HOW TO
Change our Culture
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If you could solve one problem in America today, what would it be? A recent survey asked more than a million Americans that question. Their #1 answer was, "restoring national economic stability." That's no surprise, in these days of recession. But tying for #1, ahead of "preventing terrorism" and "curing cancer," was: "restoring values and morality to society." 1

Do you agree?

Where are we headed?

Imagine for a moment what would happen if Americans chose to live by biblical morality. For instance, the Bible says that sex outside of marriage is wrong. No standard could seem more outdated and irrelevant in our society. But what would happen if we lived by this one simple principle? Consider these facts:

• The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world.
• The Centers for Disease Control say that one-third of girls in America become pregnant before the age of 20; 81% of them are unmarried.
• Out of wedlock births accounted for four in ten of all U.S. births in 2007.
• 100,000 websites offer illegal child pornography, which generate $3 billion annually.
• 90% of 8-16 year olds have viewed porn online, most while doing their homework. There are 4.2 million pornography pages on the Internet.

How would living by biblical sexual morality change the issues of teenage pregnancy, abortion, and pornography?

The Bible says that stealing is wrong. Violating this commandment by property theft costs Americans more than $15 billion each year. Last year, more than 9.9 million Americans were victims of identity theft, our nation's fastest growing crime, at a cost of $5 billion. Total dollar loss from Internet crimes is $575 million.

The Bible says that murder is wrong. Consider these related facts:

• In 2006 in the United States homicide was the second leading cause of death for infants. Homicide with a firearm was the second leading cause of persons between the ages of 10 and 24, the third leading cause of death for persons between ages 25 and 34.
The Bible says that lying is wrong. Yet in a recent survey, 83% of students confessed they "lied to a parent about something significant." 64% cheated on a test during the past year—47% of students attending non-religious schools cheated; 63% of students from religious schools admitted they cheated. But 93% of students said they were "satisfied with their personal ethics and character."

And things are getting worse. A recent survey compared youth and young adults to their parents' generation:

- The younger group is nine times more likely to have sex outside of marriage.
- They are six times more likely to lie.
- They are almost three times more likely to get drunk.
- They are twice as likely to view pornography.

**Why this trend? How did we get here?**

**What's our problem?**

What has caused our slide into immorality? In a word: "relativism." This is the belief that all beliefs and assertions are equally valid. There's no such thing as "truth," just "your truth" and "my truth." "You have no right to force your beliefs on me" is conventional wisdom today.

How did we come to such a view of truth? The Reformation shook the foundations of medieval Catholic authority. In response, a mathematician named René Descartes (1596-1650), in a desire to argue for objective truth and his Catholic tradition, articulated a worldview based on pure rationalism and logical certainty. British empiricists such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume responded with the assertion that truth is known through the senses.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) synthesized the two, arguing that knowledge is produced when our minds interpret our sense data. However, Kant asserted, we cannot know the...
"thing in itself," only our experience of it. Knowledge is personal and subjective. "Postmodern" thinkers take this a step further, claiming that all truth claims are individual, personal, and subjective.

As a result, Christianity in the West has become a matter of personal preference, an activity reserved for our spare time, a belief structure we are welcome to possess but forbidden to impose on others. Non-Christians in our culture no longer view the church as relevant to their lives and needs. They are uninterested in our sermons and theological assertions. They see truth and morality as matters of personal preference, nothing more.

So what?

Plato, one of the greatest minds in human history, was convinced that a democracy could not last. The people could be swayed too easily by public speakers, he warned. And once the people discovered that they could vote based on their personal interests rather than the good of the nation, their democracy would begin to fail.

In a democracy, we do not seek to legislate morality. But did the founders of our nation believe that morality was essential to their democratic experiment?

In his farewell address (September 19, 1796), President George Washington told the nation: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. . . . Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."

John Adams, our second president, claimed that "the general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were the general principles of Christianity." He stated, "Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited. What a Eutopia, what a Paradise would this region be."

Thomas Jefferson, our third president, was not a biblical Christian. He cut from the Bible every reference to the miraculous, and viewed Jesus as only a man. But he insisted, "Injustice in government undermines the foundations of a society. A nation, therefore, must take measures to encourage its members along the paths of justice and morality."

And Abraham Lincoln said of the Bible, "Nothing short of infinite wisdom could by any possibility
have devised and given to man this excellent and perfect moral code. It is suited to men in all the conditions of life, and inculcates all the duties they owe to their Creator, to themselves, and to their fellow men."

The Founders knew that democracy requires morality, a basic insistence on character and integrity by the culture. Returning to such a conviction is essential to our survival and future as a nation.

**How do we build character?**

What steps can we take toward the kind of moral renewal which is essential to our democracy?

First, believe in absolute truth and objective morality. To claim there is no absolute truth is to make an absolute truth claim. We accept relativism when it is convenient. By this standard, the Holocaust was just "Hitler's truth." Either the Bible is God's word or it is not. Either Jesus is God's Son or he is not. What is his standard for us?

Second, choose to live biblically. How does Scripture call us to relate to others?

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:21-24).

What about sexual sin?

You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:27-28).

What about those who do evil to you?

You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you (Matt. 5:38-42).
What about enemies?

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:43-48).

Third, seek the help of God's Spirit. We cannot fulfill our Father's purpose without his power. That's why his word calls us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). The text could be translated literally, "Keep on being controlled by the Spirit." How does this work?

- Remove all that hinders the Spirit. Ask the Spirit to bring to your mind anything which prevents his control and power, confess what comes to your thoughts, and claim the forgiving grace of God.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to control and empower you, and believe that he has. Nowhere does the Bible tell us how it feels to be "filled with the Spirit."
- Stay connected with him through the day in worship, prayer, and communion.
- Ask his help for those areas which tempt you. You cannot defeat them in your strength, or the enemy would not waste his time tempting you in these ways. Give them to the Spirit every time they attack you. See them as viruses sent to your computer—as soon as you recognize one, call the IT specialist who will come and remove it. View them as bombs left by terrorists—as soon as you realize that one is nearby, call the bomb specialists to defuse it. Don't try to deal with it yourself—ask for the help of God's Spirit living in you (1 Corinthians 3:16).

It is critical that America experience a moral rebirth, for the sake of our future as a democracy. Such a rebirth begins with us—with you and me. Where are you tempted morally today?

In 1831, the French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to study our nation. This report has been attributed to him:

I searched for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there. I searched for the greatness and genius of America in her fertile
fields and boundless forest, and it was not there. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her public system and her institutions of learning, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

Does democracy require morality of you?

Are We Rome? The fall of an empire and the future of America

Our world is changing more rapidly than ever before in human history. Some of these changes are interesting but not threatening:

- One out of eight couples married in the U.S. last year met online.
- More video was uploaded to YouTube in the last two months than if ABC, NBC, and CBS had been airing new content every minute of every day for the last 62 years.
- Facebook would be the third-largest country in the world.
- The number of text messages sent and received today will exceed the population of the planet.
- In 25 years, the cell phone in your pocket will fit in a blood cell.
- By 2049, a $1,000 computer will exceed the computational capacities of the entire human species.

Other changes are more worrisome:

- In the last five minutes, 67 babies were born in the U.S.; 274 in China; 395 in India.
- If current trends continue, China will overtake America as the world’s largest economy in this generation; India will be the third-largest, so that India and China will account for half of global output.
- China and India together graduate half a million engineers and scientists a year, six times the number produced by the U.S.
- Name this country:
  - richest in the world
  - largest military
  - center of world business and finance
  - strongest educational system
  - world center of innovation and invention
  - currency the world standard of value
  - highest standard of living

The answer is: England, in 1900.
Is America a nation in decline? In 1988, Yale historian Paul Kennedy wrote The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. His thesis has been much discussed: nations ascend due to the supremacy of their material resources; then they inevitably spend their wealth on military expansion to maintain their power, and fall into decline and eventual collapse. The Roman Empire is usually cited as Exhibit A of Kennedy's thesis.

As America has recently fought two wars overseas while struggling to recover from economic recession, it’s easy to see why "declinists" link us to Rome, accusing our nation of "imperial overstretch" and predicting our collective demise. This argument has been in the news in recent weeks, as we learn more about the ascendancy of China and India and worry about our economic and political status in the world.

I have long been fascinated by the Greco-Roman world and its history. I’ve made 12 trips to various parts of the ancient Roman Empire, and did my doctorate in philosophy of religion with special emphasis on ancient philosophy. In researching this subject more in recent weeks, I’ve discovered some fascinating parallels and issues. Today let’s wrestle with the question, "Are we Rome? The fall of an empire and the future of American culture."

Comparing Empires

Cullen Murphy has published an excellent resource for comparing Rome and America from demographic and political perspectives. Here are similarities he notes:

- Both built the most powerful military in their world, by far (America invests as much in military expenditures as the next 15 nations combined).
- The Roman road system, stretching some 53,000 miles, was about the length of the U.S. interstate system.
- The Roman Empire and its Mediterranean Sea would fit neatly inside America's Lower Forty-Eight states.
- Both cherish a glorious past and embrace a Manifest Destiny. Rome claimed to be an imperium sine fine (empire without end), while America's dollar bill proclaims a novus ordo (new order).

Of course, dissimilarities are conspicuous as well:

- Rome never left the Iron Age; America has evolved from Industry to Information and Biotech.
- Slaves made up half of the Empire (some emperors owned 20,000 or more), while America rejected slavery.
- Rome had no middle class; the middle class is America's core fact.
So, are we Rome? Here are three factors our country would do well to consider. The first concern is "military overstretch," building armed forces which are too large to be affordable and too small to do all they are asked to do.

Manpower shortages forced the Romans to accept into their armies the very barbarians who sacked their Empire. In Iraq and Afghanistan, America employs 195,000 uniformed personnel and 218,000 private contractors. Privatizing our military (and prisons and other government functions) imperils accountability and oversight, whether in ancient Rome or today.

A second factor is a tendency I call "global myopia." "Myopia" is a defect of the eye in which the person sees near objects clearly but far away objects appear blurred. Nearly every Roman military defeat resulted from underestimating its opponent. One thinks of our unforeseen struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than ten years after 9/11, most Americans still don't know why they hate us.

A third factor is often called the "curse of empire": large systems are inherently unstable, endangering their survival in an unpredictable world. Few thought that arming the Taliban against the Soviet Union would presage the War on Terror.

On the other hand, the great socio-political distinction between Rome and America is cause for some optimism: our deep faith in "invention and reinvention." While Rome's agrarian economy was unchanged across a millennium, in two centuries Americans ended slavery and leapt from farm to high-tech. Rome was committed to stability, America to self-improvement and entrepreneurship. We worry over threats to our global position from China, India, and other rising powers; such angst is our great motivator.

Comparing souls

My primary interest in the issue is spiritual and theological more than it is social, economic or political. Here I find the comparison between the Roman Empire and American culture most striking and troubling.

Roman religion was transactional: place your offering on the altars of the gods so they will bless your
crops and give you victory in battle. They adopted the Greek division between the soul and body, the "spiritual" and the "secular," "religion" and the "real world."

The Greeks believed that the gods lived atop Mt. Olympus, far removed from life below. The Romans adopted their gods, renaming Zeus as Jupiter, Hera as Juno, Ares as Mars, and so forth. But they preserved this division between the gods and us.

They added emperor worship to their pantheon, but this was not out of any desire to foster an intimate, personal relationship with Caesar. It was a loyalty oath, another transaction. Burn a pinch of incense on the altar of Caesar and say "Caesar is lord," and you are given a certificate which makes you a legal Roman citizen for another year. Religion was like renewing your license or car registration, something you had to do.

When Christianity spread into this Roman world, it eventually adopted this spiritual schizophrenia between the "spiritual" and the "secular," this transactional religion. By AD 250 we separated the "clergy" from the "laity," the "spiritual" people from the "secular," making priests like those in Roman religion who could help us make our transactions with God. Then Constantine legalized the Church in AD 313 and we began constructing buildings like Roman temples where people could come to make their sacrifices and be blessed.

In the Modern Era we began measuring success by the size of our temples—our buildings and budgets and baptisms. In the Postmodern World we say that all truth is personal and subjective—it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you're tolerant of my beliefs and sincere in yours. You can worship Zeus while I worship Apollo or Athena or the emperor. Pay your dues for services received. A transactional religion, not a transforming relationship.

Unfortunately, many Americans have a Roman, transactional faith. If we come to church on Sunday, he'll bless us on Monday. If we pay our spiritual dues, we'll receive the result of our investment. We have compartments in our lives, with God here and the rest of life there.

We do this with our time and money and relationships. C. S. Lewis says we're like honest people who pay our taxes but certainly hope there will be money left over for us to do what we want.

Transforming souls

What does God say to our consumeristic, schizophrenic spiritual culture? Since we're comparing
America and Rome, let’s consider Paul’s admonition to the Romans:

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

Here was God’s cure for the spiritual disease infecting the Roman Empire. It is equally needed in our culture today.

God calls the Romans to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices." Not the transactional, dead, one-time sacrifices made by Romans to placate and bribe their gods, but daily, continual surrender of our lives to Christ as our Caesar, our King and Lord. Not God as your hobby, but God as your King. Have you made this commitment yet?

If Christ is your Caesar and King, you are sitting in his chair. You are wearing his clothes. Everything that is yours, is his. He is Lord of the money you keep as well as the money you give; of what you do on Monday as well as Sunday; of what you do in private as well as what you do in public. Have you offered him your body and life as a "living sacrifice" yet today?

Next, he tells the Romans to refuse the "pattern of this world," with its transactional religion and self-centered consumerism. Your culture says that religion is private and personal. Jesus tells us that we are to let our light so shine that people may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

Your culture says that the various religions are different roads up the same mountain. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Your culture says, "God helps those who help themselves." We learned the phrase from Benjamin Franklin, who said it in Poor Richard’s Almanac in 1757; it has become the quintessential expression of American self-sufficient religion. According to pollster George Barna, eight out of ten Americans believe it’s in the Bible. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps; get up earlier and stay up later and try harder. God says, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. Would you refuse the mold of your self-sufficient, subjective, relativistic culture?
So, are we Rome? The Roman Empire collapsed morally and spiritually long before it fell to its enemies on September 4, AD 476. Are we destined to follow her fate?

It's not too late, at least not yet. Either Christ is your Caesar and Lord, or you are your Caesar and Lord. When last did you crown Jesus your King?

Is America a Christian Nation?

Gwinnett County, in suburban Atlanta, was for many years the fastest-growing county in the United States. In 1929, a town in that county named Dacula was 65.8 percent Baptist and 31 percent Methodist. Now its denominations include Christian and Missionary Alliance, Anglican, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, Christian Science, Episcopal, Nazarene, Presbyterian, independent Full Gospel fellowships, Southern and Independent Baptist, United Methodist, and African Methodist Episcopal. Not to mention the Eastern Orthodox, Unitarian, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Hindu residents of the town, as well as parts of a Wiccan coven or feminist spirituality groups.³

Gwinnett County is a snapshot of the pluralism that is our nation today. American religious demographics, according to David Barrett's World Christian Encyclopedia:

- 235,741,652 Christians
- 25,077,844 Nonreligious
- 5,621,339 Jews
- 1,311,910 Muslims
- 2,449,570 Buddhists
- 1,031,677 Hindus⁴

Regarding the high number of self-described "Christians," however, as many as 70% of Americans are spiritually lost.

My city of Dallas, Texas is often called the "buckle of the Bible belt." Is this really true?

- Our city is home to over 57,000 members of the Jewish community.
- There are at least 40 Muslim mosques in Dallas and its suburbs, with more under construction.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has 15 congregations in the Dallas area.
- Garland and Richardson, suburbs of our city, are home to large Buddhist communities.
- There are several Hindu temples in Irving and its surrounding area.
- And Dallas is home to the "Winter SolstiCelebration," observed by the "spiritual but not religious" in our city.
Is America a Christian nation? Was it intended to be so at its founding? What does the issue say to Christians who seek to change their culture today?

**Biblical foundations**

Jesus was the only person in all of human history who said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). "Authority" here means power, control, sovereign lordship. "Heaven and earth" of course includes everything that exists. He proved this authority by ordering the winds and the waves, healing the sick and raising the dead, then defeating death himself. The only person ever to do so.

As a result, he has "all" authority. Over the way we do our businesses and work, our politics and government, our society and culture, and our personal lives. He alone has the right to tell us why we're here, what we're made to do. Because he made us.

What does he say?

"Therefore," as a result of his authority, "go and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19). A disciple is someone who makes Jesus his King. "In all nations"—the word means all people groups, every person we know. We start by "going"—the Greek says, "as you go." Wherever you go, with those you already know today, the people you will meet this week. As you go, help people follow Jesus. That's why you're here, he says.

To whom is this commission addressed? Simply put, Jesus' vision statement applies to every Christian. Jesus' "Great Commission" was addressed to every believer, not just the apostles, the so-called "clergy." He addressed this to carpenters, farmers, fishermen, pottery makers, tax collectors, soldiers, every conceivable career.

Your vocation—your calling—is to help people follow Jesus. Your career is how you do it. You help people follow Jesus by being a lawyer, or a hotel operator, or a banker, or a teacher, or a coach. Your career is a means to the end of your vocation. If God could give us a one-question test today, "What is your life's purpose?" the only right answer is this: to help people follow Jesus. That's your life vision, according to your Creator and Lord.
How do we do this?

Some people we need to evangelize—"baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (v. 19). We pray for the lost people we know, invite them to church or other spiritual activities, tell them what Jesus has done for us. We show them God's love in ours.

The high school students I met when I started going to church evangelized me by their care, their love for me, and their joy in Jesus. I wanted what they had. Then my Sunday school teacher simply explained John 3:16 to me. We help some people to know Jesus.

Others we equip to follow Jesus—"teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (v. 20). We help Christians to follow Jesus more personally, more closely, more passionately.

And we do all of this out of that personal devotion to Jesus which empowers all we do—"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (v. 20b). We do this in his power and ability.

What does this Commission say to the issue before us today?

**Church-state options**

The most famous document in American history begins:

> When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

These words birthed the nation whose birthday we celebrate each July 4. But what does the document say about America and religion? What were their options? What are ours?
Biblical Judaism: religion controls the state

- No interest is to be charged (Deut 23:19; Lev. 25:35-37).
- All debts remitted in the seventh year (Deut 15:1-2).
- Slavery permitted, but females to be freed or made part of the family (Ex 21:7-11); males to be freed after seven years with provisions (Deut 15:13-14, 18).
- All land to be returned to original tribal owners every 50 years (Lev 25:10).

Roman Empire: state controls the religion

- Herod the Great built a secular temple at Caesarea Maritime: just-invented hydraulic cement which hardened underwater and made the base; 800 feet into the Mediterranean, with widths 100 to 200 feet wide.
- He also built a spiritual temple at Jerusalem: plaza the length of five football fields, width of three from east to west; created atop a hill so all would have to climb up to it; stones weighed two to five tons (some were 50; one was around 400, more than an empty 747 jetliner).
- Caesar Augustus called both Savior and Lord: "The eternal and immortal nature of everything has bestowed upon mankind the greatest good with extraordinary benefactions by bringing Caesar Augustus in our blessed time the father of his own country, divine Rome, and ancestral Zeus, Savior of the common race of men, whose providence has not only fulfilled but actually exceeded the prayers of all. For land and sea are at Peace and the cities flourish with good order, concord and prosperity" (inscription at Halicarnassus, modern Bodrum in southwestern Turkey, quoted in Crossan 108).

Islam: no separation between religion and state.

"Sharia" ("path") governs every dimension of life. Sharia is a flexible concept, so that Hanbali Sharia in Saudi Arabia is very different from the Shafi’i Sharia I encountered while living in East Malaysia. But it is united:

- Prohibition of pork and strict dietary laws
- Prohibition of interest (Riba)
- Strict punishment for theft (loss of hand), drinking alcohol (flogging), accusing falsely of sexual immorality (flogging), highway robbery (execution by sword or crucifixion), or sexual immorality (flogging if non-married or non-Muslims, stoning if married Muslims).
American history

What has been America's practice? What were the intentions of the Founders?

- Each day's session of the Supreme Court begins with the invocation, "God save the United States and this Honorable Court."
- The National Motto is, "In God We Trust."
- The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag contains the words, "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."
- And the Declaration of Independence includes the phrase, "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."

In recent years, the assertion that America was founded as a Christian nation has been growing in energy and influence. It typically works from three arguments. The first: America was the New Israel, called by God to settle this Promised Land for his Kingdom.

There can be no doubt that Puritans under John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts Bay, came to establish a New Israel on these shores. Winthrop developed a covenant which was required of all in his colony, patterned directly on the Torah. Death penalty was prescribed for worshiping any God but the God of the Bible, and for witchcraft, blasphemy, murder, sodomy, homosexuality, adultery and kidnapping.

The Salem witchcraft executions are only the most famous example of the Puritans' commitment to living fully by Old Testament law in the New World. The government required church attendance, banished dissenters, and called church governance meetings. Voting and running for public office were restricted to church members.

And the Puritans viewed Native Americans as Canaanites, occupying land which had been promised to them by God. Their shameful treatment of the Indians was the result of this theology.

On the positive side, this vision means that the law is our highest authority, standing over elected officials (thus Watergate vs. coups in Latin America). In the same way, God's word stood over the kings of Israel—when they violated it, they were punished by God. This elevation of law produced citizens who were also subservient to the law and sought to live by its principles.

On the negative, the Puritan vision produces a self-reliant "religion of moralism" independent of God's power. The "spiritual" was interpreted in individualistic terms (personal ethics); the corporate
was divorced from such reliance on the divine.

The Puritan experiment demonstrates that there can be no sustained "Christian" culture because culture inevitably becomes dependent on basic human nature and aspirations. Thus selfish interest, materialism, and the lust for power come to dominate cultural development.

The second argument: The Great Awakening produced the American Revolution, both of which were initiated and blessed by God.

There is no doubt that the Great Awakening of the 1740s produced remarkable results in America. Church members never amounted to more than a third of New England adults; it may never have been as high as five percent of adults in the southern colonies. However, in New England, where church records are best, the average number of new members (upon profession of faith) in the Congregational churches of Connecticut was eight per year from 1730-40; in 1741 and 1742, it grew four-fold to 33 per year.

Much greater interest in personal piety was demonstrated. And education was much emphasized: Princeton was established by Presbyterians in 1746, Brown by Baptists in 1760, Rutgers by Dutch Reformed in 1764, and Dartmouth by Congregationalists in 1769.

A number of spiritual leaders saw the Awakening as ushering in the millennium in America. Some even connected George III with the Antichrist. However, many church leaders resisted the Awakening's emphasis on individual regeneration as a requirement for church membership, seeking to keep church membership open as a means of sanctifying the culture.

It is also noteworthy that advocates of the Awakening did not connect the movement spiritually to the Revolution. Most were patriots, but not because they saw the Revolution as divine in origin. Many criticized the new nation for its slavery and suppression of religious minorities. And the numbers of church members produced by the Awakening soon returned to normal levels, or in many cases to below-normal levels.

The third argument: Most of the Founders of America were Christians who believed they were creating a Christian nation.

It has been alleged that 52 of the 55 signers of the Declaration of Independence were "orthodox" Christians, and that 24 held seminary degrees. But their personal spiritual commitments are hard to
know. We can determine the personal faith of only about 20; 11 were biblical Christians, while the rest were Deists or theological liberals.

Benjamin Franklin, widely considered a Deist by historians, made a motion that the Constitutional Convention open its morning sessions with prayer. However, Franklin's motion was turned down and not taken up again. Franklin himself noted that "with the exception of three or four, most thought prayers unnecessary."

John Jay, first Chief Justice of the United States, desired that we should "select and prefer Christians" for office. But the Constitution specifically disallows any religious test for public office (Article VI, the only time religion is mentioned in the document). Washington: "a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States." Jay left the Supreme Court to be governor of New York, where he tried to banish all Catholics from the state.

*Church of the Holy Trinity vs. United States*, 143 U.S. 457 (1892) states that this is "emphatically a Christian nation." But the Treaty of Tripoli, negotiated under George Washington and ratified by the Senate under John Adams, stated, "The government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."

Many religious and political leaders of the day were adamant that America should have a free church in a free state. For instance, Roger Williams (founder of First Baptist Church in America), declared in 1640: "An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh."

Baptist minister Isaac Backus said in 1773, "Religious matters are to be separated from the jurisdiction of the state not because they are beneath the interests of the state but, quite to the contrary, because they are too high and holy and thus are beyond the competence of the state."

Baptist leader John Leland: "The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever...Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians."

John Adams claimed in 1785, "We should begin by setting conscience free. When all men of all
religions . . . shall enjoy equal liberty, property, and an equal chance for honors and power . . . we may expect that improvements will be made in the human character and the state of society.

Spiritual awakening today

John Micklethwait is former editor in chief of *The Economist*; his writing partner, Adrian Wooldridge, is management editor of *The Economist*. One is Roman Catholic, the other an atheist; both are Oxford graduates. In *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), they document the staggering spiritual awakening sweeping the world and speculate about the future of religion, culture, and war.

Here are some facts about the global explosion of Christian faith:

- More than a million people become Christians every week, the largest number in history.
- In 1900 there were roughly ten million Christians in Africa; today there are four hundred million, 45% of the population.
- Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, began in a tent in 1956 and now claims 830,000 members; 3,000 join every week. Five of the 10 largest churches in the world are in South Korea.
- Pentecostalism, founded in a Los Angeles ghetto in 1906, now claims five hundred million followers around the world.
- In 1900, 80% of the world’s Christians lived in Europe and the United States; today, 60% live in the developing world. More Roman Catholics attend church in the Philippines than in Italy. Churches in the developing world now export 100,000 missionaries each year.

Now consider these facts regarding the demise of Christianity in Europe:

- A century ago, Britain had the same level of religious commitment as the United States. Half of children under 15 years of age were enrolled in Sunday School. Today, six percent of Britons attend church on an average Sunday.
- On current trends, the Church of England will lose more than half that attendance in the next 20 years and be forced to close another 6,000 churches. Fifty-eight percent of church-goers in London are non-Anglo immigrants.
- In a 2004 survey, 44% of Britons claimed that they had no religious identification whatsoever. Two-thirds of people age 18 to 24 call themselves nonreligious; almost half of these young adults don’t believe that Jesus existed as a historical figure.
• One in 20 people in France attend a religious service once a week. Five percent in Sweden attend weekly worship services; fewer than 2% in Denmark attend church regularly.
• Meanwhile, a megamosque planned for east London will hold twelve thousand people, five times as many as St. Paul’s Cathedral. In 2008, London’s new mayor helped organize a festival in Trafalgar Square to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Currently, the mayors of Rotterdam and Leicester are Muslims.

And these facts regarding American Christianity:

• Fewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible.
• Only a third know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Billy Graham is a popular answer).
• A quarter do not know what is celebrated at Easter.
• Sixty percent cannot name half the Ten Commandments.

America can go the way of Europe. Or we can choose to follow the Great Commission. What if our future were up to you? Isn’t it?

Chuck Colson:

When I served under President Nixon, one of my jobs was to work with special-interest groups, including religious leaders. We would invite them to the White House, wine and dine them, take them on cruises aboard the presidential yacht. . . Ironically, few were more easily impressed than religious leaders. The very people who should have been immune to the worldly pomp seemed most vulnerable.

Christian leaders, including Chuck Colson and Father Neuhaus met with other Christian leaders and together they all signed the following statement in 1997:

We reject the idea that ours should be declared a ‘Christian’ nation. We do not seek a sacred public square but a civil public square. We strongly affirm the separation of church and state, which must never be interpreted as the separation of religion from public life. Knowing that the protection of minorities is secure only when such protections are supported by the majority, we urge Christians to renewed opposition to every form of invidious prejudice or discrimination. In the civil public square we must all respectfully engage one another in civil friendship as we deliberate and decide how we ought to order our life together.
Colson concluded, "the truth is that a virtuous society can be created only by virtuous people, whose individual consciences guard their behavior and hold them accountable." Abraham Lincoln would have agreed: "America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves."

Here is how the most famous document in American history concludes:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

Let us join them.

What about the "separation of church and state"?

When we speak biblical truth to our culture, are we imposing our values on others? Isn't the church to be kept separate from the state?

On Thursday, April 30, 1789, General George Washington took an oath to become the first American president. As the General walked to the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City, thousands of people jammed into the street below gave him a thunderous ovation. Suddenly the crowd became quiet as General Washington turned toward Judge Robert R. Livingston and placed his left hand on an opened Bible sitting upon a table beside him. He raised his right hand, and swore to "faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States."

There was a pause. Then the nation's first president added his own words, unscripted and unexpected: "I swear, so help me God." The president bent over and kissed the Bible. Then Justice Livingston turned to the crowd below and cried out, "Long live George Washington, President of the United States."
United States!" People cheered. Church bells pealed. Cannons at the nearby fort fired a salute.

From that day to this, every President of the United States has followed George Washington’s precedent, concluding the oath of office with the words, "So help me God." But what do they mean by their confession of faith? How should Americans understand the relation of church and state, faith and politics?

This section is only an introduction to an extremely involved and somewhat controversial subject. We'll survey briefly the history of the debate, examine the question biblically, and seek relevant applications for our country and our lives today.

President Washington and the church/state relationship

George Washington became president of a nation still bitterly divided by its War for Independence. When the Revolutionary War started on April 19, 1775 with "the shot heard round the world," at least a fourth of the colonists supported England. Patriots and Loyalists maintained tensions and bitterness for years after the conflict was ended.

One nation?

Surprisingly for us today, Washington became president of a nation which was still not sure it was a nation. In April, 1507, Martin Waldseemuller, professor of cosmography at the University of Saint-Die, produced the first map showing the Western Hemisphere. He called it "America," after Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine merchant. But from the very beginning, it was a question much argued whether the country which emerged on these shores would be one nation or many.

The Declaration of Independence dropped the word "nation" from its text, with all references made to the separate states instead. Its final heading reads: "The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America." The resolution which adopted the declaration states, "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States." It can be argued that independence did not create one nation, but thirteen.

The word "nation" or "national" appears nowhere in the Constitution. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson warned soberly that "a single consolidated government would become the most corrupt government on earth." New England threatened secession at the end of Jefferson's first term over his economic and political stances. His response: "Whether we remain in one confederacy, or form into
Atlantic and Mississippi confederacies, I believe not very important to the happiness of either part."
And he added, "separate them if it be better."

**Under God?**

Washington also became president during a time of enormous conflict regarding the role of the church in the state. Protestant ministers cried out against "foreign Catholics" and warned of the dangers of electing "papal loyalists" to public office. "No Popery" banners flew in parts of New England. Following the constitutional decision to avoid any state-supported church, many were concerned that the nation's new leadership not endorse a particular denomination or faith tradition.

Despite such concerns, our first president made his personal faith commitment clear. He was a lifelong Episcopalian, worshipping regularly at Christ Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia. He rode ten miles to church (two to three hours on horseback) whenever weather permitted, an example which both shames and encourages us today.

John Marshall (Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and Washington's biographer) described him as "a sincere believer in the Christian faith and a truly devout man." He believed in God the creator, arguing that "It is impossible to account for the creation of the universe, without the agency of a Supreme Being. It is impossible to govern the universe, without the aid of a Supreme Being. It is impossible to reason without arriving at a Supreme Being. If there had been no God, mankind would have been obliged to imagine one."

He trusted God as his helper. Washington encouraged his troops during the Revolutionary War: "The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own... The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army... Let us therefore rely on the goodness of the cause and aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions."

Immediately following his first inauguration, President Washington and other officials rode to St. Paul's Chapel on Fulton Street and Broadway for a religious service. However, since most of the crowd could not fit into the sanctuary, the president suggested that they walk seven blocks to hear prayers offered by Episcopal Bishop Samuel Provoost, just named Chaplain of the Senate. This was the only time a religious service has been an official part of a presidential inauguration.
On October 3, 1789, he issued the first thanksgiving proclamation in national history: "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor . . . Now, therefore, I do recommend . . . that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are now blessed . . . And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions . . . to promote the knowledge and practice of one true religion and virtue."

On March 11, 1792, he wrote: "I am sure there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a Divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that Agency which was so often manifested during our revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them."

In his farewell address (September 19, 1796), President Washington made clear his belief that religion is indispensable for the morality essential to America: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and cherish them . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. 'Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."

And yet our first president was a firm supporter of religious freedom. Writing to a general convention of the Episcopal Church in 1789, he stated, "The liberty enjoyed by the people of these States, of worshiping Almighty God agreeably to their consciences, is not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights."
Thomas Jefferson and the "wall of separation"

During his years as President, Thomas Jefferson frequently worshiped with the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He once explained: "No nation has yet existed or been governed without religion. I, as the Chief Magistrate of this nation, am bound to give it the sanction of my example." He also sent a note with $50 to the rector, Rev. Andrew J. McCormick, every New Year's Day while he was President.

Jefferson authorized federal support for military chaplains and Christian missions to the Indians. He attended Sunday services of Christian worship in the Capitol building, and designated space in the Rotunda of the University of Virginia for chapel services. He refused to issue Presidential proclamations for national days of prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving, but only because he considered this to be the responsibility of state governments rather than the federal authorities; as Governor of Virginia, he did issue such calls.

What was Thomas Jefferson's personal faith? What was his view of public faith?

Jefferson and Jesus

When President John Kennedy entertained a group of Nobel Prize winners in the White House in December 1962, he welcomed them as the most distinguished gathering of talents ever assembled in the Executive Mansion except for when Jefferson dined there alone. Our third president was indeed brilliant, a fact which affected his faith in significant ways.

His parents, Peter and Jane Randolph Jefferson, were devout Anglicans. When he was nine years old, Jefferson went to live with Rev. Douglas A. Scott, a committed Calvinist; Rev. Scott taught him Latin, Greek, and French. As a college student at William and Mary, he later confessed, "I got my first views of the expansion of science and of the system of things in which we are placed."

He wrote his friend Benjamin Rush that his religious beliefs were "the result of a life in inquiry and reflection and . . . very different from the anti-Christian system attributed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to genuine precepts of Jesus himself."

Then he added, "I am a Christian, but I am a Christian in the only sense in which I believe Jesus wished anyone to be, sincerely attached to his doctrine in preference to all others, ascribing to him
all human excellence, and believing that he never claimed any other."

Jefferson never joined a Christian congregation. This statement helps to explain why: "the Christian religion when divested of the rags in which they [the domineering clergy] have enveloped [sic] it, and brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent institutor, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expression of the human mind."

He was, however, a great admirer of Jesus' ethical teachings. Their "system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime . . . ever taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the ancient philosophers." He mourned that Jesus' "character and doctrines have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special disciples, and who have disfigured and sophisticated his actions and precepts, from views of personal interest, so as to induce the unthinking part of mankind to throw off the whole system in disgust, and to pass sentence as an imposter on the most innocent, the most benevolent, and the most eloquent and sublime character that ever has been exhibited to man."

**Jefferson and public faith**

Thomas Jefferson was among our country's most staunch advocates for freedom of and from religion. In June of 1779 he sponsored a Bill for Religious Freedom in his home state of Virginia. He was more proud of that bill than of all the offices he held, including the Presidency.

As further proof of the importance of this bill for Jefferson, note the epitaph he wrote for his grave at Monticello, a statement which shows what he deemed most important: "Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." In a letter to his friend Benjamin Rush he asserted, "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Jefferson was author of the most widely quoted single phrase and metaphor on the subject of church-state relations. Upon his election as President, the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut sent him a letter of congratulations (October 7, 1801). They saw his anti-Federalist platform as assuring their (minority) rights of religious freedom, and they were right. In his response of January 1, 1802 he stated, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."
Jesus and Caesar

The most famous document in American history begins thus: "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. . . .

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

When the Continental Congress adopted this statement on July 4, 1776, they laid the foundations for freedoms we celebrate 229 years later. But what did Mr. Jefferson and his fellow patriots mean when they wrote, "all men are . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights"? According to their document, we are creatures of a Creator. How are we to relate both to Creator and country? Let's ask Jesus.

Understand the question

It is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is teaching the crowds gathered in the Temple corridors. Now the unlikeliest of political coalitions comes against him. The Pharisees hated the Roman occupation. But they also hated Jesus. They considered his grace-centered message in violation of the Law and its demands. He was a heretic whose influence must be stopped. On the other hand, the Herodians supported the Roman occupation in every way. They and the Pharisees were in constant political conflict. But they also saw Jesus as a threat to the Empire's power. Like the Pharisees, they wanted him arrested or even killed.

So these two groups "went out and laid plans to trap him in his words" (Matthew 22:15). Luke gives us their underlying motive: "They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). The Pharisees sent some of their "disciples" to him (Matthew 22:16), students at one of the two Pharisaic theological seminaries in
Jerusalem. Their youth might endear them to Jesus; at any event, they would be less recognizable to him than their leaders.

After patronizing him with compliments, they spring their trap: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v. 17). Their grammar requires a "yes" or "no" answer. And either will serve their purpose. They have pushed a very hot button. The "taxes" to which they refer were the poll-tax or "census" taxes paid by all males over the age of 14 and all females over the age of 12. They were paid directly to the Emperor himself.

And they required the use of a coin which was despised by the Jewish populace. This was the "denarius," a silver coin minted by the Emperor himself. It was the only Roman coin which claimed divine status for the Caesar. On one side it pictured the head of Emperor Tiberius with the Latin inscription, "Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus." On the other side it pictured Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the Latin inscription, "high priest." It was idolatrous in the extreme.

The tax it paid led to a Jewish revolt in A.D. 6 which established the Zealot movement. That movement eventually resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. At this time that movement was growing in power and influence. Jesus' opponents were asking him to take a position on the most inflammatory issue of the day.

If he says that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, the public will turn from him in revolt and his influence will be at an end. If he says that it is not, he will be a traitor to Rome and the authorities will arrest and execute him. Either way, the hands of these schemers will be clean, and they will be rid of their enemy.

We ask the same question today: To whom do we owe allegiance? Are we to support our country or our Creator? Jesus' answer is yes.

*Obey the answer*

Our Lord asks for a denarius, and then asks them, "Whose portrait is this?" (v. 20). They tell him that it bears the image and inscription of Caesar. And he replies, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's" (v. 21). If taxes belong to the nation, pay them. If worship belongs to God, give it. Give to each what is due. Live in two countries, a citizen of both.

Paul clarifies this image of citizenship when he calls us "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:20).
American ambassadors live in foreign countries, under appointment by their president at home. They are to obey the laws of the country where they are stationed, and support their leaders. But always they will have a second, even higher allegiance to their home country and her leader. And if they must choose between the two, their loyalties are clear.

Like them, we are each to obey and support our governing authorities:

- "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" (Romans 13:1).
- "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Romans 13:6-7).
- "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" (1 Timothy 2:1-2; cf. Titus 3:1-2).

But we are also to obey and serve our Lord:

- "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:7).
- "You kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Psalm 2:10-12).
- Why? "By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth" (Proverbs 8:15-16).

Peter explains well the relationship between Christ and Caesar: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right . . . Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:13-14, 17).

So we are to love people, fear God, and honor the state. Do not fear people or state, but God alone. In other words, serve your highest authority. When you can serve Christ and state, serve both. If you must choose, choose Christ. The same apostles who taught us to serve the Empire were martyred by its emperors because they would not stop preaching the gospel. Because they chose to serve Caesar unless they could not also serve Christ. Serve your highest authority, always.
A free church in a free state

When the president ends his oath with the words, "so help me God," he speaks for us all. We are to serve Caesar and Christ, but our highest authority first. We are to be loyal citizens of our country, but even more, loyal citizens of heaven.

This position is best for both. The Southern Baptist Convention met in Washington, D.C. in 1920. Standing on the east steps of the national capitol on Sunday, May 16, Dr. George W. Truett delivered the most significant address on religious liberty in American Baptist history. Among his remarks were these paragraphs, commenting on the biblical text we have just reviewed:

"That utterance of Jesus, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's,' is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once for all, marked the divorcement of church and state. It marked a new era for the creeds and deeds of men. It was the sunrise gun of a new day, the echoes of which are to go on and on and on until in every land, whether great or small, the doctrine shall have absolute supremacy everywhere of a free church in a free state.

"In behalf of our Baptist people I am compelled to say that forgetfulness of the principles that I have just enumerated, in our judgment, explains many of the religious ills that now afflict the world. All went well with the early churches in their earlier days. They were incomparably triumphant days for the Christian faith. Those early disciples of Jesus, without prestige and worldly power, yet aflame with the love of God and the passion of Christ, went out and shook the pagan Roman empire from center to circumference, even in one brief generation. Christ's religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree that it is thus supported is a millstone hanged about its neck."

Dr. Truett echoed the remarks of John Leland, one of the most important Baptists in colonial history, when he said in 1791: "Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would have agreed. Mr. Washington was public about his faith, clear about his commitment to the authority of Scripture and the miraculous powers of his God. Mr. Jefferson was private about his faith, doubtful of biblical authority and unsure that the Maker of
the universe ever intervenes in his creation. But both believed in religious liberty—freedom from, of, and for faith.

Neither wanted the state to control the church, or the church to control the state. Both wanted us to be free to choose which God, if any, we serve. Both would have us render to Caesar what is his, and to Christ what is his. Both are right.

In practical terms, then, how do we serve both? We give our taxes, as Jesus taught us. We give our obedience to the government whenever we can also obey our Lord. Luther said, "It is necessary to have governments because we are sinners." We need them, and must obey them so long as we can also obey Christ.

We give our service to our country as God directs. Churches are not to be political organizations, endorsing or supporting political candidates. But Christians are to be fully engaged in political and public leadership. Plato said, "The punishment of wise men who refuse to take part in the affairs of government is to live under the government of unwise men."

And so we give our witness. We are salt and light to this decaying, dark planet. We preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, we use words.

We serve both Caesar and Christ, but always our highest authority.

The Declaration of Independence ends thus: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States . . . And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Let’s join them.

How to change the world

Our nation clearly needs moral and spiritual renewal. How can we help? What can we do to make a difference? How do we become culture-changing Christians?
To Change the World

James Davison Hunter’s magnum opus is titled, *To Change the World*. This University of Virginia sociology professor turned down an appointment to Princeton to continue his work with the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He may be the most profound voice on culture change writing and speaking in America today.

How does he think culture is changed? He begins with ways it is not.

Culture does not change by winning elections. It is important for Christians to be engaged in public service. In fact, I am convinced that God is calling more Christians into public service than are answering his call. But electing Christians to office is not enough to change the culture by itself. For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in American culture during the presidency of the second George Bush. Neither was their fault, of course, but both illustrate the fact that winning elections is not sufficient.

Culture does not change by evangelism and church attendance. More than 80% 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% 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% of all American recipients.

Culture does not change by popularity. While more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they primarily target the faith community and exist out of the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. People have heard of Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, but we cannot claim that our culture has been changed by their popularity.

How does a culture change? Here is the matrix, according to Dr. Hunter.

*For knowledge:*

**Theoretical**

- Academic think tanks
- Elite research universities
- Elite opinion magazines and journals
- Elite and first tier university publishers
High-end educational
• First and second tier colleges
• High-end journalism
• Seminaries and divinity schools
• Elite private schools

Practical / everyday
• Journalism (print and electronic)
• The Internet
• Mass-market book publishing
• Churches, synagogues, and teaching ministries
• Public education
• Christian schools

For morality:

Abstract
• Academic philosophy and moral psychology
• Law schools and schools of public policy

Activist
• Public policy think tanks
• Special interest groups
• Innovative churches, synagogues and faith-based ministries of mercy
• Moral education activism

Grass Roots
• Local activist organizations
• School boards
• “How to” publishing
• Youth organizations and ministries
• Faith-based ministries of mercy
• Moral education
What are we to do to influence change in these cultural areas? Manifest "faithful presence" where we are, with those we influence, and seek to develop leaders at places of the greatest effective influence in our culture. How do we do this?

**The mustard seed movement**

Jesus taught his disciples this parable:

> The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).
The mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds used in Jesus' day (about the size of a period at the end of a sentence today). Would anyone believe that a tree some ten feet tall could grow from it? But the farmer has faith. He plants it, and waters it, and waits for it. It takes time, several years in fact.

But eventually that tiny seed becomes a tree so large that birds come from all over to settle on its branches. They eat some of the seeds it produces. And that tree multiplies itself, until it makes more and more trees. All from one seed so small you must strain even to see it in your hand.

That, says Jesus, is how God builds his Kingdom on earth. Here we have the mustard seed movement: God uses anything we entrust to him, to do more than we ever imagined he would. If only we believe he can.

Let's examine the mustard seed movement in Scripture and history:

- Noah, working for 100 years by himself to build an ark to save the human race when it had never rained before.
- Moses, standing before Pharaoh with nothing more than a rod in his hand and God's call in his heart.
- David, fighting the mighty Goliath with a slingshot.
- Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, speaking divine Revelation; their effect all out of proportion to their social status.

One of my favorite Old Testament examples of the mustard seed movement is the story of Gideon at the Springs of Harod. The Midianites were the enemy of the Jewish people and an indestructible army: "It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it" (Judges 6:5). Yet God called Gideon to march against them, his 32,000 foot soldiers against their vast army.

Then God said, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained" (Judges 7:2-3).

Then he told Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go.' So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, 'Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.' Three
hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink“ (vs. 4-6).

Now "the LORD said to Gideon, 'With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.' So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others" (vs. 7-8).

With these 300, each bearing a trumpet and a torch, they went to battle. And this was the result: "They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!' While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords" (vs. 19-22).

The New Testament demonstrates the same pattern. Jesus told us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). It doesn’t take much salt to change the flavor of food, or much light to shine in the dark. You can think of examples immediately: Peter, the fisherman who failed his Lord before preaching the Pentecost sermon; Paul, the Pharisee who persecuted Christians before taking the Gospel across the Empire; John, exiled on Patmos where he received the Revelation for the world.

If we will be God’s "faithful presence": where we are, with the influence we have, he will use us to change our culture. The first century church had no strategy for political power or cultural engagement. They simply went where they went as the people of God, and by Acts 17:6 they had "turned the world upside down" (KJV).

Martin Luther was an unknown, troubled monk when he nailed 95 topics for discussion on the community bulletin board and sparked the Reformation. William Wilberforce read an unknown book by Thomas Clarkson about the horrors of the slave trade, and then moved single-handedly to abolish it.

The First Great Awakening was more the result of Theodore Frelingheusen’s prayer commitment than anything the history books note. Isaac Backus was a little-known Baptist minister whose call to prayer led to the Second Great Awakening. Jeremiah Lamphier’s prayer meeting at Old North Dutch Church in NYC on September 23, 1857 led to the Third Great Awakening. The preaching and praying of Evan Roberts led to the Fourth Awakening.
A church of seven meeting on May 15, 1958 is today a congregation of 1.2 million under the leadership of Pastor David Yonggi Cho. Jim Cymbala’s Brooklyn Tabernacle was down to 30 when it resolved to make its Tuesday night prayer meeting the engine that drives the church, and now their ministries span the globe.

Conclusion

Changed people change the world. Use your influence where it is for the Kingdom of God, praying for those in other spheres of influence. Make your work and home and school your mission field. Ask God to make you his faithful presence there. See every person you meet today as a subject for ministry, every problem and opportunity and temptation as a way to serve your King. And step by step, day by day, as we serve our King with faith and joy, he uses us to change our world.

To that end, let’s close our exploration with this statement by the brilliant Chinese theologian, Watchman Nee:

A day must come in our lives, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. . . . There must be a day when, without reservation, we surrender everything to Him—ourselves, our families, our possessions, our business and our time. All we are and have becomes His, to be held henceforth entirely at His disposal. From that day we are no longer our own masters, but only stewards.

Not until the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a settled thing in our hearts can the Holy Spirit really operate effectively in us. He cannot direct our lives until all control of them is committed to Him. If we do not give Him absolute authority in our lives, He can be present, but He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is stayed.\(^7\)

Is today that day for you?

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\(^2\) Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007).
The Denison Forum on Truth and Culture (DFTC), founded by Dr. Jim Denison in 2009, equips Christians to use their influence to change their culture. DFTC promotes spiritual formation and advances biblical thinking on cultural issues. As a catalyst for moral and spiritual renewal, DFTC is joining God in building a global movement of culture-changing Christians. The ministry provides compelling perspectives on culture to a modern generation in search of moral truth. By utilizing the web, social media, print literature, radio, and speaking events, DFTC is bridging the gap between faith and culture. Dr. Denison writes a cultural commentary available at www.denisonforum.org. His free daily commentary is distributed around the world to over 90,000 subscribers in 203 countries.