

“Steve Monsma avoids the modern-day tendency to believe that the kingdom of God will arrive on Air Force One. Instead he offers a balanced, thoughtful perspective on how Christians should engage in the political process. His solid biblical grounding, as well as his concrete applications of Christian principles to public policy, provides wise guidance.”

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“Urgent, compelling, readable. An important book on a crucial topic. Monsma’s entire life—as a successful politician and a gifted professor of political science—has prepared him to write this clear, compelling book. Every Christian with any interest in politics should read it.”

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“If you need to know in advance whether the author is a conservative or a liberal, you may not like Monsma’s approach. He asks you to set aside such simplistic labels and go back and ask instead what the Bible says about each of a dozen key public policy issues. And then if you disagree with some of his personal conclusions—just as he expects you to—you will always appreciate his candor and honesty. This is a thinking person’s book.”

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“Wise, helpful, and comprehensive, *Healing for a Broken World* shows the way for a Christian engagement with politics that is constructive. If it had been read thirty years ago, it would have saved us from all the excesses of the religious right that are creating such a backlash today.”

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“Monsma hit a home run just at the time evangelicals need to reassess the assumptions on which we voice our views on a whole range of critical issues.”

—ROBERT ANDRINGA, President Emeritus,  
Council of Christian Colleges and Universities

“This is an important introduction to issues arising at the intersection of faith and politics, written from a disciplined Kuyperism/Calvinist theoretical stance and resulting in a nuanced centrist evangelical perspective. The book is reader-friendly, biblical, holistic, and wise. Monsma’s wide experience and excellent research make this a quite valuable resource.”

—DAVID GUSHEE, Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University

“If believers will read this book—or better yet, discuss it in groups—there’s a strong possibility a fresh Christian chorus may be heard in the land. It is my hope that believers will read, ponder, and discuss.”

—JUDSON POLING, Willow Creek Community Church

“An essential guidebook for evangelicals seeking to navigate the complexity of faith and public life while remaining grounded in their faith. For people of all faiths and persuasions, this book is a valuable resource for understanding the history and depth of evangelical thinking about the public square.”

—REV. JENNIFER BUTLER, Executive Director, Faith in Public Life

“Monsma is one of the most important scholars writing on church-state issues today. This latest contribution is perhaps his finest work. It brings together his wide-ranging knowledge of the history of politics and jurisprudence with a theological seriousness that is often lacking in much church-state scholarship. For Monsma, Christian theology is a knowledge tradition, not simply private piety that has its rightful place only in a sequestered sphere from which it cannot count against the deliverances of so-called ‘secular reason.’ On the other hand, Monsma is a thoughtful defender of religious liberty and liberal democracy as necessary bulwarks that help protect the rights of Christians and non-Christians alike. Thus, this book should be in the hands of anyone who takes theology and politics seriously.”

—FRANCIS J. BECKWITH,  
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies, Baylor University

“Monsma calls evangelicals to careful thinking about our political responsibilities. This book requires a careful reading by any Christian who is seriously committed to engaging their mind, heart, and strength to the world of politics and government. But be warned. Monsma will challenge you to re-think assumptions about political ideology, power, tactics, and the emphasis on charisma in American political life. He takes the reader back to the basic biblical premise that Christians must be committed to justice for all—believer or not—for the sake of Christ’s kingdom, rather than for the construction of some idealized political or economic society.”

—RON MAHURIN, VP for Professional Development & Research,  
Council of Christian Colleges and Universities

“Politics can be a perilous subject to tackle in the church, but this book offers a way to deal with important concepts in a mature and healthy way. This is the ideal resource for a church or small group wanting to explore what it looks like to be faithful citizens.”

—JASON POLING, Senior Pastor, Our New Hope Community

HEALING FOR  
A BROKEN  
WORLD

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES  
ON PUBLIC POLICY

STEVE MONSMA

CROSSWAY BOOKS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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## Preface

**EVANGELICALS ARE TODAY A MAJOR FORCE** on the American political scene. We make up one-fourth to one-third of all voters. Our leaders are invited to the White House. Every election politicians appeal to us for our votes. We are quoted on CNN and find ourselves on the front pages of the *New York Times*.

But for many evangelicals, myself included, this heightened influence and attention generates more dismay than rejoicing. Too often our voices are shrill, our grasp of the facts thin, and our vision narrow. Our leaders often embarrass the rest of us with their strident voices and cocksure positions.

The religious left seems to offer no more than warmed-over versions of the tired positions of the Democratic left; the religious right seems to do the same for the tired positions of the Republican right.

We evangelicals are rightly known for our efforts to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the lost at home and around the world, to explore boldly new forms of worship and new church structures, and increasingly to create agencies to care for the needy in our communities and abroad. Our churches are full and our agencies vigorous. But are we ready to follow the call of Scripture to be good citizens? Do we know how to be not simply good citizens, but good *Christian* citizens?

This book is for people who want to answer the call to be good Christian citizens but are uncertain what this means in today's world. It goes back to basics: to Scripture and key biblical principles relevant

to our lives as Christian citizens. It then applies these principles to specific public-policy questions that are daily in the news.

It does not attempt to give a simple, supposedly “Christian,” answer to every public-policy question—and then make one feel guilty if one does not immediately embrace it. We have had too much of that. Instead, its goal is to help Christians understand basic biblical principles and then use them to live as thoughtful, conscientious citizens.

Different Christians, equally thoughtful and equally committed to following God’s Word, will sometimes reach different conclusions. But that is OK. The truly important thing is that we approach public-policy issues humbly and with our minds shaped by biblically-based principles, not by the various political idols of our day.

It is my deepest prayer that this book will be used by God to help us evangelicals as citizens to be more faithful to him and his Word. As we are, we will be prepared to be used by God to be salt and light in our communities, our nation, and our world.

When the Jews in exile in Persia were threatened with destruction, Mordecai urged Esther the queen to take action with these words: “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:14). As citizens in a free, democratic country, we evangelicals also have the potential for great influence. Paraphrasing Mordecai, “Who knows but that we have come to a position of great influence in the world’s most powerful nation for such a time as this?”

In writing this book I had the help from many persons along the way. I owe all of them a large debt of gratitude. I begin by thanking editors Allan Fisher and Tara Davis, whose support, suggestions, and editorial revisions have strengthened this book. Also, in the early stages of my thinking through this project five people encouraged me to proceed with it and offered key suggestions: Stanley Carlson-Thies, Richard Cizik, Luis Lugo, Ronald Sider, and James Skillen.

A group of sixteen evangelical church leaders, academics, and public policy advocates agreed to serve as a task force of consultants for this book. We met in Washington, D.C., for a full day of meetings, and they responded to my email enquiries and updates with helpful comments and suggestions. In addition to Richard Cizik, James Skillen, and Ronald Sider, this task force of consultants consisted of

Jennifer Butler, Danny Cortes, Michael Cromartie, Keith Hill, Joe Loconte, Dan Meyer, John Northrup, Jason Poling, Judson Poling, Corwin Smidt, Harold Dean Trulear, and David Worth. I owe each of these persons a public acknowledgment for their help. Among them, I owe a special thanks to Jason Poling, pastor of Our New Hope Community Church in Baltimore, who read the entire manuscript carefully and offered many helpful, sometimes frank, ego-bruising suggestions. The book is a more readable book that is also more faithful to Scripture because of his help.

I also wish to thank the Paul B. Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics and its director, Corwin Smidt, for their support. The Institute funded the meeting of the task force and in numerous other ways supported the writing of this book. I also wish to thank my colleagues at Calvin College in both political science and communications. They were invariably generous in their suggestions and words of encouragement. A special word of thanks to one of my colleagues, Amy Patterson, who helped with factual information and insights for chapter 11 on challenges Africa is facing today.

In the same breath as my thanks I must make clear that the fault for any errors that remain in this book and any insights that are less than accurate or less than scriptural remain mine alone. Please do not blame those who helped me for any shortcomings in this book.

Lastly, I dedicate this book to Caitlin Elizabeth and William Carlisle Flanagan, my grandchildren, with the prayer that they will inherit a world more fully redeemed in all its aspects than what it is today, and that one day they too may take their places as followers of Jesus Christ who are used by him to help heal a world that is all too often still broken.

Steve Monsma  
August, 2007



1

## Our Starting Point:

*“Take Captive Every Thought  
to Make It Obedient to Christ”*

(2 CORINTHIANS 10:5)

**IN 1785 THE ENGLISH ECONOMY** was largely built on the slave trade, the cruelly exploitive policies of the East India Company toward India, and laborers, even children, who worked long hours in mines and factories under brutal conditions. The government was dominated by a corrupt elite class addicted to its privileges and a status-conscious social whirl. It was also the year that God called a twenty-six-year-old member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, out of a life of privilege and fashionable entertainments; in part through the witness of John Newton, a former slave trader and evangelist, William Wilberforce was convicted of his sin, turned to Jesus Christ as his Savior, and began a life-long commitment to serving him.<sup>1</sup>

Wilberforce considered leaving his political career, but Newton persuaded him to stay in Parliament and use his position to influence England for the good. He urged Wilberforce with these words: “God has raised you up for the good of the church and the good of the nation, maintain your friendship with Pitt [the prime minister], continue in Parliament, who knows that but for such a time as this

God has brought you into public life and has a purpose for you.”<sup>2</sup> Over the next forty-eight years, God used Wilberforce and other evangelicals who gathered around him for enormous good. They ended the British slave trade, won the freedom of all slaves in British territories, changed British policy toward India in a more humane direction, and worked for reforms in education, health care, child labor, and the prisons.

The role Wilberforce played in the abolition of the slave trade and later in slavery itself was powerfully pictured in the 2007 feature film *Amazing Grace*. The film makes

“It was the faithful, persistent and enduring enthusiasm of . . . William Wilberforce . . . and [his] noble co-workers, that finally thawed the British heart into sympathy for the slave, and moved the strong arm of that government in mercy to put an end to his bondage. Let no American, especially no colored American, withhold a generous recognition of this stupendous achievement.”<sup>3</sup>

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS,  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY FREED AMERICAN  
SLAVE AND ABOLITIONIST

clear that the faith of Wilberforce was not a private affair that touched only his personal and spiritual life; it was a blazing fire that transformed his entire life, including his political career. As a result God used him to change Britain—and the world.

Why was God able to use Wilberforce to accomplish much good? Five characteristics marked Wilberforce’s action as a public figure. We can still learn from them today. First, Wilberforce had a deep, personal commitment to Jesus Christ that transformed *all* aspects of his life. Christ was

at the center of his life. This commitment deeply affected his work as a member of Parliament. And it did not stop there. He founded the British Bible Society and was active in organizations to prevent cruelty to animals. He regularly gave away large portions of his income to a variety of charities. His commitment to Jesus Christ as his Savior, his work as a member of Parliament, and his work in missionary and other reform organizations—all three—were cut from the same piece of cloth. And that cloth was his devotion to Jesus Christ. He was not a politician who thought all the answers to society’s ills would come through changing public policies; nor was he a devout believer who thought his Christian duty ended with cultivating an

inner life of devotion to Christ. Jesus Christ claimed and transformed his entire life.

A second characteristic that marked Wilberforce's efforts in public life was that he did not act alone, but was part of a group of fellow Christians who prayed, planned, and worked together. Many of them purposely lived near each other in the Clapham section of greater London and came to be known as the Clapham group.

A third mark of Wilberforce's efforts in public life was the great opposition—even derision and death threats—that he and his fellow evangelicals faced during their long, drawn-out struggles for reform.

The slave-owning plantation owners in the West Indies, the slave traders, and great seaports such as Liverpool bitterly opposed the ending of the highly lucrative slave trade. Many, in fact, saw it as a mainstay of the British economy. It took over twenty years, and failure after failure, before they succeeded in ending the British slave trade, and only as Wilberforce lay dying, in

1833, did the British House of Commons vote to end slavery in all its territories. The British East India Company bitterly opposed efforts to reform exploitive British practices toward India, and it took years of struggle and several defeats in Parliament before Wilberforce and his fellow evangelicals in 1813 won passage of key reforms.

Fourth, Wilberforce and his fellow Clapham reformers worked for the greater good of society as a whole. They were not, as an evangelical special-interest group, out to protect the narrow self-interests of their fellow believers or their social class. They sought the common good, not their own welfare. Wilberforce and almost all in the Clapham group were people of wealth and social standing. Yet time and again they took on the causes of the poorest and least of their day. The Africans, who were the victims of the unimaginably cruel practices of the slave traders, were not fellow Christian believers and were totally dispossessed with no legal rights at all. Nevertheless, Wilberforce and his coworkers labored for over twenty years to stop this abominable

“Wilberforce should be an inspiration to every person of faith who takes seriously the obligation, responsibility and commission to make a difference in society.”<sup>4</sup>

—RICHARD LAND, PRESIDENT,  
SOUTHERN BAPTIST ETHICS AND  
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION

business. They challenged the exploitation of India even though, if anything, it would hurt their own social class's economic wealth.

Most of those in the Clapham group were evangelical dissenters, that is, Methodists and others who had left or were working against the establishment in the then widely corrupt Church of England. But they did not use their political skills and power to protect the position of dissenters or to force reforms onto the Church of England. They spent themselves—totally and consistently—to seek the greater good of others, not to protect themselves.

Fifth, Wilberforce and his fellow evangelicals acted thoughtfully. They only took on issues of the day after careful study and much prayer and study of the Bible. Often they would spend years gathering facts on a certain issue before publicly taking it on. One of the Clapham group, Thomas Clarkson, was a noted researcher who carefully gathered facts and formulated arguments before Wilberforce or the others would speak out publicly on an issue. For years he gathered information on the slave trade by interviewing thousands of sailors who were involved in it. William Carey—the famed missionary to India—played a key role in providing information and insights that led to the 1813 passage of reforms in British policies toward India.<sup>5</sup> Wilberforce and his fellow reformers acted together. They tested their ideas on each other; the insights of one would correct those of another. When they spoke—whether on policy toward India, child labor in the mines, or slavery—they had their facts straight, having carefully thought through their positions. They could defend their positions with skill and knowledge.

### **William Wilberforce and American Evangelicals Today**

Are American evangelicals today true heirs of Wilberforce and his fellow reformers of two hundred years ago? Are we working—persistently and passionately—for reforms in our country's public policies, in spite of opposition and ridicule? Are we concerned for those suffering in our country and around the world with the same passion Wilberforce had for the slaves in his day?

Forty years ago I would have answered that question with a sad no. American Christians—and especially evangelicals—saw politics as “dirty” and something from which one should “keep oneself from

being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). In 1965 Jerry Falwell, in a sermon he later rightly regretted, warned against preachers who became politically involved instead of sticking to preaching the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

But much has changed. Jerry Falwell became a leading voice calling for Christian political involvement. Organizations such as the Christian Coalition, Call to Renewal, the Family Research Council, Evangelicals for Social Action, Focus on the Family, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and many other voices in the political arena are calling evangelical Christians into active political involvement. Key evangelical leaders are speaking out on public-policy issues of the day.

Hundreds of thousands of evangelicals have responded. Many have joined and sent money to organizations such as those mentioned above; others have registered to vote and perhaps for the first time have cast ballots; others have passed out voters’ guides at their churches or taken part in other volunteer political activities. Some have been stimulated to run for public office or to work for the election of certain candidates. This is all to the good. We have increasingly followed William Wilberforce in his concern for changing the nation’s public policies.

However, there have been days when, observing my fellow evangelicals deeply involved in seeking to influence public policies, I wished they had all gone back to sitting quietly in their pews! In crucial ways we have not followed the example of Wilberforce and his fellow evangelicals. We have rushed in when we should have held back and held back when we should have rushed in. We have tackled minor evils with gusto, and ignored more serious evils. Sometimes we have acted more as a narrow, special-interest group working for advantages for ourselves rather than for others in need. At times our rhetoric has been shrill and our grasp of facts thin. We have been used by political operatives to advance their partisan interests, and then we’ve been ignored when actual policy decisions were made. It is all too easy to enter the political arena with distorted agendas and inept tactics.

More specifically, there are three especially dangerous traps into which we evangelicals can fall—and at times have fallen—as we

work to influence our nation's public policies. I examine each of these three traps in turn.

## Three Traps to Be Avoided

### *The Misguided Efforts Trap*

It is all too easy for us, even when we are trying to act as Christians who are obedient to our Savior, to adopt positions on public-policy issues that later we see as being simply wrong. Or we have ignored major problems and spent enormous amounts of time and energy on less important issues. During the 1960s many evangelicals spoke out against Martin Luther King Jr., and opposed his calls for national action to correct the blatant segregation then practiced in many states. When in 1990 Saddam Hussein's armies attacked Kuwait without warning or provocation, some evangelicals on the left opposed the highly successful efforts of the American-led coalition to force them out and restore Kuwait's independence. In the 1980s we largely ignored the emerging AIDS crisis in Africa that is now taking hundreds of thousands of lives, while spending enormous time and energy on trying to reinstall teacher-led prayers in public schools.

All of us see imperfectly—and through lenses clouded by missing information and our own biases. How then can we avoid stumbling into the trap of misguided efforts? How can we escape taking positions on public-policy issues that we later come to regret and see as more dishonoring than honoring of the name of Christ? How can we avoid focusing on minor issues and ignoring major issues?

The first step is to recognize a basic fact: all of us tend to view contemporary issues through lenses shaped by our own personal backgrounds and the current culture. All of us live in a certain social setting in terms of family, friends, coworkers, and neighborhood. Our natural tendency is to reflect the political views dominant in our social setting. What we have experienced and the perspectives and values that surround us seem so natural and right that we fail to recognize they are blinding us to other ways of viewing the world that may be more in keeping with biblical teachings. The danger is that as we Christians enter the political world—whether as voters or in more

active roles—we will end up merely reflecting our original political predispositions, now dressed up with a little “God-talk.”

The apostle Paul has given us the answer for avoiding this danger. It lies in careful use of our God-given minds. To the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). And he urged the Christians in Corinth in words as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago: “Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

As we Christian citizens vote, express our opinions, and in other ways act politically, it is essential for us to do so carefully and thoughtfully. An understanding of relevant biblical principles and of the factual situation will help us determine our priorities and ensure that we are supporting policy options that are indeed honoring to our Lord. Careful thinking will help us avoid pursuing secondary issues while ignoring more important issues—or coming out on the wrong side of contentious issues.

In addition, “renewing our minds” will enable us to defend our positions with persuasiveness and integrity, because, having fully thought them through, we can marshal needed facts. Sometimes politically involved Christians suffer derision because of the secular bias of the mainstream news media, but sometimes the problem lies with us. At times our facts have been wrong, our voices harsh, and our arguments weak. We need clear thinking on exactly why we are taking a certain position, and we need to be able to explain those reasons to others in a clear, convincing manner. Then if our positions are distorted by secular opponents—as will sometimes happen—the fault will lie with our opponents, not with ourselves, as now is too often the case.

Wilberforce and his Clapham group of fellow believers can serve as our model here. Their minds had been transformed and their

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. . . . We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

—PAUL, APOSTLE AND MISSIONARY,  
IN 2 COR. 10:3–5

thoughts made captive to Jesus Christ. As we have seen, they acted only after careful preparation marked by Bible study, prayer, and the gathering of facts. And they worked together as a group. In doing so they were spared the sort of errors that present-day evangelical Christians have too often fallen into.

### *The Christian-Nation Trap*

Some of my fellow evangelical Christians refer to the United States as once having been—and perhaps one day again becoming—a Christian nation. I read such statements and come away puzzled. What do they mean by the United States being a Christian nation? If by this they mean that they hope and pray that more and more Americans will come to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and their Lord, and that they will seek earnestly to pattern their lives after him, I join with them fully.

But usually those who refer to the United States as being a Christian nation seem to have something quite different in mind. They begin by emphasizing the Christian aspects of our nation's heritage and foundations (while ignoring or downplaying the less-than-Christian aspects). From there they go on to reach two conclusions: (1) that it is right and proper for our nation's public policies to favor Christianity, as long as it is favoring a generalized Christianity and not any particular denomination or set of doctrines, and (2) that as we do so, God will bless our nation, and if we do not do so, the United States will go into social and political decline. To support this position, people will cite Old Testament promises of God to bless Israel if it would follow God's commands. Often Psalm 33:12 is cited: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." And 2 Chronicles 7:14: "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."

In the Christian-nation mind-set, the biggest motivation for Christians to become politically involved is to make sure that Christianity is recognized in the public life of our nation. Then God will bless the United States, and we as a nation will prosper. I suspect many evangelicals who have a renewed interest in public-policy issues are motivated by this Christian-nation mind-set. Often they have done so

unself-consciously and without fully thinking it through. But there it is, lurking in the background and coloring their reactions to political issues and candidates.

I see this as a trap to be avoided, however, rather than a foundation for Christian political involvement. A brochure put out by an evangelical organization recently came across my desk. It proclaimed:

With strategic partnerships in Washington, D.C., it [the organization] is able to be proactively involved in the effort to reclaim America for Christ. Whether delivering petitions; encouraging constituents to respond to critical legislation with letters, faxes, phone calls, and e-mail; fighting for qualified judicial nominees; or registering voters; the [name of the organization] aims to provide a megaphone for the collective voice of Christ's Church.

There is a problem here, is there not? How, according to this brochure, is America to be reclaimed for Christ? Not by Christians preaching the gospel, not by winning their neighbors to Christ, not by Christian husbands and wives creating homes of mutual respect and love. No, it is by political means; petitions, constituent pressures on public officials, working to affect the judicial nomination process, and voting. It is assumed that America can be led back to Christ by political means.

But this cannot be right. Whenever in history the church has tried to advance the gospel by political means, the church has been corrupted and the gospel dishonored. Think of some European countries where churches have been officially supported and given certain privileges by the government. They have almost always ended up weakened and with declining active members. Christ offers us a new life in him; he asks us to give him our hearts. It is futile to require the acceptance of Christ's offer of a new life in him; it can only be freely accepted.

Since this is the case, ought we Christians to insist that Christian symbols and references be displayed in public places, giving the impression that Christianity is being preferred over other religions or unbelief? Ought the public schools subject children from Jewish, Muslim, or unbelieving families to Christian rituals and prayers? These are complicated issues, and I will discuss them later in this book. They need to be thought through carefully and with sensitivity to our non-Christian fellow citizens. But the Christian-nation mind-set

focuses on the Christian heritage of our country, sees that the strong majority of Americans are Christians—at least in a very broad sense of the word—and concludes we have a right to insist that a gloss of Christian symbols and references be imposed on all.

Sometimes I am invited to speak to church groups about Christianity and the political realm. I often make the point that Christianity is sometimes disadvantaged today by our government's public policies. I will say more about this in a later chapter. But I always am certain to add that I believe we Christians ought to be as concerned for the religious freedom of our Jewish or Muslim neighbors and for the rights of our nonbelieving neighbors to live out their lack of religious beliefs as we are for our own religious freedom. If we do not do this, we become like any other special-interest group, working for advantages for ourselves.

In addition, it is irresponsible for us evangelicals, who have a high view of Scripture, to apply the promises and warnings made to the Old Testament nation of Israel to the present-day United States. There is no biblical basis for believing that God has made a special covenant with the United States or named Americans as his chosen people.

Today God works through his worldwide church, which is drawn out of “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev. 7:9), not through a special, chosen nation. The United States is not the equivalent of Old Testament Israel.

Again Wilberforce and the Clapham group can serve as a model. They certainly were concerned with spreading the gospel and worked to encourage their countrymen to live more Christ-like lives. Wilberforce's book *Real*

“The real issue today is not whether one is a Democrat or a Republican, but whether one is committed to justice for all. This means we must defend the rights of those with whom we disagree. Suppressing their freedoms in the name of religion is just as wrong as for them to suppress ours.”<sup>7</sup>

—ED DOBSON, PASTOR AND FORMER OFFICIAL WITH MORAL MAJORITY

*Christianity*, a classic of Christian devotional literature, is still in print and can be read with benefit today.<sup>8</sup> In it he urged the British people of his day to take their Christian faith more seriously and to live more consistently Christian lives. But in their political activities, the

Clapham group worked for freedom and more equitable treatment for others. Their primary goal was not to protect their own religious freedom or to promote Christianity by the use of public policies. Their concern was not to make Britain into a great nation. In fact, their efforts to end the slave trade and the purely exploitive policies toward India were seen in their day as weakening Britain economically and damaging its great-nation status. Their concern was to be faithful to a God of love, who cares for all his children of whatever nationality or race.

It is easy for concerned Christian citizens who do not pause to think through their political involvement to slip into a Christian-nation mind-set. It is easy to assume that the primary motive for Christians to be concerned with public-policy issues is to make sure that Christianity is honored and even given some advantages over other religious and secular faiths. And that is wrong.

### *The Trap of Despair*

To many of us, government and public policies appear enormously complex. And so they are. The Christian citizen wishing to act in a responsible, contributing manner is faced with a host of policy alternatives and controversies on the national, state, and local levels. It would be a full-time job to master them all and take thoughtful, biblically-based positions on them. Meanwhile, we all have our other responsibilities as parents, wage-earners, students, and church leaders, and in whatever other positions God has placed us. The temptation is to give up in despair.

One can also despair upon seeing that some Christians who have engaged in well-intended political actions have been used by politicians who were more cynical and cunning than they. In 1998 a *New York Times* reporter related how a group of twenty-five leaders of the religious right fumed that “they had been used and abused, like some cheap date.” Cal Thomas, the Christian columnist and former Moral Majority official, commented, “What did they expect? They have been dealing with politicians who take as much as they can get from every interest group and give back just enough to keep them on a string so that they might stay in power. Such behavior makes ‘cheap date’ a perfect metaphor.”<sup>9</sup>

Again, some are tempted to give up in despair: If politics is so corrupt, so driven by a crass search for power, seeking to be a Christian influence in public policies is futile. There's no point in being courted and flattered when Christians' votes are needed and being tossed aside when the real policy decisions are made.

We need to recognize we are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses who demonstrate that Christians can be used by God to

change a nation's public policies. Again think of William Wilberforce. In our own country I am thinking of John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian pastor, who in 1768 left his native Scotland to accept the presidency of Princeton University, helped lead the colonies' independence struggle, and signed the Declaration of Independence. I am thinking of Arthur and Lewis Tappan, two brothers and committed Christian believers, who were key leaders in the American abolitionist movement. Susan B. Anthony, well-known as a fighter for women's rights, is less well-known as a committed Christian believer. In more recent times there is former

"There were just so many ways to make [Christian conservatives] happy. In addition to myriad White House events, phone calls, and meetings, they could be given passes to be in the crowd greeting the president when he arrived on Air Force One or tickets for a speech he was giving in their hometown. Little trinkets like cufflinks or pens or pads of paper were passed out like business cards. . . . Making politically active Christians personally happy meant having to worry far less about the Christian political agenda."<sup>10</sup>

—DAVID KUO, WHITE HOUSE AIDE  
UNDER GEORGE W. BUSH

senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon who opposed both abortion and the Vietnam War as unjust. There is John Perkins, whom God called to leave a comfortable life in California to return to his native Mississippi in the 1960s to work for racial reconciliation and justice. There is former congressman Tony Hall of Ohio, who, on the basis of his deep Christian faith, worked for the United States to use its abundant agricultural resources to feed more of the world's hungry. Later he served as a United States ambassador to the United Nations. We should thank God for these heroes of faith and what he accomplished through them.

Today countless Christians, serving in Congress, state legislatures, city councils, school boards, executive departments, the White House, and public-policy think-tanks, are standing firm on Christian principles and refusing to be manipulated and used for partisan advantage. I have met many of them. They surely are worthy of our prayers and encouragement.

Both these witnesses and the ordinary Christian citizens to whom they look for support and encouragement need to begin with the renewing of their minds. We Christians need to grasp key biblical principles relevant to the political world and then apply them in a thoughtful way to the public-policy issues that confront us. As we do so and as we discuss these questions with fellow believers, we will be better able to evaluate the television campaign appeals to which we are subjected, as well as the news stories we see and read. We will be able to decide what public officials and what politically active groups—whether Christian or otherwise—we should support.

And that is what this book is all about. It is intended primarily for ordinary Christian citizens, who wish to vote, express their opinions, and support public-policy alternatives in a thoughtful manner in keeping with biblical principles. It is intended for Christians who wish to be salt and light as they act as citizens of their communities and our nation.

In it I do not offer neat, simple, “Christian” answers to the host of public-policy questions our nation faces today. Instead, I seek to develop some basic Christian perspectives and principles that relate to the world of public policies and politics and then demonstrate how to apply them to key public-policy questions. My basic goal is to give help in thinking through public-policy issues in a Christian manner, not to push every reader to predetermined results. And certainly not to push the agenda of either the political left or right.

## **The Plan of the Book**

In the next four chapters, I will explain four biblical principles or perspectives important for guiding our thinking about public-policy issues. They are, I am convinced, sure and firm, because they are directly taught in the Bible or can be directly inferred from the Bible by

using our God-given minds and relying on our and other Christians' observations of the world about us.

The last seven chapters apply those Christian, biblical perspectives and principles to seven of today's public-policy issues. Even here some observations will be sure and firm, but others less so. I describe certain key alternatives but will try to avoid implying that any one of these alternatives is *the* Christian answer. In concrete situations, there is room for Christians to disagree on exactly what conclusions should flow from Christian principles. This should not be surprising. Even in our daily lives, as we seek to apply basic rules for Christian living, we are sometimes puzzled about what direction to take. Spouses may disagree over how to balance competing demands of job and family. Neighbors may disagree on how best to set up a neighborhood crime-watch program. Young people may be uncertain exactly what career to pursue.

It is the same in the political realm. The Bible is no more a recipe book for resolving twenty-first-century public-policy issues than it is a recipe book for successful marriages, neighborhood cooperation, or choosing careers. But it does contain principles highly relevant for marriages, neighborhood cooperation, and choosing careers—and for public policies. It is up to us to apply those principles in concrete situations. In doing so, there will be some disagreements; even when there is, we as followers of Jesus Christ will be far ahead of others who are unthinkingly following the political predispositions they have inherited from their social setting or striving merely for personal advantage or to amass ego-satisfying power.

It is my hope and prayer that the following eleven chapters will help Christians as they seek to understand biblical principles and perspectives relevant to the world of public-policy issues and debates and apply them in a thoughtful manner.

## **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. This chapter lists five characteristics of William Wilberforce and his fellow evangelicals that enabled them to be used by God to accomplish many needed reforms in Britain two hundred years ago. Which of these five characteristics do you see as the

most important in explaining their success? On what basis did you make your selection(s)?

2. This chapter suggests Christians can fall into the trap of misguided efforts when working to influence public policies. This consists of following the positions to which one's personal background leads; they appear so right and logical, one assumes they are supported by biblical principles. Toward what sort of positions on public-policy issues does your own personal background incline you? How certain are you that these are indeed positions supported by biblical principles?
3. Do you think of the United States as a Christian nation? In what way is it and is it not a Christian nation?
4. Do you find that demands such as those of your children, job, church, and simply helping others leaves little time or energy for becoming informed on public-policy issues and questions? If so, how do you feel about this? Does it—should it—make you feel guilty? Do you think the plan of this book may help you to place public-policy issues into a Christian perspective without having to commit more time than you have?

# Notes

## Chapter 1: Our Starting Point

1. Three of the better biographies on Wilberforce and on which most of this example is based are Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002); Garth Lean, *God's Politician* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1987); and Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

2. John Newton, quoted in British Broadcasting Corporation, Religion and Ethics—Christianity, “William Wilberforce,” [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/people/williamwilberforce\\_2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/people/williamwilberforce_2.shtml).

3. Frederick Douglass, quoted in Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, p. 19.

4. Richard Land, quoted in Michael Foust, “‘Amazing Grace’ Film about Wilberforce Called Inspirational,” *Baptist Press*, [www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24883](http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24883).

5. For more information, see Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), esp. pp. 82–88.

6. See William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), pp. 69–70.

7. Ed Dobson, in Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 50.

8. William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity Contrasted with the Prevailing Religious System*, abridged and edited by James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982).

9. Cal Thomas, in Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, pp. 143–44, quoting *New York Times*, February 12, 1998.

10. David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: The Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York: The Free Press, 2006), p. 173.

## Chapter 2: Creation, Sin, and Redemption

1. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

2. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 39.

3. For more on shalom, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 69–72.

4. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, quoted in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 49.