(3) We cannot doubt that much of the Savior's engagement with Heaven in His holy hours of solitary prayer was in the **communion of holy love with the Father**. On the mountain-edge there was, we may believe, a nightly renewal of that fellowship which is beyond knowledge, an interchange of affection which the Incarnation had not weakened (though it had lessened its sweet immediacy). So that, mingling with the ineffable repose of the Son in the bosom of the Father, there ran the strain of eager longing which was to find its full expression in the High Priestly Prayer:

And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was . . . for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:5, 24b)

The Son of Man dwelt ever in the presence of God. And yet, in the days of His flesh, He yearned for that glad hour when, having completed His redemptive toil, He should ascend from His voluntary humiliation to the Uncreated Glory, and bringing His manhood with Him, resume His Session in God.

(4) We must not, however, suppose that the prayers of the Lord were only thanksgiving and adoration. He had **many requests to offer**, in supplication and intercession. **He prayed for His disciples**—for their escape from temptation (Luke

22:32), for the success of their labors (Luke 10:18), for their advancement in holiness and love (John 17:11). **He prayed for those who were still strangers to His grace**—the world of men (John 17:21, 23), the tribes of the House of Israel (Luke 10:2), the rebellious children of Jerusalem, to whom He had stretched out His hands, no man regarding (Luke 19:42), the soldiers who pierced His hands and feet (Luke 23:34). **And for Himself He prayed**—for guidance in the crises of His life (Luke 6:12), for the continued supply of power in the prosecution of His ministry (Luke 11:1), for life to be granted at His word to Lazarus lying dead (John 11:41); that, if it were possible, the bitter cup might pass from Him (Matt. 26:39), or failing this, that the will of His Father might be fully wrought (verse 42).

(5) *I know that Thou hearest Me always*, said the Savior at the tomb of Lazarus. All His prayers were answered. But it must be remembered that **there were petitions which He refused to offer**. In the ignominy of His arrest He said to Simon,

Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech My Father, and He shall even now send Me more than twelve legions of angels? How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be? (Matt. 26:53–54)

He would not ask to be delivered from the hands of men. Not many days before, when the anticipation of the agony soon to fall had forced from Him the cry, *Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say?*, He will not offer prayer except within the will of God.

Shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour?" But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name. (John 12:27–28a)

And so long as that will has not been fully revealed, His requests are tendered with submissiveness. *Not My will, but Thine be done* (Matt. 26:39, 42, 44).

(6) **His prayers were always heard**. But the answer did not always come at once. God has His seasons and delays. Even the Son must wait upon the Divine wisdom. The Lord Jesus prayed that Israel might repent and turn to the Lord, but for 2000 years the Chosen Race has been wandering in the wilderness. He prayed that the nations should be given to Him for an inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth to be His possession, but to this hour *the whole world lieth in the evil one* (1 John 5:19). Nevertheless, it is written that the rejectors of the Messiah shall one day look on Him whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn. And for our sad, sin-cursed earth, the day is drawing near when the kingdom of the world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.

(7) As we have indicated, those prayers of Christ which are referred to in the Gospels are for the most part **concerned with His mediatorial work**. The Surety claims for His people the fulness of the Divine mercy. The Good Shepherd makes intercession for the flock which He is about to purchase with His blood.

Accordingly, so far as the record informs us, our Lord's engagements in prayer, with scarcely an exception, gather around that act of allegiance to the will of God by which the Redeemer bowed Himself under the curse and assumed our sin as His own. Let us note these instances among others:

His Baptism
His Temptation
His Preparation for the Calling of the Twelve
His Supplication after the Feeding of the
Five Thousand
The High Priestly Prayer
The Agony in the Garden
The Voices of His Passion

All these have Golgotha in view. They are the disclosure to us of what death meant to Christ. To the Savior the mere article of physical dissolution could only prove to be the striking off of earthly fetters and the return to the Right Hand of power. Nor could the fierce aspect of the torturing cross terrify this Man, most fearless of all who have looked with unflinching eyes on pain. His royal spirit made Him in this, as in all else, more than conqueror.

But the death that occupied His waking thoughts and became the predominant theme of His supplications until He came to inhabit His passion, was such a death as no son of Adam had ever undergone. Countless millions have paid the debt to nature. But our blessed Lord tasted death for every man. The prayers of Jesus are written red in the blood of sacrifice. And so they revealed to us, as no other words have done, what the Cross signified to Him who passed His earthly life under its benign but awful shadow.

(8) The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that our Lord *learned obedience by the things which He suffered* (5:8). Hebrews connects this discipline with the exercise of prayer: *He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears* (5:7). These words recall to our minds the agony in the Garden. But perhaps they have a wider reference. Not only upon Olivet, but often elsewhere, our Lord may have plunged into anguish and amazement. On such occasions His refuge was the audience chamber of God. And there in the divine embrace, He became perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10).

In many of the Psalms and in the Prophetic Word the sorrows of the saints seem to mirror the experience of the Master.

Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O LORD.
(Ps. 130:1)

I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope. (Ps. 130:5)

My soul looketh for the LORD, more than the watchmen look for the morning. (Ps. 130:6)

(9) The intensity of the prayers of the Savior was equaled only by the **unconquerable faith** in which they were presented to the Father. His word of encouragement to the ruler of the synagogue, *Fear not, only believe* (Mark 5:36), must often have been addressed to His own spirit. It was, no doubt, out of His own experience that He spoke when He laid on His disciples the supreme condition of their acceptable approach to the Father.

Have faith in God. Verily I say unto you, "Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, 'Be thou taken up and cast into the sea,' and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that what he saith cometh to pass, he shall have it." Therefore I say unto you, "All things whatsoever you pray and ask for, believe that ye have received them, and ye shall have them." (Mark 11:22-24)

He confronted apparent disaster with undoubting heart. In desertion and forsakenness He comforted Himself with the thought, *The Father is with Me* (John 16:32). He embraced the cross, pillowing His dying head upon the ordered covenant. His enemies, gathered round the tortured Son of God, bore witness to the most patent feature of His holy character: *He trusteth in God* (Matt. 27:43). They marked that then, in that dread hour, His confidence in the Eternal Love was undimmed.

(10) Before His ministry drew to a close, our Lord antedated His Passion and prepared to enter on that heavenly priesthood which had awaited Him from the first of time. *Father, he exclaims, those which Thou hast given me, I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me; that they may behold My glory which Thou hast given Me. For Thou lovest Me before the foundation of the world* (John 17:24).

This is not the plea of suffering manhood. It is a **request by one who holds the right of intervention** on behalf of His tried and afflicted people. This heavenly ministry our High Priest shall exercise to the end of all the ages. For He liveth to make intercession for us. And His advocacy is forever presented in the power of an accepted sacrifice.

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Expository Thoughts on John, J. C. Ryle

Among the many theologically thoughtful writings from this venerable 19th-century English Anglican bishop is his series of *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*. The volumes on each of the Gospels are usually published separately. The one-volume expositional overviews of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are textually attentive and devotionally warm. But his three-volume work on John is in a class by itself.

Some harbor the illusion that older commentaries are not as thorough or well-informed as modern ones. A brief perusal of Ryle’s preface shatters that misconception. His reading and research spans over eighty writers of multiple languages, including several of the church fathers, two dozen foreign Reformers, a dozen Roman Catholic interpreters (with whom he most takes issue), well over two dozen Scotch and English writers, and numerous German authors.

Ryle’s commentary works through the text, segment by segment. The text of John is followed by four to five pages in which Ryle develops three or four of the leading theological observations from the passage, from which he also draws practical ramifications and applications to the reader. This is followed by anywhere from four to twenty pages of tightly texted small-font comments on numerous exegetical details. (To illustrate the level of detail, I will note that the expository commentary pages have about 300 words per page, while the exegetical commentary pages run to nearly 500 words per page.)

His expository remarks are always perceptive and sometimes most memorable. “Unbelief does not arise so much from want of evidence as from want of will to believe.” “Ignorance of Scripture is the root of every error in religion, and the source of all heresy.” “There will always be counterfeit coin where there is true money.”

His explanation of human inability is spot on. Man’s “inability is not physical, but moral. It would not be true to say that a man has a real wish and desire to come to Christ, but no power to come. It would be far more true to say that a man has no power to come because he has no desire or wish. It is not true that he would come if he could. It is true that he could come if he would.”

His posture toward prophecy is exemplary:

Such fulfillments of prophecy [as in 12:12–19] teach us to beware of the mischievous practice of spiritualizing and explaining away the language of Scripture. . . . To know that predictions about the second advent of Christ will be fulfilled literally, just as predictions about the first advent of Christ were fulfilled literally, is the first step towards a right understanding of unfulfilled prophecy.

Ryle’s more detailed exegetical notes are astute and well-informed both from his knowledge of the Greek text and from the very broad reading I described earlier. When multiple inter-

pretations vie with each other in an ambiguous or problematic passage, Ryle (like most helpful interpreters) tells you what he thinks but not before first laying out the other possible views and who holds them (e.g., 1:16; 1:51; 6:63).

Two final recommendations. The first is from my pastor. Having preached through the Gospel of John, he offered the opinion that of all the commentaries he owns and used throughout that series, Ryle is “the best commentary on John for the preacher”—that is, the best for feeding a pastor’s own mind and affections from the text. Coming from a preacher who has over seventy volumes on John’s Gospel in his personal library, that’s a significant endorsement.

The second recommendation is from my seminary students. The last time I taught Exposition of the Gospel and Epistles of John, I assigned my students to work through the first volume of Ryle’s commentary, which covers John 1–6. With each reading, they posted comments of their discoveries and takeaways from Ryle. But the comments were not to me or for me; they were posting for each other and responding to each others’ discussion posts. Here’s a sampling from those comments:

- “I found it very encouraging to see Ryle’s humility in approaching his text.”
- “His simplicity is one aspect of his writing that makes him so readable and enduring.”
- “I love how Ryle starts each section with a warm expositional commentary before getting into the technicalities.”
- “I have been truly blessed by Ryle’s commentary on John. His analysis is highly insightful. At many points he stopped to comment on how a detail or theme directly affects us as Christians, making the book considerably beneficial in a personal as well as technical study supplement.”
- “I’m so encouraged by Ryle’s ability to magnify Christ’s heart of mercy.”
- “I praise God for the encouragement Ryle’s writing brought to you and me. What an amazingly gracious God we worship!”

That’s the kind of model and impact you want assigned readings to have on your seminary students! It speaks well of Ryle (and of my students!) that they so thoroughly enjoyed and profited from his commentary on John. And that’s the kind of commentary you want regular recourse to, both for serious sermon and lecture preparation as well as an accessible aid for personal reading and study of the Word.

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Why Does James Say, "Above All Things, Swear Not" (James 5:12)?

One reason to slowly, carefully study God's Word is because when we do, we often notice important details that are easily missed. This happened to me when I stopped to think about the phrase "above all things" in James 5:12. After a letter teaching Christians on issues ranging from speech, to purity, to unity, to care for the poor, James includes a surprising command near the end of his letter: "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation." Why is it that not swearing is "above all things"? Why highlight this command in particular?

But there's something else that is different about this verse. Throughout James, we see many of the teachings of Jesus, but normally James paraphrases Christ's instructions. This is the one place, however, where James quotes Jesus quite closely, almost verbatim. So why does James begin this command with "above all" and then break from his normal pattern of rephrasing Jesus' teaching to quote it almost exactly? To answer this, we must first determine what exactly this command prohibits, see how this command fits with James' overall goal for his letter, and apply this teaching practically.

THE MEANING OF SWEARING

So, what does James mean by "swear not"? Most people today hear "swear" and think of four-letter words, or what we call vulgar language, but this isn't what James means. The Greek word translated "swear" is *omnuō*, a word which means taking an oath to guarantee something you have said. The Greek lexicon BDAG defines it this way: "to affirm the veracity of one's statement by invoking a transcendent entity, [frequently with] implied invitation of punishment if one is untruthful, *swear, take an oath.*" This understanding of "swear" becomes obvious because in the rest of the verse, James clarifies that we should not be taking an oath *by* anything.

We don't do this anymore. I don't swear to my wife by heaven or by earth that I will be home by 5:30. Sometimes in public life we are called to swear an oath, such as when testifying in court or taking office. I do not think that's what this passage is warning against. Such solemn occasions call for formal ceremonies declaring one's integrity. The problem James and Jesus have with oaths is their casual usage in everyday life. They do not want Christians *needing* to take an oath so people know when to trust them.

This would be like people today saying something like, "It's true, I swear!" or "I promise!" People who talk this way tacitly acknowledge that, while you cannot always trust them, in this instance they are sincere. James and Jesus are totally opposed to this. When you say "yes," you should mean "yes." When you say

"no," you should mean "no." No one should ever need to ask you to promise or swear that you are speaking the truth.

THE THEME OF JAMES

But why does James say this is "above all things"? To understand the importance of this command to James, we need to understand his letter. While James' organization of his letter tends to be more thematic than linear, there is a method to the madness. Studying James means paying attention to the development of themes. James has several of these to which he frequently returns, such as wisdom, faith, and perfection or maturity. This last theme, sometimes also called spiritual wholeness, probably functions as a theme for the whole letter.

James begins his letter by telling us that God uses trials to produce endurance so we might be "perfect and entire, [lacking] nothing" (1:5). Twice James will use the term "double minded" to describe those who want to follow God but do not quite trust Him (1:8) or who love God yet love the world (4:8). And the opposite of being double minded would be being spiritually whole, or perfect (1:5; 2:22; 3:2). If this is James' concern, it makes sense why taking oaths bothers him. People who must take oaths show that they are not normally sincere, whole people who can be trusted all the time.

PEOPLE OF INTEGRITY

If our speech reveals our heart, then our speech must be characterized by integrity. God wants His children to be the kind of people who never need to take oaths, because people know they can be trusted. From God's perspective, everything we say should carry the weight of an oath, because that is the example that God Himself has set for us. The author of Hebrews relates that even when God took an oath, it was only to further confirm the promise to Abraham since God couldn't lie to begin with (cf. Heb. 6:17–18). James wants us to be whole people, with a single-minded obedience to God and a sincerity in our interactions with others. Few things communicate that we are double minded quite like needing to take oaths.

So, as James approaches the end of his letter, he sees oath-taking as a big deal. Not because taking oaths is bad, but because needing to take oaths is bad. We might not formally swear in our everyday lives, but we must be people who mean what we say, people whose "yes" means "yes" and whose "no" means "no." If we don't, James warns, we will fall under judgment, and we might just be revealing to the world that we are double-minded people.

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How Christians Disagree: A Cautionary Illustration

Tim Cooper has rendered a valuable service to the church and its leaders—if we will only learn from it—by recounting the relational history of two men characterized by towering intellect, theological orthodoxy, influential longevity . . . and an intense mutual dislike. Those two men are identified in the subtitle of Cooper’s book *When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter* (Crossway, 2024). I want to use Cooper’s study as an extended illustration of the dynamics that can contribute to testy relationships between brothers or sisters in Christ.

In some ways, these two godly 16th-century ministers had a great deal in common. Both were reared in devout Puritan homes, both were formidable intellects, both were prolific authors, and “both men were nothing if not faithful to the very end” (26). And yet, they “came to dislike each other so intensely” that “they brought out the worst in each other” (6). Cooper’s goal is not merely to explore the fact “that Christians disagree” but to investigate “how they go about their disagreements” (6). Owen and Baxter are role models in this respect, but they are not good ones. They do not “come out of this book looking like saints” (7). Cooper is not out to disparage them; his genuine esteem for both men is evident throughout the book, and his depiction of both is even-handed. Aspects of their example may inspire us, but their failures ought to caution us to remember that they, like us, “are sinners and saints all at the same time” (7).

Born within a year of each other, both men entered adulthood during the English Civil War, but experienced it from very different vantage points. Baxter was an army chaplain in the Midlands where most of the fighting occurred, preaching in earshot of cannon fire and ministering amid much of the death and gore of war. Owen, meanwhile, lived a safe and well-connected life near London, far from nearly all the fighting. “Both Baxter and Owen supported Parliament’s cause in the civil war; they were on the same side. Yet their perspectives on the war provide a study in contrasts” (35).

Theology may have been the topic of the conflict between Owen and Baxter, but if we think their differences were purely theological, “we will miss the subtle but powerful impact of their experience and personality” (41). Personal information about Owen is hard to come by but “he possessed an ability to advance his career” and “to network, and he was not without ambition” (43). A “political player” with a “relentless determination to get his way,” Owen “could be touchy when it came to slights on his authority, and he was not a man to be contradicted” (46, 47).

Admittedly, it is difficult to square this impression of Owen with his reputation as a towering theologian. We expect such figures to be above the foibles of mere human temperament,

but they never are. This is also a most unflattering picture. . . . this is not the whole of the man. But it does explain something. If this is Owen’s personality, what other type of personality would be likely to rub him the wrong way? Who would he find particularly grating and abrasive? The answer is someone who did not demonstrate proper deference, who lacked Owen’s deft political facility, who blurted out the truth as he saw it with little regard for the feelings of others, who had his own implacable views Someone, in other words, a lot like Richard Baxter. (48)

As a boy, Baxter reportedly had no qualms about rebuking other children for their profane language. “We are told that it pleased his elders, but it could hardly have delighted his playmates” (49). As an only child, Baxter was accustomed to having “his own way, with no near rival to contradict him” and thus “lacked the opportunity a larger family presented to develop skills in negotiation or empathy” (49). Owen, on the other hand, was the second of at least six children. Baxter never went to university, with its benefits of networking and community, and instead “came to his views, in the main, by reading” (50); Owen spent several years at Oxford. Baxter married late at age 47; Owen married around 26. Baxter never had children; Owen had eleven.

All of this helps explain the enduring irony of Baxter’s life: he genuinely desired nothing more than to cultivate peace and unity, but his style and temperament regularly caused offense and generated conflict. Both friend and foe alike observed his tendency to come across as magisterial, haughty, arrogant, impervious to correction, blind to his own weakness, incapable of self-doubt, and personally disdainful of others. (50–51)

That’s not to say he was entirely unaware of such tendencies, as his correspondence bears out (51–52). But it is one thing to be aware of our weaknesses and sins, and another thing to conquer them. “When these two personalities finally came into direct contact, the result was never going to be pretty. . . . Owen was easily exasperated; Baxter was simply exasperating” (53). The upshot for us? “Vocal disagreements that seem on the surface to be merely theological . . . may be much more substantially the product of clashing personalities. Recognizing that factor is surely an essential requirement in resolving the conflict” (54)—or at least learning to manage it with grace and Christlikeness.

Cooper explores the theological issues that sparked their relational conflagration. “Theology does truly matter. But as we have seen, so does biography. It is impossible to separate how we think from what we have experienced” (57). Their different emphases can be explained “in large part because each was driven by a differ-

ent set of concerns” (58). I will not delve into the specifics of their theological differences here; suffice it to say that though the issues clearly seemed of significant importance to both men at the time, they paled in comparison to “just how much they had in common.” They “shared an enormous amount of common ground” but “stood back-to-back, looking in opposite directions and subject to opposite fears” that “made it extremely difficult for each man to see in the other the many points they held in common” (69).

If Cooper’s depiction is accurate (and he quotes amply from both men), the tone of Baxter’s initial critiques of Owen were “relatively measured” even if somewhat off-pitch (76). Owen, nonetheless, “was deeply offended, and the language he used throughout his short reply made that very clear” (77). Baxter refrained from responding for five years, and when he did, his answers to Owen were “both brief and respectful” (79) but still expressed concern over the potential impact of some of Owen’s views. Owen’s reply was devastating: “a remarkably personal, bitter, and scathing rebuke” (81). Baxter, in return, only escalated matters, doubling down on his criticisms and making them, if anything, more pointed and insistent. “He complained that he had been personally attacked, ‘voluminously slandered,’ and roundly criticized as ‘hypocritically proud.’ Instead of understanding, he had received from Owen ‘ingenious malice’” (81). And all of this was conducted not in private letters but public print—the 17th-century version of social media. The heightened stakes of a reading audience “made any sort of reconciliation that much harder. Pride and ego came into play, rather than humility, kindness, and generosity. The damage had been done. By 1650 the written word had estranged two men who had not yet even met” (83).

Cooper invites his readers “to apply the lessons of this story” to how we manage the modern issues that often divide us, but admits that there are “no easy answers.”

When they finally did meet, the plot only thickened. In 1654 Parliament called “a subcommittee of around a dozen minister-theologians to prepare a list of the fundamentals for the approval of Parliament and the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell” (95). Owen, a Congregationalist and leading theologian with connections in Parliament, was an obvious choice. Archbishop James Ussher from Ireland was nominated but declined. His replacement was Richard Baxter, who had a penchant for insisting on the exclusive use of expressly scriptural language in the formation of any confession. Seeing that his opinions would not prevail, Baxter decided that the only remaining strategy was “to hinder them from doing harm and thrusting in their own opinions or crude conceits, among our fundamentals” (98–99). “The whole affair achieved nothing but to confirm Baxter and Owen in their worst views of each other and to permanently darken their relationship” (99–100). “The great irony,” Cooper notes, “is that the project in which Baxter and Owen were involved in 1654 was designed to achieve unity and mend division, but the outcome was the opposite, at least for them” (100).

The final nail in the coffin of their relationship sealed it so tight that the breach was to extend even beyond the grave (see chapter 7, “Memory”). Cooper concludes with the observation that “even the most conscientious Christians disagree. It is their very conscientiousness that can trigger their disagreement. They take truth seriously. It matters. It matters enough to take a stand, even against a fellow believer” (119–20). But when that becomes necessary—for it is inevitable—what can we learn from Owen and Baxter so as not to repeat their errors? Cooper develops five suggestions: (1) Look for a mediator. (2) Never lose sight of common ground. (3) Take seriously the Scriptures “that summon us to unity and concord.” (4) Cultivate humility. (5) Consider the invisible factors behind our disagreements. Cooper follows these with a series of searching questions to ask ourselves in order to manage *our* disagreements more scripturally (125–26).

The brief chapters are packed with intriguing historical background, astonishing statements from both Owen and Baxter, and Cooper’s own insightful observations along the way. One example comes relatively early in the book.

We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals firmly in control of our own decision-making, finding our way in the world through the choices we make, both large and small. While this is true to a significant extent, it is not an entirely safe assumption. It overlooks the ways in which we have been profoundly shaped by forces that lie outside our control. We do not choose the family into which we are born, our DNA, our prenatal environment, the quality of nurture we receive in our early years, or the shaping forces in our social, political, and cultural context as we grow into maturity. All that life experience molds how we see the world and how we perceive both ourselves and others. When two people come into conflict, they bring with them a contrasting set of perspectives informed by their respective pasts. Their personal history is very much alive. It operates in ways that they themselves may not recognize, let alone the person with whom they have clashed. Thus, two people can be set up for conflict and misunderstanding before they even meet. (29)

Cooper invites his readers “to apply the lessons of this story” to how we manage the modern issues that often divide us, but admits that there are “no easy answers.” There are *simple* answers; but that is not at all the same thing. Each chapter ends with a concluding series of probing, self-reflective questions to help readers personalize and process those lessons. Given the subject matter, it is one of the most valuable aspects of the book and makes it an excellent resource for group discussion.

At under 130 pages of actual text, it’s a pretty quick read. Cooper forewarns his readers on the front end: “Spoiler alert: there is no happy ending” (4). Ah, but there is! Baxter and Owen have been enjoying it for three hundred years, where the spirits of just men are made perfect and the saints eternal rest. But God forbid that we should wait until then. Hopefully Cooper’s book will chasten us to model now how to get along with brothers whom we may love, but not necessarily like.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.

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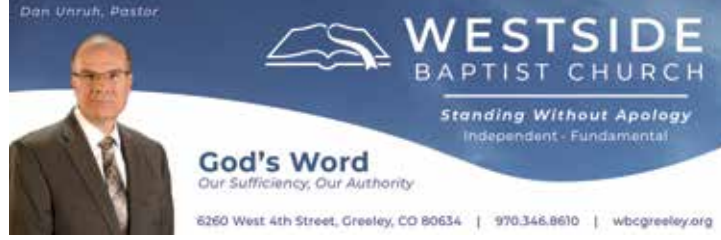
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Coordinator: Greg Kaminski

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Coordinator: Caleb Phelps

October 24, 2026

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Dover, NH 03820

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FEATURED FROM OUR MOST POPULAR ARTICLES:

A Sketch of the Premillennial, Pretribulational Rapture of the Saints

By David Huffstutler | October 24, 2025

The *rapture* is the event in which “the dead in Christ will rise first” and “then we who are alive, who are left” are “caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). We can never know when exactly the rapture will take place, but Scripture at least indicates that it precedes a future 1,000-year period and a 7-year period that takes place just before the 1,000. We describe the rapture as *premillennial* because it takes place before the *Millennium*, the 1,000-year rule of Christ on earth (Rev. 20:1-6).

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/10/24>

10 Ways to Pray for Your Pastor

By David Huffstutler | November 14, 2025

I was asked recently to give a list of 10 ways folks could pray for their pastor, which meant to me, “How can I pray for you?” So, I tried to give this request some careful thought, resulting in the list below. I’m sure a million requests could be added, but here is a brief post to offer at least 10 ways that you can pray for your pastor, compiled by a pastor.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/11/14>

How to Provoke Your Children to Anger

Ben Hicks | November 13, 2025

Paul warns parents to not provoke their children to anger. We see this warning in both Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. Ephesians goes on to give us the positive side of parenting: “bring them up in the nurture and instruction.” But in Colossians, the only parenting advice we get is, “Don’t provoke your children to anger!” Apparently if you want to be a good parent, the thing that Paul is most concerned about is that you not provoke your children to anger.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/11/13>

A Dangerous New Ecumenism

Ben Hicks | October 23, 2025

“I don’t know.” I was stunned. A couple of Mormon missionaries had swung by, so I had invited them in for cookies and a frank discussion. I had asked questions and we had some good back and forth, but they seemed hesitant to commit to things where they knew they didn’t have a good answer. To be fair, they were both fresh out of high school, so some of it might have been nerves. But the moment that really floored me was when I asked them if God the Father was a created being. “I don’t know.”

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/10/23>

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Five Ways to Start Gospel Conversations

You meet a stranger or see an acquaintance. Something in your heart whispers, “I need to share the gospel of Christ with this person.” But how do you start? How do you “break the ice” to get a conversation going? By the time you put your head on your pillow tomorrow night, you could have begun a gospel conversation with someone who is lost. G.R.A.C.E. is a memorable roadmap with five conversation starters to guide you into joyous gospel conversations.

Most of us were taught to start sharing the gospel with the words, “All have sinned.” But even the verse we are using tells us that sin must be understood as follows: “. . . and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

So here is the start for your memorable roadmap: “**G**—the **glory of God**. Throughout Scripture we see that God delights in a believer who glorifies Him. What does “glorify” mean? It means to praise the unique excellence of the true and living God. Here is the first, fascinating conversation starter: Start by giving glory to God.

Pause to consider the fascinating horizons that open up here. Anything that you are legitimately interested in is a potential starting place for a gospel conversation! What is your favorite hobby or subject to study? How long could you talk about that? With as little as twenty minutes of preparation, could you figure out how to give glory to God with what you already know about that topic? Of course you could. As I have been out speaking in churches, believers have told me that they see how they could use combustion engines, rifle construction, mathematics, language, birds, trees, plants, structural materials, music, disease, disasters, and even slime mold to start gospel conversations! As you can see, this approach opens up remarkable possibilities.

Why does this conversation starter work so well? Believers are commanded to give God glory, and doing so corresponds to the message of creation. For instance, consider Psalm 96:7 and 97:6: “Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, give unto the LORD glory and strength”; “The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory.” Obey the Lord by giving Him glory and you will find Him to be your powerful ally. You will find that glorifying God brings the fear of God into the conversation and leads naturally into what follows.

Where do we go next? Back to the G.R.A.C.E. roadmap. “**R** is for **rebellion**: man’s rebellion against God. It’s in the news many times each day: murder, theft, substance abuse, fraud, lying, and, sometimes, wearing religious disguises (Rom. 10:2–3). People around you are already talking about it. Keep your eye on the G.R.A.C.E. roadmap and join in the conversation. Take them back to God’s glory to show how serious that rebellion against God really is.

“**A**—the awful penalty for the rebellion of mankind. Mankind is in bondage to the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). Read about it in the

news each day and get ready to hold gospel conversations.

The recent fiery crash of a UPS flight in Louisville helped me convey the gospel to two men for about twenty minutes recently. Disasters, disease, daily heartaches, and alienation are all starting points for your next gospel conversations.

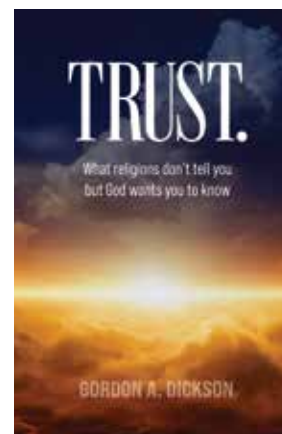
“**C**—Christ paid the penalty for the rebellion of mankind!” “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The gospel of Christ the Savior is the corrective. He alone can turn sinners and whole societies away from rebellion in humble repentance. The next time the conversation turns to the need for a return to right thinking and behavior, be ready to show that Christ and His gospel grace are the answer. We need Christ more than we need mere conservatism.

“**E**—Embrace Christ by faith today. When the conversation turns to a general need for faith, there is your opportunity to share the gospel. Why do people need to place their faith in Christ? It’s because people can’t get real help on their own terms. When people see the glory of God and understand that Christ alone is the answer for man’s rebellion and its awful penalty, the next step is clear: it’s time to embrace the Christ who loves us and washes repentant sinners from their sin in His own blood (Rev. 1:5).

G.R.A.C.E. is your memorable roadmap with five ways to start and share gospel conversations. Get ready. Re-read this article if you need to. As you follow this outline, you will find that by tomorrow night you will revel in the joy of sharing Christ with someone who desperately needs Him.

To illustrate this G.R.A.C.E. approach to a gospel presentation, I have written *TRUST. What Religions Don’t Tell You to Know*. It is available online as a paperback, e-book, and audiobook, and it will soon be available wherever books are sold.

After nearly four decades of pastoral ministry, **Gordon A. Dickson** continues to serve the Lord as an author, podcaster, and conference speaker. His most recent books include *TRUST. What Religions Don’t Tell You to Know* and *12 Ways You Can Make a Difference in This Crazy, Mixed-up World*, available as paperbacks, e-books, and audiobooks.





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The Christian's Role in a Secular State

Continued from page 16

who had changed them! And through proclaiming Christ, lives were transformed, churches were planted, and the world was changed.

WHEN ROLES ARE CONFUSED

Government enforces laws; Christians extend grace. Government deals with external behavior; Christians address the heart. Government operates by authority; Christians operate by love and humility. Government uses coercive power when necessary; Christians use persuasion, compassion, and example.

When the distinct roles of government and individual Christians are confused, several problems arise. First, this confusion can lead to the expectation that the government should enforce Christian morality. It is appropriate for laws to reflect moral truths through measures such as prohibiting murder or theft. However, expecting the state to uphold all aspects of Christian teaching—such as loving enemies or forgiving debts—misunderstands the nature of both government and discipleship.

Second, this confusion can result in Christians abdicating personal responsibility. Some believers have mistakenly assumed that voting for the right candidate or passing the right laws is the primary way to advance God's kingdom. As a result, they may neglect the harder, more personal work of evangelism, discipleship, and acts

of mercy. The gospel spreads not through legislation but through transformed lives.

A CALL FOR DISCERNMENT AND FAITHFULNESS

With every privilege is responsibility. American citizens have the privilege and responsibility to engage in the democratic process through prayer, voting, and advocating for moral principles that respect religious freedom and promote righteous public policy. When dialogue is necessary and appropriate, believers must be informed and engaged, speaking the truth in love. Political involvement need not be a distraction from faith, but can be an expression of it—when done with integrity and humility.

Churches should boldly engage with elected officials while resisting the temptation to become political platforms. Cultural hot-button issues—such as life, marriage, sexuality, education, parental rights, fiscal responsibility—must be addressed accurately and compassionately from Scripture. Believers should develop and be guided by a biblical worldview³ as a countercultural people whose convictions are shaped by the values of the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

The Bible presents a clear and compelling vision for the distinct roles of government and individual Christians. Government is God's servant to maintain justice and order; Christians are Christ's

ambassadors for love and transformation. When these roles are confused, the result is a compromised witness and a distorted gospel.

In an era of political polarization and cultural upheaval, it is more important than ever for Christians to think biblically about their civic engagement. By maintaining the proper balance and keeping our eyes fixed on Christ, we can be faithful citizens of both the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. It is possible—and necessary—for Christians to be salt and light in a secular society without losing sight of their ultimate allegiance to Christ and His kingdom. As citizens of both heaven and earth, let us engage the world not with fear or fury, but with faithfulness—proclaiming Christ, living justly, and loving boldly.

Thomas Alvis has pastored at Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Powhatan, Virginia, since July 2003 and has served with Faith Wins since 2020.



¹ See Gordon Dickson's book *12 Ways You Can Make a Difference in This Crazy, Mixed-Up World* for a helpful exposition and application of these teachings of Christ.

² Rom. 8:29; 12:9–21; 2 Cor. 5:18–20; Phil. 2:5–8, 15–16.

³ Seeing all of life—politics, relationships, work, ethics—through the lens of Scripture.

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The Tension of Contentment

Has it pulled you in too? Or is it just me? The ads on podcasts, the marketing emails, the continual recommendations from friends and influencers on social media, and even the homes of our friends and family all present us with ways in which our lives could improve.

In and of themselves, these improvements, tools, refreshes, and replacements are often helpful and even satisfying in some way. We feel like we're getting deals and even finding better ways to steward our time, money, and health. Yet, bombarded from all sides with diet plans, home upgrades, kitchen tools, and all manner of subscriptions, we can also feel overwhelmed at just how many areas of our lives seem to need "leveling up" in order to be what we view as the best wife, mother, church member, friend, or hostess.

As I have experienced my own bombardment, God has graciously and patiently spoken to my heart about a necessary tension between two realities—our God-given desire as women to improve, nurture, and beautify, and the heart attitude of contentment in which we must pursue these aims.

DON'T FEEL GUILTY FOR BEING GIVEN MUCH

The automatic response I tend to have when I realize I might be slipping into envy, covetousness, or the more respectable (ahem) discontentment, is to immediately chide myself for wanting anything—especially since there are people downtown in my city who have nowhere warm to sleep tonight.

We can all affirm, no matter our tax bracket, that we have been given MUCH. The awareness of just how much we have can make us feel guilty about desiring improvement in areas that someone without a roof over his head would never stop to consider. We know we're blessed. We know we have so much.

Yet, instead of viewing our blessings with a sense of guilt or unworthiness, we must rejoice in God's kindness and blessings as children of His love. We know He is a God whose attitude toward us is one of abounding and overflowing (Ps. 23; 103:8). Every good thing we have comes from Him (James 1:17), and He loves to give good gifts to us (Matt. 7:11). This abundance from our God is why we ourselves are then able to abound (2 Cor. 9:8; Phil. 1:9; 4:12), rejoicing in the unfathomable love and grace our God has poured out upon us.

EMBRACE THE LIMITATIONS GOD HAS PLACED ON YOU

We've been given limitations in the form of house size, physical health, salary, and time, to name only a few. Yet these limitations are not something to bemoan. As we see in the Parable of the Talents, our God is not unreasonable in His requirements (Matt. 25:14–30). We are responsible only for what He gives us and not for what we could do if only we had what others have been given.

God is sovereign over our circumstances, life situations, job security, and even the emergencies that burst into our lives. Though it's easy to forget, we can actually trust that what He's given us right now is what He wants us to have right now. He may bless us with more in the future, or He may take away some things we have come to depend on, but through either of these times we can trust His goodness and plan (Job 1:21).

It is commendable and right to be generous and pursue excellence. Yet these cannot be our ultimate goal. We run for the prize and high calling of Jesus, and that may mean accepting limitations where He has put them so that we glorify Him all the more (Phil. 3:13–14).

DON'T STOP STEWARDING

In an attempt to be content, we sometimes swing to an extreme of complacency or apathy. We may believe that we should just be "happy" with our current situation, no matter what it looks like. Isn't this contentment? Perhaps we simply bury our one talent in the earth, fearful of both using and losing it.

In the little and the much, all we have is still a gift from God that belongs, ultimately, to Him (Ps. 24:1). Nothing, no matter how great or small, is ever truly ours, and this truth is both freeing and weighty.

God has entrusted us with great blessings to enjoy and to steward, with His kingdom as our ultimate goal (Matt. 6:33). Even if those blessings look different from what we wish they did, they are still gracious gifts from the hand of our loving Father to be used—and when possible, multiplied (Matt. 25:19–23)—for His glory.

HOLD ON TO THE TENSION

As women, we want to make life better and more beautiful for ourselves and our families. As Christians, we want to do this in a way that seeks God's kingdom first and delights in the good gifts He has given us to enjoy right now.

So, will we choose to trust that God has given us what we need to pursue these desires for His glory? Or will we sit back in apathy, discouraged at all our limitations or continually longing for more than what He has given us?

Whether our efforts are bringing forth fruit or frustratingly limited, whether we feel low or abounding, we can be content through the One who is our strength (Phil. 4:11–13).

Jessica Schaal is a writer for a Christian company that publishes Bible studies and homeschool curriculum. She and her husband live in Reno, Nevada, where they moved in 2021 to be part of a new church plant. They serve as youth leaders as well as in the music ministry and love being a part of the community they have found and helped to build there.





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Why Didn't Jonah Just Jump?

Regarding the book of Jonah, one evangelical scholar wrote: The debate over the book's historicity will undoubtedly continue, because for some it is a litmus test of orthodoxy that proves whether or not one is committed to historical Christianity. Surely such an attitude makes a philosophical "mountain" out of a literary "molehill." Unlike the exodus and the resurrection of Jesus, the historicity of the Book of Jonah is not foundational to redemptive history and biblical faith. Unfortunately, the debate over the book's historicity has often distracted interpreters from focusing on its theological message, which is not affected by how one understands the book's literary genre. Whether the book is labeled historical narrative, legend, parable, or something akin to a historical novella, its themes seem apparent.¹

But consider the implications of Jesus' words for deciding the literary genre of Jonah. Matthew 12:39–40 necessarily places Jonah—indeed, the single most objectionable detail of Jonah—squarely in the category of history. Christ doesn't merely refer to the "story" of Jonah; He cites the *sign* of Jonah. Look up every usage of the term in Scripture and you will discover that a *sign* is always an actual, factual, historical reality used to signify the certainty of another historical reality. That means that if it did not actually happen, it cannot be a *sign* of something else that was going to happen. A fictional story would never have satisfied the Jews' request for a sign. Jesus cited the Jonah incident as the providential precedent for His resurrection, which was, itself, the ultimate and unarguable sign of His messianic identity.

The writer cited in the opening paragraph argues that Jesus' citation of Jonah need not imply the historicity of the Jonah story. He likens Jesus' reference to Jonah to "a school teacher using a legendary incident from the story of George Washington to motivate his/her students to follow the example of America's revered founding father."² Whether the "legendary incident" really happened is irrelevant. Yes, we can tell make-believe stories to our children that set an example and encourage them to behave in certain ways. But Jesus' reference to Jonah goes far beyond trying to motivate people to behave in a certain way. Jesus is demanding that His listeners *believe* who He is based on something that happened to Jonah. Indeed, Jonah's historical experience is the sole sign of His identity and authenticity that Jesus offers His detractors.

Liberals have long insisted that they don't care about "facts"; they care about "truths." But there are no reliable truths without verifiable facts. A "truth" with no factual, observable, confirmable basis in reality is, at best, fantasy and, at worst, falsehood. It's like a Holocaust denier saying, "Of course, the Holocaust never really happened; but the Holocaust 'story' teaches us how cruel man can be to his fellow man." It's a logical *non sequitur*.

"WHY DIDN'T JONAH JUST JUMP?"

Years ago, a thoughtful Bible reader stumped me with that question. It had never occurred to me before. I suspect few Bible

readers have paused to ponder it. But it strikes me as a pretty observant question.

Jonah admits that he's the problem. God is imperiling all the men on the ship because of him. So, the sailors ask him what they should do to make the sea calm (1:11). He could have said something like, "This storm is all my fault. God's angry with me, not you. I'll take responsibility for my sin against God. I'll jump overboard so God can deal with me alone." Instead, Jonah laid a heavy burden on them: "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me" (1:12, NKJV). Why lay such a terrible weight on the consciences of these men by compelling them against their will to effectively execute him?

The sailors clearly didn't want to do it. Instead, they rowed hard to try to bring the ship to land (1:13). When nothing else worked and the storm only worsened, finally, reluctantly—and with an earnest plea to Jonah's God not to hold them responsible for his death—"they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea" (1:15, NKJV).

What did that feel like? Imagine being one of the sailors to physically pick up a fellow human being and throw him to certain death in the raging sea—and living with the memory that you had done that. No cry of "Man overboard!" No frenzied attempt to rescue him. Just watching him disappear into the waves because *you* threw him in.

So, why did Jonah tell them that *they* had to throw him overboard? Why didn't Jonah spare them the mental anguish of that action? In short, why didn't Jonah just jump? "Well," you might say, "jumping would, in effect, be suicide, and that's wrong." So, compelling a group of men to kill you against their wishes is preferable? Surely there is more to this. I think there is.

Some have suggested that's Jonah's self-destruction would have been an act of despair: "Note that he did not throw himself into the sea," observes Charles Feinberg, "for there is a vast difference between an awakened conscience and a despairing conscience."³ Maybe. But that still doesn't explain why it was better to give all those men a guilty conscience.

Feinberg goes on to offer a more satisfying explanation: Jonah's action was, in the providence of God, a picture of the sacrifice of Christ: "Jonah . . . was willing to sacrifice himself to save those about to die. How like our Lord Jesus is this, although our Lord did not bring about the calamity, as Jonah did."⁴ Matthew Henry, too, notes that "Jonah is herein a type of Christ, that he gives his life a ransom for many; but with this material difference, that the storm Jonah gave himself up to still was of his own raising, but that storm which Christ gave himself up to still was of our raising."⁵ Along with the material difference, however, is a material similarity: *neither Jonah nor Jesus committed suicide; both were given over to death by the hands of others*. This similarity cannot be accidental or insignificant; it's the only thing that explains Jonah's otherwise bizarre directive—bizarre, that is, once we step outside

Jonah and the Resurrection of Jesus

the box of our overfamiliarity with the well-known story and start asking questions about what we've been reading for years, as my friend did.

Jesus explicitly taught that the Old Testament is, in its entirety, essentially and ultimately Christocentric (John 5:39). Closer attention to the biblical details sharpens the intentionality of the illustrative parallel to a finer scriptural point.

First, the book of Jonah carries a missionary, evangelistic thrust. God not only called Jonah to preach to the heathen in Nineveh; God also providentially used even his disobedience to evangelize the pagan mariners aboard the ship. The term “cast out” figures prominently at several key junctures in the story. God “cast out” a great wind to overtake Jonah in his disobedience, endangering others in the process (1:4). They all called on their gods and “cast out” all their cargo, but to no avail (1:5). When they awakened the slumbering Jonah to call on his God, God providentially manipulated the lots to implicate Jonah (1:6–7), thus drawing attention to Yahweh as the true God who was actually in control of all this (1:8–10). When they asked Jonah what needed to be done to appease God's anger, he instructed them to “cast out” his body into the sea (1:11–12). Despite their understandable aversion to the suggestion, when it became apparent that nothing else would work, they finally “cast out” (literally) Jonah into the sea. When the storm then ceased, they feared, worshiped, and made vows to Yahweh (1:15–16).

God had prepared a great fish to come and swallow Jonah, in what surely appeared to be his end. But the God whose providence brought the storm, and brought the fish, also sustained him there for “three days and three nights” (1:17). It was a “death” and “burial” from which he re-emerged alive, a graphic prophetic picture—a picture-prophecy—of the death and burial of Christ under divine judgment and His deliverance from that grave by the power of God. Is this parallel just overly imaginative wishful thinking? An unwarranted reading of NT truth back into the OT? It might be, except for the next point.

Second, Christ explicitly calls attention to the experience of Jonah as a picture of His own death and resurrection. Jesus' allusion to the time reference as prophetically significant regarding the duration of His own burial invests the experience and narrative of Jonah with Christological significance (Matt. 12:39–40). Moreover, Jesus' description of Himself as a “greater than Jonah” (Matt. 12:41) suggests an even closer link to the broader imagery suggested by Jonah's experience. Christ claims superiority to this consummate prophet in terms of ministerial impact (which is the point of this specific comparison to Jonah). The link between Jonah and “the greater than Jonah” suggests a parallel similar to that between the first Adam and “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45). Whereas, like Adam, Jonah rebelled against his call and commission and proved a disappointment, the “greater than Jonah” submits to His call and commission and will effect an even greater response to His prophetic ministry.

Luke 11:30 includes another small detail of surprising prophetic heft: Jonah was “a sign to the Ninevites.” His virtual return

from the dead validated the divine origin of his commission and the divine authority of his message to them. Likewise, Christ's literal return from the dead (having voluntarily submitted to being thrown there by others, like Jonah) was the ultimate validating sign of the divine origin of His commission and the divine authority of His message. Jesus' post-resurrection instruction of His disciples “from Moses and all the prophets” (Luke 24:25, 27, 32, 44–45) invites the thought that Jonah was one of those prophets to whom He turned their attention, opening their understanding.

Though virtually every parallel between Jonah and Christ naturally carries a corresponding distinction, here are some possible implications:

- Jonah was commissioned and sent by God; so was Jesus.
- Jonah “perished” willingly and self-sacrificially for the deliverance of those around him, including those who sent him to his death; so did Jesus.
- Jonah did not suicidally take his own life; neither did Jesus.
- Jonah's sacrifice involved the voluntary action of those around him; so did Jesus'.
- Jonah's death at the hands of the mariners conveyed a picture of the necessity of a propitiatory sacrifice—connected to an act of obedient faith on their part—to appease the righteous wrath of God; so did Jesus'.
- The mariners had a hand in, and were responsible for, sending Jonah to what seemed his certain death; so were we for Jesus'.
- The events surrounding Jonah's sacrifice resulted in the worship of the true God even among pagans; so did Jesus'.

If there is some other natural, immediate, historical explanation for why Jonah didn't just jump, the OT text does not reveal it. Jonah's vicarious sacrifice at the hands of others to save others, the providential course of events, the way in which the Holy Spirit selectively directed the record of those events, and Christ's own pointed references to the story, all demonstrate that ultimately a providential Christological significance lay behind the fact that Jonah didn't just jump.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.



¹ Robert Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Baker Academic, 200), 408.

² Chisholm, 407–8n175.

³ Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Moody, 1976), 137.

⁴ Feinberg, 137.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1708–1710; repr., Revell, n.d.), 4:1284.

Comfortable Being Conservative

What an interesting question for the theme of this issue: “Is Conservatism Enough?” I will be interested to read the other articles, but I assume that in one way or another they will answer “no.” If conservatism is enough, then the Pharisees would be in great shape. Only Christ is enough. Our goal should be to be Christlike, not just conservative.

It is interesting to observe new Christians. They get saved and immediately start making big changes in their life. They start going to church regularly. They start reading the Bible. They stop drinking and smoking. They stop living together before getting married. They buy into 2 Corinthians 5:17, which states, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” Sadly, however, it seems that five years down the road they stop changing and they settle for conservative Christianity instead of Christlike Christianity.

I think we would agree that no matter where we are on our spiritual journey, the minute we arrive in heaven there will be a spiritual change for the better. No one is so perfect this side of eternity that when they get to heaven, no change will take place. Unfortunately, many Christians live and act like they have arrived. How long has it been since you personally have had a spiritual change? What are you working on right now to be more like Christ?

It seems many Christians are comfortable being conservative rather than striving to be like Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, “For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.” The Greek word for

“constraineth” has the idea of pressure that produces an action. This is true of everything we love. If you love it, you want to get better at it. A golfer wants a lower score. A woodworker wants to improve, and so does a quilter. Paul is saying if we love God as we should, it will pressure us to try to be a better Christian.

Our world desperately needs to see growing, humble, changing Christlike Christians. Someone said we are having some of the finest preaching in America we have ever had with the fewest results we have ever seen. I think COVID-19 revealed the church was not as healthy as it looked. Many churches did not experience the congregation responding to the pandemic with the fruits of the Spirit. The Center for Bible Engagement, the Bible literacy research center for Back to the Bible, conducted a very interesting study with very interesting results. It was a 113-question survey with 8,665 respondents. Their conclusion was as follows: “Consistent with other studies we find a disconnect between respondents’ expressed beliefs about the importance of the Bible and their reading habits.” In other words, people believe it is important to read the Bible; they just don’t do it. When a person is not in God’s Word daily, he becomes almost by default a conservative believer instead of a Christlike believer. The survey found that those who read their Bible daily are three times more likely to have shared their faith with at least ten people in the past year. The survey also found that those who read their Bible at least four times a week are far less likely to participate in gambling, pornography, getting drunk, or having sex outside of marriage. When those who don’t read their Bible daily were asked why they didn’t, 51 percent responded that they were too busy and 17 percent responded that they were too distracted.

The Bible is clear in 2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” And 2 Timothy 3:16–17 states, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” One of the symptoms of spiritual backsliding is a dullness toward the Bible. Sunday School becomes dull, preaching is dull, anything spiritual is dull. However, it is important to remember that we are not commanded to love our Bible; we are commanded to love our God. The chief priests and scribes knew their Bible better than the wise men, but the wise men loved the Savior. A plaque my dad had in his office year-round displayed the saying “Wise men still seek Him.” So true. Satan knows the Bible, but he decided a long time ago that he would never have a relationship with God. Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). We are told to be not just hearers of God’s Word but doers of God’s Word.

If you are not actively working on something specific in your Christian life to improve, could I encourage you to start today? Don’t settle for being conservative—strive to be Christlike. Our world desperately needs to see Christians who have been changed because of what they believe. Humble, growing Christians are the most effective at taking the Word to the world. May the Word of God do the work of God in all of our hearts and lives!

Jim Tillotson has served as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, since June 2015.





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Corey A. Pfaffe



Pastoral Compensation 101 Basics Every Church Member Needs to Know

He *blew up* the church by stubbornly insisting on his flawed understanding of how a pastor should be paid. The pastor left. The congregation lost its shepherd. They *built up* the church by wisely and sacrificially supporting the financial needs of their pastor. The pastor stayed. The congregation loved its shepherd. While a larger or wealthier congregation may have been able to provide a larger total pay package, this body learned the basics of pastoral compensation and engaged in communication with its pastor regarding his support.

Using available resources like www.churchsalary.com (fee required), church members can explore comparable pay levels of ministers across the country. These benchmarks might be unreachable for your church's current financial position, but they do offer targets for the future. More cash compensation is helpful, but alone it does not guarantee a wise fit for your pastor and your church's resources.

Your church needs members like you who will learn the basic tools of the pastoral compensation toolbox and collaborate with him in assembling a family-friendly and tax-smart pay package.

COMPENSATION TOOLBOX

Nuts and bolts. Some items, like nuts and bolts in a repairman's toolbox, are not really tools used to assemble a finished product. But understanding their place is essential to selecting appropriate tools. For pastoral compensation, a factor that greatly impacts compensation tool selection is your pastor's classification by the Internal Revenue Service as a *dual status employee*. As his employer, your church must prepare for him an *employee's* Form W-2. However,

for Social Security tax and Medicare tax he is treated as if he were *self-employed*. Tax law does not permit him to be treated as a "FICA employee" like virtually all other U.S. employees. This means that neither of these taxes is withheld from his pay, nor is the church permitted to pay an equal amount on his behalf to the IRS. This reality can be a burden on your pastor's finances.

Cash compensation. Virtually all pastors are paid a fixed salary, not an hourly wage.

Housing allowance. Your pastor must request that a portion of his cash compensation be officially designated toward his out-of-pocket housing costs. Pastors living in a church parsonage typically need only a small allowance. If your pastor is paying for his own personal residence, his request will be much larger. The church's only obligation in this respect is to approve the designation. It is typically arranged before a new calendar year begins.

Healthcare benefits. This is an expensive and complicated tool for pastors and their church members. Today, most of the outlays that your church may consider for your pastor will be treated as taxable income (e.g., healthcare sharing plan subscriptions, Healthcare.gov premium assistance). As in your family, health care often weighs heavy on your pastor's budget. Don't fail to address it with him. You should probably seek professional advice when researching the best fit for your pastor's family and the church.

Retirement benefits. As is true in your career and family, your pastor must start early in saving for a future time when he can no longer serve your church as a full-time paid minister. Like you, he can

set up his own traditional or Roth IRA. But your church holds a unique position as his employer to offer a much better plan—an Internal Revenue Code section 403(b) retirement plan. The tax benefits are substantial. You don't necessarily need to understand them all, but he certainly must. The most basic form of a 403(b) plan simply permits the pastor to request that a fixed amount be withheld from each paycheck and then sent to his investment advisor each month.

Other insurance benefits. Many churches now offer dental, eye care, and disability insurance to their pastors. Some also provide a life insurance benefit. In addition, churches are required under state law to carry workers' compensation insurance. These insurances are often quite economical for your church to provide and the consequence to your pastor of not having one of these coverages can be catastrophic.

Expense reimbursements. Your pastor can find himself serving church members any day of the year and any hour of the day. Perhaps the most common expense is use of his personal car. Each December, the IRS sets the next year's mileage rate (e.g., 72.5 cents per mile in 2026). Of course, he can incur many other expenses (e.g., meals, professional library, conference attendance) all on behalf of your church. Make sure that he does not bear the personal burden of these expenses. If your church collects timely documentation for expense reimbursements, the amounts are subject to neither income, Social Security, nor Medicare tax.

Cost of living adjustments (COLAs). Each of the above tools must be well maintained with annual COLA increases. The



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COMPENSATION COMMUNICATION

Once your pastor and your church determine the next year's compensation arrangements, they should be communicated in a written summary. The church budget will incorporate the effects. The church treasurer or payroll processor will translate the plan into paychecks, including voluntary *income tax* (but not FICA) withholding. The plan should also include vacation time off and the pastor's and church's understanding of his time away for any outside speaking opportunities.

Your ministry to understand and implement the tools of pastoral compensation can bless your pastor and build up the church.

Corey Pfaffe serves as the CEO of MinistryCPA, a certified public accounting firm based in Watertown, Wisconsin. The firm works with ministry clients in virtually every US state and every continent. He and his wife Laurie have served in various lay capacities as members of Calvary Baptist Church of Watertown for more than thirty-five years.



Opportunities and Dangers of the Current Cultural Moment

Continued from page 11

worldview and the increasing sensitivity to spiritual matters. We began discussing whether this was a "revival" when he asked a penetrating question: "Has there been repentance?"

It's a good thing that a culture turns from wickedness of any kind, but our goal is not just for people to turn from one wickedness to another. Giving up the insanity of gender ideology simply to go back to the rebellion of cohabitation or divorce isn't good enough. True revival means a turning from sin to God. We must continue fighting and praying to see individuals and our country as a whole acknowledge sin, turn from it, and return to the Lord.

CONCLUSION

The cultural winds appear to be favorable to Christianity. We can rejoice in this, but we dare not relax as if we've won and the battle is over. Now is the time for fighting, not resting. Now is the time for vigilance, not carelessness. Some will look at everything happening and see only the good,

whereas others will harbor cynicism and fear that we will only make the same mistakes as before. The best path forward seems to be to land somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the very real dangers but also taking advantage of every Spirit-directed opportunity.

Ben Hicks, PhD, is the Associate Pastor at Colonial Hills Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana.



¹ "New Barna Data: Young Adults Lead a Resurgence in Church Attendance," Barna Group, Sep. 2, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/research/young-adults-lead-resurgence-in-church-attendance/>.

² Bob Smietana, "Bible sales keep growing, even as many Americans lose their religion," AP News, Nov. 24, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/bible-sales-united-states-christianity-8ff396ec9e-6caf25179d3b620718991a>.

³ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1987), xvii.

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Chaplain's Report

CH MATTHEW SPRECHER PROMOTED TO COLONEL



On 1 Dec 2025, the Army promoted Matt Sprecher to the rank of Colonel. Interestingly, the ceremony included mostly FBFI chaplains (CH Joe Willis did the invocation, CH (COL) Gary Fischer was the guest speaker, and, of course, Matt Sprecher shared comments). It was a very special time for Matt's family to share in this ceremony with him. Even his father-in-law, who is a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, wore his old uniform to the ceremony. What a great day for Matt, for the Army, and for our FBFI family! The following letter was written by one of Matt's former commanders and was read by Gary Fisher during his remarks. It was very moving.

Email sent by COL-R Joseph S. McLamb, dated 24 NOV 25 (reprinted by permission)

Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity. Chaplain Sprecher is certainly exaggerating my influence, but I appreciate the sentiment. At the risk of sounding dramatic, we walked in the Valley of the Shadow of Death together, and that sort of experience creates bonds that are probably best described as sacred, if you will forgive my use of a term more common to your profession than mine.

The truth is I do not have the right words to describe what Chaplain Matt Sprecher did in 2007–2008. Through no fault of his own he found himself assigned as the battalion chaplain of 1-502 Infantry, a battalion that had just returned from an exceptionally traumatic tour in Iraq that made the unit something of a pariah in the 101st Airborne Division and gained enough international attention to spawn the book *Blackhearts: One Platoon's Plunge into Madness in the Triangle of Death and the American Struggle in Iraq*. Many of the unit's leaders and Soldiers were still reeling from that experience, still trying to sort out what it had done to them individually and collectively, when Matt and I met for the first time. I told him I needed his help; no matter how hurt and scarred the men of the battalion were, I knew we were returning to Iraq in about 9 months—ready or not.

Matt proved to be exactly the chaplain the battalion needed. An almost perfect blend of sympathetic ear and stiff upper lip, he listened to the stories and endured the

unavoidable tragedies of a battalion trying to find itself again, regain its sense of purpose and pride, and re-orient itself to mission accomplishment. I doubt any chaplain in the division faced a tougher situation, but if Matt recognized he was carrying a heavier load than his peers he never so much as hinted it to me. He shouldered his rucksack with a quiet dignity that I found inspirational, and I believe others did too. The unit had already had its fill of flashy, "all eyes on me" leaders, and Matt proved to be the perfect remedy—a competent but humble leader who worked tirelessly to help the battalion prepare for its next combat tour without wasting any time over who would get the credit.

If I were a Hollywood writer, I would undoubtedly include a story about the dramatic day that the unit "turned the corner" and suddenly emerged as a solid battalion. That would be a lie, though, so I will resist the temptation. The reality is the battalion recovered just like any wounded man recovers: slowly, with days both good and bad, moments of hope clouded by unexpected setbacks. As when one climbs a mountain under a heavy load, progress was painful and almost impossible to measure. A modern-day Sisyphus, Matt kept at his task of pushing the boulder up the incline; as far as I could ever tell, he was content.

The battalion did return to Iraq as scheduled and performed well enough to be labelled the "best unit in Multi-National Division—Baghdad" by its notoriously hard-to-please division commander and to receive the Valorous Unit Award—a very long way from where we started the journey. I learned about the award after I left the unit, listening on the phone as a senior non-commissioned officer told me through tears, "We did it right, sir. We did it right."

Chaplain Matt Sprecher did it right. Quietly, consistently, and with no fanfare, he helped the men of the battalion restore their faith in themselves, in their nation, in God. If not everyone noticed the difference his contributions made, that is only because of his exceptional skill; he was like one who pulls a fish from the pond without creating a ripple on the surface. But Matt was not looking for the praise of men, not during the long struggle nor in the moment of success. When I saw him on our way back from Iraq, I was struck by how unassuming but confident he appeared, like a man who has heard his father say "well done" and seeks no

further word of praise.

More than a decade later I found myself standing in front of the Chaplain Corps Memorial at Fort Jackson,



South Carolina. The sun was just rising, and in the shadow of the Chaplain School I saw the immobile bronze figures of the troubled Soldier and the comforting chaplain. The scene mesmerized me, as it seemed to capture a thousand painful memories that somehow managed to be both tragic and miraculous at the same time. My eyes were drawn irresistibly to the one detail that the sculptor captured exactly right and that holds my attention every time I return to the site: the Soldier with his head down still has a magazine in his weapon. The chaplain at his shoulder is not there to free the Soldier from the hardships he faces, but to help him face those hardships with dignity and determination. That is, I think, the very model of what a chaplain can be and should be, and no man I have known has lived out that model more fully than Chaplain Matt Sprecher.

Joe
Joseph S. McLamb
Chief of Staff

Congratulations to Matt, Ginger, and the Sprecher family!

CH TRENT WILSON ORDAINED

On November 1, 2025, seven ordained men of various ministries gathered together at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, to participate in the ordination council for **Trent Wilson**. The officiating pastor for the ordination was Andy Rodriguez, Trent's



senior pastor. After three hours of questioning and some interrogating, the board enthusiastically and unanimously voted to confirm Trent as an ordained minister of the gospel with an emphasis on ministry in the military chaplaincy. CH Joe Willis preached the following morning at Cornerstone, the church sending Trent and his wife Sarah, providing a charge to both the couple and their church family. Several family members and friends were in the service to support Trent. Trent's Battalion Commander was also in attendance that Sunday morning to witness Trent's installment.

NOTEWORTHY PROMOTIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

Alan Ashley: Received "Distinguished Expert" certification through the National Rifle Association Marksmanship Qualification Program (Rimfire Rifle, Prone Discipline) on 1 September

Mark Hanson: Army Commendation Medal for meritorious service during overseas deployment with the 732nd CSSB

Samuel Jackson: pinned Captain on 10/10/25

Daniel Llorente: Chapel team won Major Command (AFRC) level team awards for 2024 Ministry of Presence and 2024 Readiness

Tavis Long: Selected to be the commanding officer of the Naval Chaplaincy School in Newport, Rhode Island

Jeffrey Rybold: Commendation Medal for time at Luke AFB

Casey Stephens: Received Indiana Guard Reserve Service Award



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