

The Next 4 Years

Faith issues
in the
Obama
Administration



What Christians should know.

 **DENISON FORUM**
ON TRUTH AND CULTURE

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Faith issues in the Obama Administration***

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Introduction

On the day President Barack Obama returns to office, here are questions he'll face:

- Will there be another 9/11-like attack, killing our citizens and crippling our economy?
- Will Iran obtain nuclear weapons? If so, will they use them to begin another Holocaust, or at the least, empower Israel's enemies to attack her people with impunity?
- Will China's economic juggernaut continue? Will other nations threaten the future of our economy?
- Will Russia's energy alliance with Europe lead to a new Soviet empire?
- Will our nation's struggling economy fall back into recession?
- Will America's superpower status go the way of Great Britain? Are we a nation in irreversible decline?

What can we expect from the next four years? The purpose of this report is not to survey every domestic and geopolitical issue facing the Obama administration, but to focus on those challenges that are clearly spiritual in nature. What faith issues will Americans confront in the coming years? How can Christians be the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) in a nation facing dark days?

Faith issues at home

Terrorism and a nuclear Iran are clearly threats against our nation, and will be discussed shortly. However, of the challenges facing the Obama Administration, five relate especially to matters of faith: abortion, same-sex marriage, health care, embryonic stem cells, and the economy. Each is deserving of longer attention than space permits here, but a brief survey may help equip Christians in responding to these issues in the coming years.

*Abortion*¹

The president of the United States nominates justices to the Supreme Court. Two members of the present Court may well retire in the next four years—Ruth Bader Ginsberg is 78 and Stephen Breyer is 73 years of age. Each is among the Court's strongest supporters of abortion rights. By contrast, Justices Scalia, Thomas, Roberts and Alito are believed to be opposed to *Roe v. Wade*. If Justices Ginsberg or Breyer retire during President Obama's next term, he will nominate a justice whose vote would preserve *Roe*, preventing the issue from being returned to the states. (During the last election, 24 states passed laws restricting abortions.²

The president has repeatedly made clear his support for abortion rights in our country. On January 22, 2012, marking the 39th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, President Obama

affirmed this ruling and stated, "I remain committed to protecting a woman's right to choose and this fundamental constitutional right."³ He also disagrees with requiring parental notification before an abortion can be performed, since "not all girls can turn to their mother or father in times of trouble."⁴

What can Christians do on this painful issue?

"Pro-life" advocates typically believe that life begins at conception, so that abortion is wrong. "Pro-choice" advocates typically believe that life begins when the fetus is viable independent of its mother or at birth, and that abortion should be a legal choice for the mother prior to that point. The framers of the Constitution did not address this issue. The Supreme Court in 1973 interpreted this silence to mean that constitutional rights to life do not extend to the pre-born. And yet the Bible speaks with a single voice in viewing the pre-born as the creation of God and as children deserving of protection and care. In light of these contradictory facts, is there a way to move forward?

Given that the participants in this debate come from a variety of religious and personal worldviews, and assuming that *Roe vs. Wade* will continue to be the law of the land, it seems implausible that pro-life supporters will change our culture through faith-based or political means. So I suggest the following strategy.

First, we should build a consensus for permitting abortion to protect the life of the mother or in cases of rape and incest. Such cases account for a small percentage of the 1.5 million abortions performed each year. Even though some question the morality of this position, most would concede the point in order to reduce the 93 percent of abortions which are elective in nature. Allowing for this exception removes the most obvious and emotional obstacle to the "pro-life" position.

Second, we should understand that the pre-born possess at least the potential for "life," however it is defined. Many of us believe that a fetus is a human being by every definition of the term except independent viability, and note that the pre-born will attain this status unless harmed. But even those who disagree with this assertion will admit that every fetus is in the process of becoming a "person."

Third, "pro-life" and "pro-choice" advocates should work together to reduce the number of abortions in our country. In his 1996 speech accepting the Democratic Party's nomination for president, Bill Clinton stated that "abortion should not only be safe and legal, it should be rare."⁵ How do we make abortions more rare? Even the most ardent "pro-choice" supporters surely see abortion as negative for pregnant women and for our nation, and would support an agenda intended to decrease the number of abortions performed each year.

A way to achieve this goal would be for both sides to promote adoption as the best answer to an unwanted pregnancy. (President Obama has consistently voiced his support for adoption.⁶) Both sides could also support abstinence and birth control education. Many "pro-life" advocates view birth control measures as promoting sexual promiscuity, but we may have to choose between sexual activity and unintended pregnancy with a resulting abortion.

Both sides could join forces in educating the public about the actual characteristics of the fetus. It has been proven that women are far less likely to choose abortion when they see a sonogram of their unborn child or learn about its present capacities. Adoption would

then become a more likely option for the mother to choose. Leaders from both sides could be asked to adopt a united agenda aimed at decreasing the number of abortions performed each year in our country. If this strategy is successful, it may change the public's opinion regarding the morality of abortion.

Fourth, whatever the "pro-choice" position decides to do to help limit abortions, "pro-life" advocates must do all we can to help both the unborn child and its mother. We must care for the mother and the father of the child, and minister to those who have chosen abortion in the past. We should work hard to advocate adoption and to provide life necessities for at-risk families. We must be "pro-life," not just "pro-birth."

It may be that these steps would eventually help to change the legal status of abortion. An eventual constitutional amendment extending legal protection to the fetus would be more likely to pass if more Americans were taught to view the fetus as a life. Alternately, it would be more likely that the courts would recognize the rising consensus against abortion and rule in light of such popular opinion.

As the father of two sons, I know the identity of their true Father: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). Every person conceived by the miraculous grace of God deserves to know him as well.

*Same-sex marriage*⁷

Gay marriage is one of the most divisive issues of our day, with 54 percent of Americans in support and 42 percent opposed. More than three-quarters of supporters and opponents of gay marriage say they feel strongly about the issue.⁸

On May 9, 2012, President Obama publicly endorsed same-sex marriage during an interview with ABC's Robin Roberts: "It is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same sex couples should be able to get married." This statement marked the first time a sitting president has publicly endorsed gay marriage.

Part of his reasoning was spiritual: "In the end the values that I care most deeply about and [Mrs. Obama] cares most deeply about is how we treat other people. We are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others but, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is, not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the Golden Rule; treat others the way you would want to be treated. And that's what motivates me as president."⁹

Mr. Obama's 2008 political platform endorsed the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act. In February 2011, he announced that he views the section relating to same-sex couples to be unconstitutional and instructed his Justice Department not to defend the statute.¹⁰

What can Christians do to support biblical marriage?

First, we should understand the debate. Advocates make the following claims: marriage is a civil activity regulated by the state, so religious objections should not be relevant or recognized. All couples deserve marriage benefits, including patient visitation, a role in medical decisions, and tax and insurance benefits. Homosexuals are a minority whose civil rights must be protected. And gay marriage would encourage family values, lessen high-risk behavior, and increase adoptions.

Opponents counter: legalizing gay marriage could force religious employers to extend spousal benefits to same-sex partners. Civil contracts can provide the economic and legal benefits of marriage to same-sex couples. If anyone can get married, what is to prevent polygamy, adult-child, or direct-family marriages? The Full Faith and Credit Clause of the Constitution means that a law enacted in one state must be recognized in another—would this mean that a gay couple married in Massachusetts must be considered married in Texas?

Second, we should teach and defend the biblical view of marriage. Each time Scripture speaks to the subject of homosexuality, it prohibits such activity (see Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; and 1 Timothy 1:8-11). (Jesus didn't address the issue because such a stance was unnecessary since homosexual activity was forbidden in his culture.) The Bible intends marriage to be a covenant between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24), a position Jesus reinforced (Matthew 19:4-6). Scripture never endorses homosexual relations on any level.

Third, we should extend God's transforming grace to all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Homosexuality is not the unpardonable sin—refusing salvation is the only sin God cannot forgive, because this sin rejects his forgiveness (Matthew 12:31-32). All sex outside of marriage is unbiblical (1 Cor. 6:9). Which has split more congregations: homosexual or heterosexual sin?

Homosexuals deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. I am not tempted by homosexuality, but my homosexual friends may not face some of the temptations that trouble me. God loves the "world" (John 3:16), whatever our failings may be.

If we will work to defend traditional marriage while offering all people the opportunity to experience God's love in Christ, we will serve both our nation and God's Kingdom.

Health care reform

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (commonly known as the ACA or Obamacare) has been the most hotly debated legislation of our day. It is beyond my purpose to discuss the Act in detail (the published summary alone runs to 13 pages).¹¹ Among the Act's most popular provisions now in place:

- The Medicare rebate for brand name drugs was increased.
- Adults with pre-existing conditions are now eligible for insurance.
- Insurers cannot impose lifetime dollar limits on essential benefits.
- Dependents are permitted to remain on their parents' insurance plan until their 26th birthday.
- Insurers cannot exclude pre-existing medical conditions for children under the age of 19 or drop policyholders when they get sick.

In the future, insurers would not be allowed to discriminate against or charge higher rates for individuals based on pre-existing medical conditions. Nor would they be allowed to establish annual spending caps.

How would insurance companies be able to afford these changes? Now we come to the most controversial part of the Act: the "individual mandate." By 2014, all Americans will be required to purchase insurance or pay a penalty. The Supreme Court narrowly

approved this requirement as constitutional when Chief Justice Roberts determined that the penalty for not purchasing insurance constitutes a tax and thus falls within governmental authority.¹²

How are biblical principles relevant to this debate?

Scripture calls us to care for those who cannot care for themselves:

- "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).
- "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place" (Jeremiah 22:3).
- "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27; see 5:14-16).

However, God's word also encourages individual liberty and wise choices: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15); "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). And it assures us that the Great Physician is not subject to the vagaries of our political process. He is "the Lord who heals you" (Exodus 15:26).

As our president continues on the controversial road toward health care reform, he will need the compassion taught by Scripture and the intercession of God's people.

Embryonic stem cells

"Stem cells" are unspecialized cells—they are not yet heart, skin, nerve cells, etc. They can reproduce themselves in this state and can become all or many of the 210 different kinds of tissue in the human body.

They are found in adult neural cells and bone marrow, live-birth umbilical cord, placental blood, and embryos. Until recently, most researchers believed that embryonic stem cells possessed the most capacity for medical benefit. Unfortunately, harvesting them destroys the embryo. If a person believes that life begins at conception, he or she is likely to view embryonic stem cell research as the destruction of human life.

This issue relates to the presidency because federal funds for such research are vital to its progress. President George W. Bush permitted such funds to be used only for embryonic stem cells in existence before August 9, 2001.¹³ Shortly after taking office, President Obama signed Executive Order 13505 Removing Barriers To Responsible Scientific Research Involving Human Stem Cells. This order stated that "the Secretary of Health and Human Services (Secretary) through the Director of NIH, may support and conduct responsible, scientifically worthy human stem cell research, including human embryonic stem cell research, to the extent permitted by law."¹⁴

What does God's word say on this issue?

I understand Scripture to teach that life begins at conception (cf. Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5), whether the egg and sperm are joined in the womb or in the laboratory. As a result, I believe that destroying any embryo to obtain its stem cells is wrong. In my view, in-vitro fertilization should be used only to create embryos that are then implanted in the mother, with no excess embryos to be frozen (more than 100,000 such embryos now exist in our country) or used for experimentation.

Whatever your view on this difficult subject, it is clear that Christians need to pray for our leaders to have divine wisdom as they seek to utilize medical technology for our good and God's glory.

The economy

The United States produces 25 percent of the world's wealth. In 2009 we accounted for 22.5 percent of all foreign direct investment; China accounted for 4.4 percent.¹⁵ While we continue to recover from the Great Recession, our Gross Domestic Product is nonetheless larger than the next three nations (China, Japan, and Germany) combined.

Navigating the global economic storms ahead will be challenging. China's economy, long touted as the most successful on the planet, is facing headwinds from surging inflation. As a result, their labor is now more expensive than in Mexico, Malaysia, Indonesia, and several other countries. They have responded by manipulating their currency to keep their exports competitive, but declining profits have resulted.¹⁶

Russia also poses a significant economic challenge in the next four years. As a significant provider of natural gas to Germany and most of Europe, it is positioning itself for partnerships and alliances with the Continent. Russia needs technology, which Germany has in abundance; Germany needs manpower, which can be achieved by building factories in Russia. A Russian-German alliance may be coming, a development that would alter the economic landscape in the West.¹⁷

What does God's word say about the financial challenges we face?

We begin with greed, the cause of so much of the Great Recession and its aftermath: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The psalmist prayed, "Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain" (Psalm 119:36).

What about injustice and dishonesty, key contributors to our plight? "The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out" (Proverbs 10:9); "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity" (Prov. 11:3); "Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow" (Prov. 13:11); "Better is little with righteousness than much gain with injustice" (Prov. 16:8).

What does God think about the foreign debt we have amassed? He warns us: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (Prov. 22:7). Paul instructed us to "let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Romans 13:8).

How does he feel about the growing number of impoverished people in our land? David said of him, "You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them" (Psalm 35:10). He instructed his people, "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

God assures us, "he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Prov. 19:17). He said of King Josiah, "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:16). He counsels us to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). Jesus began his public ministry by quoting Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

What is the ultimate solution to our plight? "Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life" (Proverbs 22:4). If Americans lived by God's financial principles, how different would our economy be?

President Obama clearly needs our intercession as he seeks to lead our economic recovery. As we pray for him, however, "we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7). King David proclaimed that "the Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble" (Psalm 9:9). Then he added this assurance: "Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you" (v. 10).

The threat of terrorism

The president's first priority is to protect America. As Commander in Chief, he has final authority over the exercise of our military. No president has faced greater threats to our nation's citizens than Mr. Obama does.

We have fought other wars on our home soil, from the American Revolutionary War to the Civil War. But each was contested by soldiers on battlefields, using conventional weapons and tactics. On 9/11 we learned that a handful of terrorists can kill thousands of American citizens and inflict catastrophic harm to our economy. This threat remains and in many ways is more frightening than ever.

Surveys indicate that seven percent of the Muslim world has been radicalized. Seven percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims is 112 million people who are convinced that killing Americans is required by the Qur'an. This is an enemy three times larger than the combined forces we faced in World War II, nine times larger than the Soviet army we faced during the Cold War.¹⁸

Considering the 1979 capture of our embassy in Iran as the first battle in the War on Terror, here is a list on attacks against Americans leading up to 9/11:

- The U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon was bombed on April 18, 1983, killing 63 and injuring 120.
- The U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon were bombed on October 23, 1983, killing 241 marines.
- The U.S. embassy in Kuwait was bombed on December 12, 1983, killing six.

- The U.S. embassy in Beirut was attacked on September 20, 1984, killing two American military personnel and 22 others.
- A restaurant near the U.S. Air Force base in Torrejon, Spain was bombed on April 12, 1984, killing 18 American servicemen.
- William Francis Buckley, the CIA's station chief in Beirut, was kidnapped on March 16, 1984. He was tortured for 15 months and died of a heart attack.
- The cruise ship Achille Lauro was hijacked on October 7, 1985; a wheelchair-bound American named Leon Klinghoffer was thrown overboard and killed.
- The World Trade Center in New York City was bombed on February 26, 1993, killing seven and wounding more than a thousand.
- In 1993, Omar Abdel Rahman attempted to blow up the Holland and Lincoln tunnels in New York City.
- Ramzi Yousef tried to blow up a dozen U.S. airliners over the Pacific in January, 1995.
- The American Air Force dormitory in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia was bombed on June 25, 1996, killing 19 U.S. airmen and wounding nearly 400 others.
- U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya were bombed on August 7, 1998, killing 224 and injuring more than 4,000.
- Ahmed Ressay attempted to bomb Los Angeles International Airport on New Year's Eve, 1999.
- The U.S.S. Cole was attacked on October 12, 2000, killing 17 U.S. Navy sailors.

Since 9/11, what have American citizens faced? According to the Heritage Foundation, there have been 53 terrorist plots against the United States in the last 11 years.¹⁹ Among them:

- Richard Reid attempted to blow up a U.S.-bound airliner with explosives in his shoes on December 22, 2001.
- José Padilla was arrested in May 2002 as he returned from Pakistan; he had planned to use a dirty bomb against the U.S.
- Iyman Farris, a naturalized U.S. citizen, was arrested in May 2003 for conspiring to use blowtorches to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Nuradin Abdi, a Somali citizen living in Columbus, Ohio, was arrested in November 2003 for plotting to bomb a local shopping mall.
- Four men were arrested in Los Angeles in August 2005 and convicted of conspiring to attack targets in the area.
- Five men were sentenced to prison in November 2005 for plotting to blow up the Sears Tower in Chicago.
- In August 2006, a plot to blow up 10 U.S.-bound commercial airliners was stopped by British police.
- In May 2007, six men were arrested for planning to attack Fort Dix in New Jersey.
- In June 2007, four men were arrested for plotting to blow up aviation fuel tanks and pipelines at the J.F.K. International Airport in New York City.
- In May 2009, four men were arrested for planning to blow up New York-area Jewish centers and shoot down planes at a nearby Air National Guard Base.
- Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad killed a soldier and injured another outside a military recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas on June 1, 2009.
- Najibullah Zazi, an Afghani citizen and legal American resident, was arrested in Denver on September 15, 2009 and charged with planning an attack using backpack bombs.

- Nidal Malik Hasan is accused of killing 13 soldiers and wounding 10 others at Fort Hood on November 5, 2009.
- Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up Flight 253 on Christmas Day, 2009.
- Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate explosives in an SUV parked in Times Square, New York City, in May 2010.
- In October 2010, two packages shipped from Yemen to Chicago-area synagogues were found to contain explosives.
- In May 2011, two men were arrested by New York City police for plotting to attack a Manhattan synagogue.²⁰

While our military's sacrificial and commendable efforts have greatly weakened the original leadership of al Qaeda (often called "al Qaeda prime"), the global jihadist threat against our people has only grown since 9/11. Radical Muslims have built strongholds across the Middle East, controlling Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon, with bases in Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen. They are active in Africa, working in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Algeria and Morocco.

Jihadists are growing in Asia with strongholds in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, and Uzbekistan. Radical Islamist groups are strong in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, East Timor and Thailand. Homegrown terrorists and jihadist immigrants are active in England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. And al Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas have expanded their presence in South America, exploiting the illegal drug trade to fund their operations. These terror groups follow no single leader we can kill or capture and defend no single homeland we can invade.

How are we to stop them from attacking us? TSA screens 1.8 million passengers on our nation's airlines every day. Our borders with Canada and Mexico are over 7,500 miles long. More than 6 million cargo containers enter U.S. seaports each year, of which only 2 percent are physically inspected by Customs. When Quazi Nafis attempted to bomb the Federal Reserve Bank building in Manhattan in October 2012, his plot became the 15th attempt against New York City since 9/11.²¹ Clearly, we cannot prevent terrorists from targeting Americans.

We have been fighting in Afghanistan longer than any war in our nation's history. Even after our troops come home, our battle with jihadists will continue. This is indeed the "Long War."

What can the Obama Administration do to protect our people? America must counter the appeal of radicalism in the Muslim world. If young Muslims continue to join jihadist groups at the present rate, this conflict will never end.

To win the minds and hearts of Muslims, our government can strengthen alignments with non-radical Muslim leaders as they seek to control jihadist elements in their countries. We can help to build democracy in the Islamic world, giving more Muslims a voice and a vote. Surprisingly, 50 percent of radical Muslims say that "moving toward greater governmental democracy" would advance progress in their world.²² We can mediate peace in the Middle East, as many jihadists claim the plight of Palestinians as cause for attacking Israel and the West. And we can encourage economic renewal, offering hope to many who will otherwise turn to radicalism.

What can Christians do?

While there is much our government can do to protect our nation, this conflict at its heart is spiritual. Jihadists are motivated by their vision of a world dominated by radical Islam. They are not fighting for land or gold, but for the souls of humanity. We must counter their spiritual movement with our own.

The good news is that more Muslims are turning to Christ today than at any time in Islamic history. More have become Christians in the last 15 years than in the previous 15 centuries, many after seeing visions and dreams of Jesus.²³ Christians must pray more fervently than ever for this spiritual awakening to continue in the Muslim world. We must support believers from Muslim backgrounds with our intercession, finances, and encouragement. And we must discover God's Kingdom assignment for each of us as we join forces to win Muslims to Christ.

Tom Doyle, long-time missionary to the Middle East and my good friend, believes that radical Islam's attack on America was orchestrated by Satan to keep Christians in our country from loving Muslims and reaching out to them. I'm convinced that he's right. Let's counter the enemy's strategy on our knees.

I pray every morning for 100 million Muslims to come to Christ this year. Will you join me?

A nuclear Iran

On New Year's Day 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led a revolt against the Shah of Iran that deposed him and created the Islamic Republic of Iran. On June 4, 1989, he was succeeded by Seyed Ali Khamenei as the nation's Supreme Leader. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former mayor of Tehran, was elected president of Iran in 2005 and was reelected to office in 2009 after voting marred by widespread allegations of fraud.

Why are Iran's leaders a threat?

Ahmadinejad has described Israel as "filthy bacteria"²⁴ and "the most criminal people in the world."²⁵ He denies the Holocaust and has pledged to destroy Israel. Khamenei recently stated that Iran "will support and help any nations, any groups fighting against the Zionist regime across the world." He called Israel "a true cancer tumor on this region that should be cut off."²⁶ (To those who agree with his assessment of Israel as "occupiers" of Palestine, George Friedman makes an excellent point: "To argue that the Jews have no right to be in Palestine is a defensible position only if you are prepared to assert that Europeans have no right to be in America or Australia."²⁷)

Such rhetoric against the Jewish people is unfortunately common in the Muslim world. The Prophet Muhammad had 800 Jewish men beheaded when they conspired against him. The Qur'an calls Jews "apes" (2:65), "apes and swine" (5:60), and "apes, despised and rejected" (7:166). What makes Iran's enmity with Israel especially dangerous to the Jewish people and to America?

First, Iran is the only nation led by radical Muslims that is seeking nuclear arms. In 1967, the U.S. supplied Iran with its first nuclear research reactor. The next year, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Shah planned to construct up to 23 nuclear power stations by 2000. However, after the 1979 Revolution, most international nuclear

cooperation with Iran was ended. Since 2006, the United Nations Security Council has passed seven resolutions demanding that Iran suspend its nuclear activities and imposing sanctions and embargoes for its refusal to comply.

Despite such international pressure, President Ahmadinejad announced in February 2010 that Iran would begin enriching its stockpile of uranium. That same month, United Nations inspectors reported evidence that Tehran had been working to develop a nuclear warhead; some American officials believe that Iran has also obtained missiles that would enable it to reach Western European capitals and Moscow.

In late August 2012, international inspectors reported that Iran has installed three-quarters of the nuclear centrifuges it needs to complete a site deep underground for producing nuclear fuel. The report also stated that Iran has cleansed another site which inspectors suspect has been used to conduct experiments relevant to producing a nuclear weapon.²⁸

If Iran is intent only on producing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, why is it going to such lengths and expense to hide and protect its facilities? Note that Iran has displayed its Shahab-3 missile in parades with banners reading, "Wipe Israel off the map." Men who have pledged to destroy Israel are closer than ever to possessing the ability to carry out their threat.

Second, the theology of Iran's leaders makes their threats against Israel especially frightening. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are "Twelvers." This is a branch of Shiite Islam that believes Muhammad's twelfth successor was hidden by God in A.D. 872 and transported to a transcendent realm in 934. They call him the *Mahdi* ("the guided one") and believe that he will return at the end of history to dominate the world for Islam.

Why has this Muslim messiah not yet returned? Because Islam tolerates the existence of Israel. In the minds of many Iranian leaders, if Muslims would attack Israel, the *Mahdi* would then reappear to protect Islam from military reprisal. Such theology explains why Ahmadinejad has declared that Israel must be "wiped off the map" and predicts that it is "headed toward annihilation."²⁹

Should America and/or Israel attack Iranian nuclear sites? A recent exchange sponsored by *Foreign Affairs* highlights three options.

Matthew Kroenig argues that we should attack Iran now.³⁰ He recently served as Special Adviser to the U.S. Secretary of Defense for defense strategy and policy on Iran. Here is his argument:

- Deterrence has failed to halt Iran's nuclear program. Some scientists estimate that Iran could produce its first nuclear weapon within six months of choosing to do so. If action is not taken soon, it will be too late.
- Some countries in the region are already shifting their allegiances to Tehran. Others are discussing their own nuclear initiatives to counter Iran.
- A nuclear Iran could threaten our interests in the Middle East for decades to come, requiring a very costly military deployment in the region. We would also need to extend our nuclear umbrella to our allies while strengthening their ability to defend themselves.
- We have identified Iran's key nuclear assets and can destroy them with surgical strikes while minimizing civilian casualties.

- If America does not attack, Israel will. Their forces are less likely to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity, however, while their aggression is more likely to provoke war in the region.

Kroenig believes that Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia would criticize us publicly but thank us privately. We could respond decisively to Iran's proxies if they escalate attacks against Israel or our bases and citizens. And we could prevent Iran from closing the Strait of Hormuz. Military action would not strengthen Iran's hard-line leaders, since they are already in control of the nation. But strikes could persuade them not to restart their nuclear program; Israel's attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981 had this effect. Kroenig concludes that we must choose between conventional conflict today and possible nuclear war in the future. As painful as strikes would be, they would prevent a far more dangerous situation from escalating.

A second opinion is that attacking Iran would not stop their program, but would make a bad situation worse.³¹ When Israel attacked Iraq's nuclear reaction, Saddam Hussein responded by expanding his program covertly. Some experts allege that Iran is years away from building nuclear bombs and claim that we would have enough advance warning to respond if needed. However, an attack now would provoke Iran to withdraw from the International Atomic Energy Agency, making it harder for inspectors to track further development.³² In this view, we should treat a nuclear Iran as we do North Korea—contain without provoking further conflict.

A third approach is to attack Iran in such a way as to end its nuclear program but topple its hard-line leaders as well.³³ This approach would deter future nuclear ambitions, making the world safe for a longer time. In this view, we should not attack Iran until both objectives can be realized.

President Obama has made it clear that he favors military action against Iran only as a last resort. He is working to step up sanctions against Tehran and has stated that "the United States will do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."³⁴

How can Christians help counter this threat?

First, we can support Iran's growing Christian minority. According to ministry workers in the Middle East, Iran is experiencing a growing house church movement. While the Iranian government claims that 200,000 Christians live in the country, others believe the number to be much higher. As persecution against believers continues in Iran, it is vital that Christians intercede for their safety, courage, and witness.

Second, Christians can work to enhance America's support for Israel. If Iran knows that attacking Israel is viewed by America as an attack on our nation, it will perhaps be deterred from heightened aggression against the Jewish people. As we pray for our new president and our leaders, we can ask God for the wisdom they will need to defend and encourage our spiritual ancestors. God's word still calls us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6).

Third, we can pray for spiritual awakening in Iran. As God is reaching Muslims around the world through visions and dreams, he is speaking to Iranians we cannot reach through conventional ministry. We can ask for this miraculous movement to continue and increase, knowing that our Father loves Iranians as much as he loves Israelis or Americans.

God began evangelizing Iranians on the Day of Pentecost, when Parthians, Medes, and Elamites heard the gospel (Acts 2:9). Let us pray for such a Pentecostal movement to continue in this ancient land. If Iran were to turn to Christ, the threat it poses against Israel and the West would be ended. And the Kingdom of God would advance in this troubled region of the world, to the glory of God.

How to change our culture

What do Christians owe our president? First, our intercession:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Whether you voted for President Obama or not, you are required by Scripture to pray for him and for our other leaders daily.

Second, we are to support and obey our leaders:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves (Romans 13:1-2).

While we owe ultimate allegiance to God as our King (Acts 4:19-20), we are to obey our elected authorities insofar as we can do so without violating the clear word of God.

Third, we owe America our witness:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

In a dark and fallen world, God's people possess the only true light. Every American deserves to know God's word and experience his love. It's been said that changed people change the world. How can we be change-agents for the sake of the Kingdom and our country?

A gap between faith and life

A recent survey discovered an alarming gap between faith commitments and many critical social issues in America.³⁵ For instance, only 7 percent of adults who take a

position on immigration say that religion is the most important influence on their view. On government assistance to the poor, 10 percent say that religion is their chief influence; on the environment, 6 percent cite religion as their most important influence and consideration.

However, 60 percent of those who oppose gay marriage say that religion is the chief influence on their position. On the issue of abortion, 26 percent overall say that religion is the most important influence on their opinion.

Faith might not be a significant factor in your views on postal service or transportation issues. But the Bible speaks frequently on immigration, the poor and the environment. Regarding immigrants: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34; cf. Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 22:29; Malachi 3:5).

Jesus began his public ministry by quoting Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Scripture consistently calls us to care for the impoverished (Proverbs 19:17; cf. Exodus 22:22-23; Deuteronomy 15:7-8; Jer. 22:16).

And God's word speaks to environmental issues as well: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (Psalm 24:1-2). Our Lord calls us to care for his creation: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). "Take care of it" (*shamar*) is literally "guard" in the Hebrew; the word means to superintend and protect in all ways.

Why, then, is there a divide between faith and such critical issues today? Why are many Christians passionate about issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage but less interested in immigration, the poor, and the environment?

A brief history of the subject may help. Europe has a long tradition of political parties organized by the Church. America's founders rejected such engagement of church and state: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" (the First Amendment). After the Civil War, however, business leaders began significant involvement with their churches and denominations, leading them into political activism. Many denominations continue this engagement with social issues today.

More "conservative" denominations chose to focus on evangelism and personal spiritual issues. Perceiving a drift into "liberalism" and immorality, however, they organized the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 to counter this direction. After Supreme Court decisions regarding prayer (*Engle vs. Vitale*) and Bible reading in public schools (*Schempp*), and the legalization of abortion (*Roe vs. Wade*), some evangelicals organized political movements such as the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition. They continued to focus on personal moral issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, however, neglecting broader issues such as government assistance to the poor and the environment.

Jesus rejected this division between personal and social morality. He was a homeless man. He fed the hungry and healed the sick. He spoke out against injustice in every form. If we claim to follow him, we must share his passion for all human pain.

In a postmodern culture, relevance is the key to ministry. People who do not view our churches as connected to their issues will not give our message a hearing. When we engage cultural and social problems with biblical truth and personal grace, we earn the right to share Christ with those he loves.

The God of Scripture "longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion" (Isaiah 30:18). He is a Father who cares for every need of every person he created. I agree completely with the conviction of Dr. Randel Everett, former executive director of the Texas Baptist Convention: "I have no right to preach the gospel to a hungry person." May the missionary's prayer be ours: "Lord, break my heart with what breaks your heart."

How culture changes

America's Christians clearly want to make a difference in our culture. A recent Pew Research Center report indicates that "religiously active Americans are more trusting of others, are more optimistic about their impact on their community, think more highly of their community, are more involved in more organizations of all kinds, and devote more time to the groups to which they are active."³⁶

The author of the report notes, "Some analysts have been concerned that those who have active spiritual lives might not be as engaged with the secular world. We see the opposite. Those who are religiously active are more likely to participate in all kinds of groups and more likely to feel good about their communities."

Here's my question: If Christians are so engaged in our culture, why is our culture in the shape it's in? America has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. Some 90 percent of our 8-to-16-year-olds have viewed pornography online, most while doing their homework. Property theft in America costs us more than \$15 billion a year. In 2010, more than 9.9 million Americans were victimized by identity theft, at a cost of \$5 billion. I recently experienced this phenomenon personally—a research service to which I subscribe was hacked, my credit card number was stolen, and thieves used it to buy clothing in London.

Now consider the spiritual landscape of our nation. Atheists and agnostics have quadrupled in number over the last 20 years. More and more Americans are "ignostic"—ignorant of basic biblical truth. Fewer than half of Americans can identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible; only one third know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount; only one half can name even one of the Gospels.

Many are "apatheists"—apathetic about spirituality. Some 46 percent of Americans say they never wonder whether they will go to heaven; 44 percent spend no time seeking "eternal wisdom." And we have "exitists"—almost 60 percent of young people ages 15-29 have left active church involvement. If their children follow their example, what will happen to American Christianity? This decline is not only among mainline denominations: Southern Baptist Convention membership will fall nearly 50 percent by 2050 if current trends continue.³⁷

If America's Christians are so concerned about our culture, why are we not making a greater difference?

I believe that many of us don't understand how culture changes. James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* is a provocative, ground-breaking analysis of the ways culture does and doesn't change.³⁸ Hunter teaches sociology at the University of Virginia and heads the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. I consider him the most profound voice on culture change in America today.

According to Hunter, culture does not change by winning elections. For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in America during the presidency of George W. Bush. Neither fact is the fault of the presidents in office, of course, but both illustrate the limited capacity of political leaders to affect culture.

Culture does not change by evangelism and church attendance. More than 80 percent of Americans are identified with some faith community, yet our culture is intensely secularistic and materialistic. By contrast, the Jewish community has never comprised more than 3.5 percent of our population, yet its contributions to science, literature, art, music, film, and architecture have been remarkable. At least 180 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, constituting 36 percent of all American recipients.

Nor does culture change by popularity. For example, while more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they target the faith community rather than the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

How does culture change? According to Hunter, by "manifesting faithful presence." When Christians live as salt and light in our world, we wield an effect out of proportion to our size. If we seek our highest level of cultural achievement, then exercise that influence as faithful followers of Jesus, our Lord will use our witness in ways that will make a dramatic impact over time.

In this new administration, I'm more committed than ever before to loving God and neighbor, trusting the Kingdom results to the King. Will you join me?

Conclusion

President Obama will return to office on a Sunday. January 20 is the constitutionally-mandated day when the Chief Executive takes office; in 2013, that date falls on a Sunday. As a result, Mr. Obama will be sworn in privately at noon on that day, but the public ceremony will be held on Monday.³⁹

It is appropriate that our president will take office on the Lord's Day. It has never been more vital that our nation's leaders and people turn to God for leadership and provision. And it has never been more urgent that our nation's Christians serve America on our knees.

¹For my larger essay on this subject, see "Abortion and the Mercy of God" (<http://resources.denisonforum.org/library/essays/topic/101>, accessed 24 October 2012).

²Chuck Raasch, "Abortion restrictions gain steam in the states," *USA Today*, April 26, 2012 (<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/story/2012-04-25/states-anti-abortion-legislation/54538866/1>, accessed 24 October 2012).

³ "On the 39th Anniversary of Roe v. Wade," *ObamaBiden*, January 22, 2012 (<http://www.barackobama.com/news/entry/on-the-39th-anniversary-of-roe-v-wade/>, accessed 16 August 2012).

⁴ "Obama position on Abortion, 2012 Presidential Candidates (<http://2012.presidential-candidates.org/Obama/Abortion.php>, accessed 16 August 2012).

⁵ "President Bill Clinton—Acceptance Speech," *PBS Newshour*, August 29, 1996 (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec96/clinton_08-29.html, accessed 25 October 2012).

⁶ See, for instance, "Presidential Proclamation—National Adoption Month, 2011," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, November 1, 2011 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/01/presidential-proclamation-national-adoption-month-2011>, accessed 30 October 2012).

⁷ For my larger essay on this issue, see "Is President Obama right?" (<http://resources.denisonforum.org/library/essays/1327>, accessed 24 October 2012).

⁸ "CNN Poll: Americans' attitudes toward gay community changing," *CNN*, June 6, 2012 (<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/06/cnn-poll-americans-attitudes-toward-gay-community-changing/>, accessed 24 October 2012).

⁹ "Transcript: Robin Roberts ABC News Interview With President Obama," *ABC News*, May 9, 2012 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-robin-roberts-abc-news-interview-president-obama/story?id=16316043#.UC0IXETIXTs>, accessed 16 August 2012).

¹⁰ "Statement of the Attorney General on Litigation Involving the Defense of Marriage Act," *The United States Department of Justice*, February 23, 2011 (<http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/February/11-ag-222.html>, accessed 3 September 2012).

¹¹ "Read the Law," *HealthCare.gov* (<http://www.healthcare.gov/law/full/>, accessed 25 October 2012).

¹² Avik Roy, "Obama Administration: Obamacare's Individual Mandate 'Is a Tax,'" *Forbes*, July 6, 2012 (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/aroy/2012/07/06/obama-administration-obamacares-individual-mandate-is-a-tax/>, accessed 25 October 2012).

¹³ "Human Embryonic Stem Cell Policy Under Former President Bush," *Stem Cell Information, The National Institutes of Health* (<http://stemcells.nih.gov/policy/2001policy.htm>, accessed 3 September 2012).

¹⁴ Executive Order 13505 of March 9, 2009, in the *Federal Register*, vol. 74 no. 46, March 11, 2009 (<http://stemcells.nih.gov/policy/>, accessed 16 August 2012).

¹⁵ George Friedman, *The Next Decade: Empire and Republic in a Changing World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012) 9, 18.

¹⁶ Friedman, xx.

¹⁷ Friedman, 7-8.

¹⁸ Jim Denison, *Radical Islam: What You Need To Know* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Elevation Press, 2011), 150.

¹⁹ Jessica Zuckerman, "Fifty-Third Terror Plot Foiled Since 9/11: Bombing Targets U.S. Financial Hub," *The Heritage Foundation*, October 17, 2012 (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/10/terror-plot-foiled-in-new-york-bombing-targets-us-financial-hub>, accessed 25 October 2012).

²⁰ For more, see James Jay Carafano and Jessica Zuckerman, "40 Terror Plots Foiled Since 9/11: Combating Complacency in the Long War on Terror," *The Heritage Foundation*, September 7, 2011 (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/40->

[terror-plots-foiled-since-9-11-combating-complacency-in-the-long-war-on-terror](#), accessed 24 October 2012).

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²²Denison, 154.

²³For more, see Tom Doyle with Greg Webster, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

²⁴Michal Lando, "Ahmadinejad: Israel filthy bacteria," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 20, 2008 (<http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=92587>, accessed 25 October 2012).

²⁵"Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his Own Words," *The Anti-Defamation League*, September 25, 2012 (http://www.adl.org/main_International_Affairs/ahmadinejad_words.htm?Multi_page_sections=sHeading_4, accessed 25 October 2012).

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²⁸David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Inspectors Confirm New Work by Iran at Secure Nuclear Site," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2012 (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/world/middleeast/nuclear-inspectors-confirm-iranian-progress.html?_r=0, accessed 24 October 2012).

²⁹For more, see Denison, 137-40.

³⁰Matthew Kroenig, "Time to Attack Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012 (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136917/matthew-kroenig/time-to-attack-iran>, accessed 24 October 2012).

³¹Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "The Flawed Logic of Striking Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January 17, 2012 (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137036/alexandre-debs-and-nuno-p-monteiro/the-flawed-logic-of-striking-iran?page=show>, accessed 24 October 2012).

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³³Jamie M. Fly and Gary Schmitt, "The Case for Regime Change in Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January 17, 2012 (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137038/jamie-m-fly-and-gary-schmitt/the-case-for-regime-change-in-iran?page=show>, accessed 24 October 2012).

³⁴Margaret Talev and Hans Nichols, "Obama at UN Vows U.S. Won't Let Iran Gain Nuclear Weapon," *Bloomberg*, September 25, 2012 (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-25/obama-at-un-vows-u-s-won-t-allow-iran-to-gain-nuclear-weapons.html>, accessed 30 October 2012).

³⁵"Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, September 17, 2010 (<http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Few-Say-Religion-Shapes-Immigration-Environment-Views.aspx>, accessed 25 October 2012).

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