

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

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*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'"*

Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

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# How Far Is It To Bethlehem?

By Joe E. Trull

This question is the title and first line of a Christmas poem written for children by Frances Chesterton, wife of the English poet G. K. Chesterton. For her young audience she then replies, "Not very far."

If you live in Jerusalem the tiny village isn't very far—only about five miles down a winding road south of the city. To this day Bethlehem remains a small town, a tourist center. Every family there, in one way or another, earns their livelihood from pilgrims who come to see the city of Jesus' birth.

Some sights are as they were 2000 years ago, like the view of Shepherds Hills. Manger Square, however, is commercialized. Shops are everywhere. Thousands walk through the small doorway of the Church of the Nativity to view the place enshrined as the spot where Jesus was born.

But on Christmas Day 2000, the message of Bethlehem seems very far away. Fighting between the children of Abraham and Isaac threatens the peace of the world. The angel's song in shepherd field is drowned out by the whirl of attack helicopters overhead. The ancient and modern are curiously mixed, as Israeli soldiers fire modern weapons toward unruly Palestinians, who in turn throw rocks with slingshots as old as King David.

And what about us? How close are we to Bethlehem? Most of the world is hungry, but we Americans are prosperous. We have the science and the technology to conquer any problem, we say. But is our faith in God or in ourselves? Is consumerism the great obsession of our culture? Are justice, truthfulness, and love of neighbor the norm or the exception in our own society? How far away is Bethlehem?

Even for Christians, Bethlehem may seem too far away. The Holy Day of Jesus' birth is for us another holiday to endure. The frenzy of buying gifts overshadows "The Gift" God gave to the world. What has happened to the love and peace and joy the Angels announced to the shepherds? A contemporary poet, Johnstone Patrick, commented:

*Along the pathways of the stars  
We toil toward the Moon and Mars.  
Oh, God, it seems we've lost our mind  
In leaving Bethlehem behind.*

Would you like to find your way back to Bethlehem? I would. It is not easy to locate. In the ancient world, the name of the town meant "house of bread," probably because it was

the center of a fertile region. That's a clue. Bethlehem is a place of sustenance and strength. So it can be for us.

Bethlehem also reminds us of Hebrew history. Names like Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz come to mind. For them it was a place of refuge and new beginnings. So it can be for us.

But to find our way to Bethlehem, we must do more than define—we must follow the star. We must worship with the Wise Men. We must hear the angelic chorus.

The road back to Bethlehem is a way of *love*. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn. 3:16). The road back to Bethlehem is also a way of *peace*, for Jesus came to bring "peace on earth" (Lk. 2:14). The road to Bethlehem is a way of *hope*, for the Messiah was the hope of Israel and is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1).

And best of all, the road to Bethlehem is a way leading to *God*. "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us" (Mt. 1:23). To find our way back to Bethlehem is to find the very presence of God.

*"How far is it to Bethlehem town?"  
Just over the Jerusalem hills adown,  
Past lovely Rachel's white-domed tomb—  
Sweet shrine of motherhood's young doom.*

.....  
*It isn't far to Bethlehem town!  
It's anywhere that Christ comes down  
And finds in people's friendly face  
A welcome and abiding-place.  
The road to Bethlehem runs right through  
The homes of folks like me and you.*

—Madeline Sweeny Miller

For all of our readers we wish a Christmas season filled with love, hope, and peace.

## A Granddaughter's Letter

In his newspaper column, Browning Ware shared this letter to a grandmother:

"If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He'll listen. He can live anywhere in the uni-

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Editor: Joe E. Trull

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# We've Got Mail

## Letters From Our Readers

### Letters to Foy Valentine in Response to His Retirement as Editor:

"I read your *Doxology* with understanding, but a bit of sadness too. You have been such a blessing to so many others and me over the years. I thank God for you and the hard work you have put into making *Christian Ethics Today* such a quality piece."  
**Ed Carter, Waco, TX**

"Thank you for your work; this publication has been a real joy for me as I try to get back in touch with Baptist life . . . You have been a light in what has often been crazy darkness!"  
**Philip Allen, Ashville, NC**

"What a tremendous service and ministry. Well done, good and faithful servant, . . . I have been blessed."  
**Byron Welch, Houston, TX**

"I am hoping and praying that this is not a prelude to the ceasing of publication of the journal. . . . You may have no idea how refreshing it is to receive and read C.E.T. It is truly like being lost and dying of thirst in a desert and suddenly finding an oasis."  
**Issac McDonald, Elizabethton, KY**

"Enclosed is a contribution for the continued publication of the journal. I have read each issue from cover to cover usually within the first 2 days. I have gone back and read many of the articles over and over, sometimes to help in preparing a S.S. lesson and sometimes just to chew and meditate."  
**Ralph H. Ramsey, III, Lubbock, TX**

"Among your many substantive achievements, with the Lord's help, advancing the Kingdom Cause, I consider *Christian Ethics Today* your grand opus. I salute you, congratulate you, and thank you."  
**David M. Smith, Houston, TX**

"I appreciate so very much such timely articles and the fact that I didn't have to sift through a lot of 'junk.'"  
**Freddie Tatum, Brownfield, TX**

"Thank you for providing us with issues of well-documented, informative, inspirational, and explanatory contents from diverse scholars with their diverse styles that leave readers convinced that each issue is the best."  
**Helen Case, Austin, TX**

### Letters to the Present Editor:

"I'm delighted that Dr. Valentine will continue his valuable contributions to your journal. He has been a hero of mine

since his prophetic ministry at the SBC Christian Life Commission. I appreciate your reprinting of his address at the 1987 Maston banquet. I was there that night and still consider that speech one of the most direct hits at the Christian conscience that I have ever heard."  
**Bill Jones, Plano TX**

"Thank you for continuing the outstanding stewardship of Foy Valentine. I've been profoundly influenced by . . . Baptists and have enormous respect for the Baptist heritage of religious liberty." **Charlotte Coffelt, President, Greater Houston Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State**

"Thank you for the recent edition. . . . I am reading, slowly and deliberately, through the articles . . . was impressed by your introduction and moved viscerally by Foy Valentine's "Crying in the Wilderness."  
**Scott Shaver, Nachitoches, LA**

"I was very pleasantly surprised to discover that you are now the editor of this fine publication. . . . My feelings are that Foy Valentine and the Board of Directors are very fortunate to have a man of your considerable experience and ability editing their journal."  
**Gene Garrison, Cary NC**

"Thanks for the textual stimulation! Especially the *Commencement Address* by Moyers and *A More Excellent Way* by Brenda McNeil—both were more than just thought provoking. . . . each of the authors helps me to focus on some of the elements of blindness and petty bickering that afflict us who invoke the lofty title of Christian." **Wm. H. Ray, M.D.**

"You are doing the Lord's work and I value every edition of the paper. . . . Dr. Maston would be proud of you."  
**Bill Moyers, New York, N.Y.**

"I thought you might like to see a copy of the circular letter that I sent out after preaching the sermon that you so kindly printed in C.E.T. ["By Grace Alone Through Faith Alone," August, 2000]. I thought you might find it amusing:"

A CIRCULAR LETTER—JANUARY, 1997:

*I am enclosing a sermon that got me canned! After I had made two presentations on the Ephesians, the pastor came to my motel room to say that it would be best if I not continue. Even though most of the congregation had responded favorably to my lectures, a few folks were outraged when they smoked me out as a non-inerrantist concerning Biblical authority. The Scriptures are trust-*

*(continued on page 17)*

# The Most Influential Christian Ethics Book I Have Read

## A Symposium

"Of the many books which have shaped my thinking, few would rival Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. This old standby has kept me starkly aware of the cultural moorings of the faith, the faith moorings of the culture, and the inevitable tension between the two. I have never been able to read this book enough times to exhaust the thinking it stimulates."

Dr. David Sapp, Pastor,  
Second Ponce De Leon Baptist, Atlanta

[Note: See George Marsden's article in this issue for an appraisal of this book]

"*These Rebellious Powers* by Albert van den Heuvel impacted my life because it clearly revealed to me how the Bible deals in a specific way with social structures. Van den Heuvel communicates with clarity that political and economic systems ought to be listed as among the 'principalities and powers' which St. Paul refers to in his epistles. The reading of this book provided a call for me to struggle against the principalities and powers and rulers of this age (Eph. 6:12) so that they might be brought into conformity with the Will of God. As a sociologist and a social activist, I became convinced upon reading this book that there was a mandate for those of us in the church to work for the structural changes in society that would insure justice for the oppressed and deliverance for the impoverished."

Tony Campolo, Eastern College, St. Davids, Pennsylvania

"Like many graduates of Southwestern Seminary in the 1940s and 1950s, the answer to this question is simply to say—T. B. Maston! As a young embryonic preacher, Maston's basic

course in Christian Ethics was one of the most important exposures to new and fundamental truth I have ever experienced. This exposure led to taking a number of other courses Maston taught, as well as a lifelong interest in his writings. Some of his volumes which I treasure are: *Christianity and World Issues* and *Biblical Ethics*. After seminary I ministered in a time of racial warfare, social unrest, war and peace, and theological conflict. I cannot find words strong enough to express gratitude to the influence of T. B. Maston, who combined a humble Christian spirit with massive Christian teachings in the area of Christian ethics."

Darold Morgan, President Emeritus of the SBC  
Annuity Board, Richardson, Texas

"*And the Poor Get Welfare: The Ethics of Poverty in the United States* by Warren R. Copeland caused me to revise my understanding of who poor Americans are and of ways in which we as a society can assist them to escape poverty. The book is a wise and readable mix of Christian ethics, social theory, and statistics. If I were setting out to be of assistance to poor people in this country, I would want to know the things that are in this book. Copeland makes it clear that a number of ideas that are frequently labeled 'politically correct' would be better labeled 'prophetically true'."

Fisher Humphreys, Beeson Divinity School,  
Birmingham, Alabama

Note: Readers are invited to submit their own paragraph statement of "The Most Influential Christian Ethics Book I Have Read." Let us hear from you. ■



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# Pappa's Punishment

*By Hal Haralson*

Attorney in Austin, Texas

**M**y father was a “horse trader.” That means he made his living buying and selling cows, sheep, horses and other “live stock” (generic West-Texas term for domestic animals).

Since he felt strongly about spending time with his children, my brother Dale (2 years younger) and I were taken in the pickup as he bought animals, and to the stock sale in Colorado City on Saturdays.

These excursions began when we were about three or four and continued well into our teen years.

The language of the men at the stock sale was earthy and usually included profanity. When it did my father's response was, “Please watch your language around my boys.”

The profanity stopped because these men respected him and they knew his request was made sincerely.

When we went to buy cattle, “Pappa” would hook the trailer behind the pickup and we would drive down the dirt roads until we came to a farmhouse.

We pulled in and he knocked on the door. It didn't matter whether or not he knew the farmer.

“Got anything you want to sell?” and so the “games” began. It might be a horse, a cow and calf, a sow and litter of pigs, or a bull.

It didn't matter what it was. The farmer set a price and my father tried to get it lowered. If he could make a good trade, the purchase was made. If the farmer kept the price too high, we went on down the road.

Lessons learned:

1. Don't ever make the first offer. He may not know how much his animal is worth.
2. Don't hurry. Make your offer and shut up. There's no pressure like silence. He would kick a rock, or cow chip (if you don't know what that is...ask someone) for ten minutes while waiting for an answer.
3. Don't ever make derogatory statements about the other man's animal.
4. Remember, “Your word is your bond.” If you tell a man you will do something...do it. Never go back on your word.

Years later, I would find that I learned more about negotiating with other lawyers in these “horse trading” sessions than in law school.

The cattle that were bought were taken to our farm, unloaded, fed and watered until the sale on Saturday.

Pappa was so good at his craft that he seldom failed to make money on a trade.

On this particular Saturday, we were with Pappa on the catwalk that runs above the cattle. We were in our early teens. Pappa said he was going back into the sale barn and would meet us at the pickup in an hour.

As soon as he left, Dale and I pulled out a chew of Red Tag Tinsley (tobacco), put it in our mouths, and proceeded to walk down the catwalk spitting out on the backs of the cattle, swaggering like two seasoned cowboys.

This was a very “macho” thing to do. It was also a very forbidden thing to do. The use of tobacco in any form at our age was not tolerated.

We were brought up short by the sound of our father's deep voice, “I've changed my mind, we're going home.”

Dale and I stopped dead in our tracks. We could do one of two things.

We could take the chew of tobacco out of our mouths and throw it to the ground. If we did this, Pappa would know and there would be severe punishment because of our transgression.

We chose the alternative. We turned toward our father and as we turned, we swallowed the chew of tobacco.

The result of this action was two very sick boys. Our stomachs reacted in such a way as to cause Pappa to have to stop several times on the way home while we heaved the tobacco and whatever else there was in our upset stomachs.

Pappa told us later that he knew exactly what had happened. There was no need for punishment from him. The consequences of our act were the punishment.

I never was very good at “sinning.” I always seemed to get caught. And whether or not I was caught, the consequences of my actions were punishment enough.

I never found out how to outsmart God...or Pappa. ■

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# The Problem of Ethics

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By Charles W. Colson,  
Chairman, Prison Fellowship Ministries

**Editor's Note:** *A decade ago Chuck Colson wrote in an article that it might be impossible to teach ethics in Harvard's Business School because Harvard had abandoned a belief system based on a foundational understanding of right and wrong. Soon after the school invited Colson to expand his views as part of their Distinguished Lecturer series. On April 4, 1991, in a lecture hall filled to capacity, Colson delivered the speech printed here, a compelling case that to do what is right, people need not only the intellect, but also the will—which can be transformed only through Jesus Christ. Colson also argued that a society without a foundation of moral absolutes cannot long survive.*

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Harvard well deserves its reputation as a very liberal university—liberal in the best sense of the word—because you have as a lecturer in the university today someone who is an ex-convict.

Harvard also deserves the reputation for being a liberal university, in the best sense of the word, because over the last three years, I have written articles that here at Harvard could be considered quite impertinent, in which I have described my views on why it is impossible to teach ethics at Harvard. And you've invited me to speak anyway.

I'm no longer in politics. I've done my time, literally and figuratively. But, it's awfully hard not to watch what is happening on the political scene without a certain sense of dismay. Look at the Keating Five—five United States senators, tried, in effect, by their own tribunal. Just before that, Senator Dave Durenberger, who happens to be a good friend of mine, was censured by the Senate. I also spent some time with Marion Barry, the former mayor of the District of Columbia, who was arrested for drug use. And in South Carolina and Arizona, scams in the legislatures have been exposed by federal prosecutors.

I saw a press release in which the Department of Justice boasted that last year they had prosecuted and convicted 1,150 public officials, the highest number in the history of the republic. They were boasting about it, yet I read it with a certain sadness because it seems that kind of corruption has become epidemic in American politics.

We have seen congressmen, one after another: Coehlo, Wright, Frank, Lukens—both sides of the aisle—either being censured or forced out of office. We see probably the most cynical scandal of all—the HUD scandal—where people were ripping off money from the public treasury that was designed

to help the poor. Then, we've seen more spy scandals during the past five years than in all previous 195 years of American history combined—people selling their national honor for sexual favors or for money.

Business is not immune. The savings and loan scandals are bad enough on the face of them, but the fact that they're so widespread has fostered almost a looter's mentality. Ivan Boesky, speaking at UCLA Business School five years ago, said, "Greed is a good thing," and ended up spending three years in a federal prison. Just last week one of the major pharmaceutical firms was fined \$10 million for covering up violations of criminal statutes.

It affects athletics. If you picked up a newspaper this week, you saw that Sugar Ray Leonard has just admitted to drug use. He's been a role model for lots of kids on the street. Pete Rose spent time in prison for gambling.

Academia has been affected. Stanford University's President Kennedy was charged with spending \$7,000 to buy a pair of sheets—they must be awfully nice bed linens—and charging them improperly to a government contract. One day a Nobel Prize winner was exposed for presenting a fraudulent paper, and the very next day a professor at Georgetown University was charged with filing a fraudulent application for a grant from the National Institutes of Health. Probably saddest of all, at least from my perspective, are cases of certain religious leaders like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker. Bakker—whom I've also visited in prison—was prosecuted for violating what should be the most sacred trust of all: to speak for God and to minister to people in their spiritual needs.

The first question that comes to mind is whether these are simply examples of rotten apples or of better prosecutors. Maybe you can dismiss these by saying, "this is simply the nature of humanity." I think it was Bishop Fulton Sheen, in paraphrasing G.K. Chesterton, who once said that the doctrine of original sin is the only philosophy empirically validated by 3,500 years of human history. Maybe you dismiss this, too, and say, "this is just the way people are."

But is there a pattern here?

*Time* magazine, in its cover story on ethics, said what's wrong: "Hypocrisy, betrayal and greed unsettle a nation's soul." The *Washington Post* said that the problem has reached the point where "common decency can no longer be described as common." The *New Republic* magazine, and *Time* magazine—which have never been known as bastions of

conservative, biblical morality—begin to talk about some sort of ethical malaise, a line has been crossed. These aren't simply isolated instances, but rather a pattern emerging in American life.

No institution has been more sensitive to this than Harvard. Former President Bok has given some extraordinary speeches decrying the loss of ethics in the American business community. I think some of you have seen the recent polls finding that business school students across America, by a two-to-one margin, believe that businesses are generally unethical. It's a very fragile consensus that holds together trust in our institutions. When most business school students believe there aren't any ethical operations, you begin to wonder if something isn't affecting us a lot more broadly than isolated instances of misbehavior that have been exposed.

I believe we are experiencing today in our country what I choose to call a crisis of character: a loss of those inner restraints and virtues that prevent Western civilization from pandering to its own darker instincts.

If you look back through the history of Harvard, you'll see that President Elliott was as concerned about the development of character as he was about education. Plato once said, if you asked why we should educate someone, "we educate them so that they become a good person, because good persons behave nobly." I believe we should be deeply concerned about the loss of what Edmund Burke called the traditional values of republican citizenship—words like valor, honor, duty, responsibility, compassion, civility. Words which sound quaint when uttered in these surroundings.

**W**hy has this happened? I'm sure many of you studied philosophy in your undergraduate courses, and, if so, you are well aware that, through 23 centuries of Western civilization, we were guided by a shared set of assumptions that there was a transcendent value system. This was not always the Judeo-Christian value system, though I think the Judeo-Christian values were, as the eminent historian Christopher Dawson wrote, "the heart and soul of Western civilization."

It goes back to the Greeks and Plato's saying that if there were no transcendent ideals, there could be no concord, justice, and harmony in a society. There is through 23 centuries of civilization—the history of the West—a strain of belief in a transcendent value system. Whether it was the unknown god of the Greeks, the Christ of the Scriptures revealed to the Christian, Yahweh of the Old Testament revealed to the Jew, or, as Enlightenment thinkers chose to call it, natural law—which I believe to be not inconsistent with Judeo-Christian revelation—this belief guided our conduct for 23 centuries until a great cultural revolution began in America.

This revolution took place in our country in the 1960s. Some think it goes back further. Paul Johnson—who happens to be one of my favorite historians—wrote a history of Christianity, a history of the Jews, and a classic book called *Modern Times*. Johnson said all of this began in 1919 when Einstein's discovery of relativity in the field of physical sciences was confused with the notion of relativism in the field of ideas.

Johnson says that gradually, through the 1920s and 1930s, people began to challenge what had been the fixed assumptions by which people lived—the set of fixed and shared common values.

In the 1960s it exploded. Those of you who were on college campuses in the sixties will well remember that the writings of Camus and Sartre invaded American campuses. Basically, they were what Camus said when he came to America and spoke at Columbia University in 1947. To the student body assembled he said, "There is nothing." The idea was introduced that there is no God. In this view there is no transcendent value; life is utterly meaningless, and the only way that we can derive meaning out of life is if we overcome the nothingness of life with heroic individualism. The goal of life is to overcome that nothingness and to find personal peace and meaning through your own autonomous efforts.

Most of the people of my generation dismissed what was happening on the campuses as a passing fad—a protest. It was *not*. The only people who behaved logically in the sixties were the flower children. They did exactly what they were taught; if there were no other object in life than to overcome the nothingness, then go out and smoke pot, make love, and enjoy personal peace.

Then, America came through the great confusion of Watergate and Vietnam—a dark era—and into the seventies. We thought we shook off those protest movements of the sixties. We did not; we simply embraced them into the mainstream of American culture. That's what gave rise to the "me" decade.

If you look at the bestsellers of the 1970s, they are very revealing: *Winning Through Intimidation*, *Looking Out for Number One*, and *I'm Okay, You're Okay*. Each of these were saying, "Don't worry about us." We emerged into a decade that Tom Wolfe, the social critic, called "the decade of Me." Very logically that graduated into the 1980s and what some have cynically called "the golden age of greed."

Sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a book titled *Habits of the Heart*—a phrase he borrowed from Tocqueville's classic work on American life. Bellah examined the values of several hundred average, middle-class Americans. He came to the conclusion that the reigning ethos in American life in the eighties was what he called "ontological individualism," a radical individualism where the individual is supreme and autonomous and lives for himself or herself. He found that Americans had two overriding goals: vivid personal feelings and personal success.

Bellah tried to find out what people expected from the institutions of society. From business they expected personal advancement. Okay, that's fair enough. From marriage, personal development. No wonder marriages are in trouble. And from church, personal fulfillment! But the "personal" became the dominant consideration.

Now, I would simply say—and I'll try to be as brief with this as I possibly can—that this self-obsession destroys character. It has to! All of those quaint-sounding virtues I talked about, which historically have been considered the elements of character, are no match for a society in which the exaltation

and gratification of self becomes the overriding goal of life.

*Rolling Stone* magazine surveyed members of the baby-boom generation, to which many of you emerging leaders in this room belong. Forty percent said there was no cause for which they would fight for their country. If there's nothing worth dying for, there's nothing worth living for. Literally the social contract unravels when that happens, and there can be no ethics.

How can you have ethical behavior? The crisis of character is totally understandable when there are no absolute values. The word *ethics* derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which literally meant "stall"—a hiding place. It was the one place you could go and find security. There could be rest and something that you could depend upon; it was immovable.

*Morals* derives from the word *mores*, which means "always changing." Ethics or *ethos* is the normative; what *ought* to be. "Morals" is what *is*. Unfortunately, in American life today we are totally guided by moral determinations.

So, we're not even looking at ethical standards. Ethical standards don't change. It's the *stall*, it's the *ethos*, it's the environment in which we live. *Morals* change all the time. So, with shifting morals, if 90 percent of the people say that it's perfectly all right to do this, then that must be perfectly all right to do because 90 percent of the people say it is. It's a very democratic notion.

Ethics is not—*cannot* be—democratic. Ethics by its very definition is authoritarian. That's a very nasty word to utter on any campus in America, and particularly at Harvard, where Arthur Schlesinger has written a magnificently argued assault on the perils of absolutism.

In a relativistic environment ethics deteriorates to nothing more than utilitarian or pragmatic considerations. If you're really honest with yourselves and look at the ethical questions you're asked to wrestle with in your courses here at Harvard, you will see that you are being taught how to arrive at certain conclusions yourself, and to make certain judgments yourself, which ultimately are going to be good for business. That's fine, and you should do that. That's a prudential decision that has to be made. That's being a responsible business leader. It just

isn't ethics and shouldn't be confused with ethics.

Ethics is what *ought* to be, not what is, or even what is prudential.

There was a brilliant professor at Duke University, Stanley Hauerwas, who wrote that "moral life cannot be found by each person pursuing his or her options." The only way moral life can be produced is by the formation by virtuous people of traditional communities. That was the accepted wisdom of Western civilization until the cultural revolution of the sixties, with which we are still plagued.

What is the answer? I'd like to address two points: first, how each of us, individually, might view our own ethical framework, and second, why some set of transcendent values is vital.

We live in a pluralistic society. I happen to be a Baptist and believe *strongly* that, in a pluralistic environment, I should be able to contend for my values as you should be able to contend for your values, and out of that contention can come some consensus we can all agree to live by. That's the beauty of pluralism. It doesn't mean extinguishing all ideas; it means contending for them and finding truth out of that consensus.

Out of that battle comes some consensus by which people live. But I would argue that there must be some values; and I would take the liberty of arguing for my belief in a certain set of historic values being absolutely essential to the survival of society.

First, let me address the question of how we find it ourselves. If you studied philosophy courses as an undergraduate, you read about Immanuel Kant and the categorical imperative. You read about rationalism and the ways in which people can find their own ethical framework. I guess the only thing I can tell you is that in my life—and I can't speak for anyone else—it didn't work.

I grew up in America during the Great Depression and thought that the great goal of life was success, material gain, power, and influence. That's why I went into politics. I believed I could gain power and influence how people lived. If I earned a law degree—as I did at night—and accumulated academic honors and awards, it would enable me to find suc-



cess, power, fulfillment, and meaning in life.

I had a great respect for the law. When I went through law school, I had a love for the law. I learned the history of jurisprudence and the philosophy underlying it.

I studied Locke, the Enlightenment, and social contract theories as an undergraduate at Brown, and had a great respect for the political process. I also had a well-above-average I.Q. and some academic honors. I became very self-righteous.

When I went to the White House, I gave up a law practice that was making almost \$200,000 a year (and that was back in 1969, which wasn't bad in those days). It's kind of ordinary now for graduates of Harvard Business School, but then it was a lot of money.

I had accumulated a little bit of money, so I took a job in the White House at \$40,000 a year. I took everything I had and I stuck it in a blind trust at the Bank of Boston. Now let me tell you, if you want to lose money, that's the surest way to do it! After three and a half years, when I saw what the Bank of Boston had done to my blind trust, I realized I was a lot poorer when I came out of government than I was when I went *into* the government.

But there was one thing about which I was absolutely certain—that no one could corrupt me. *Positive!* And if anybody ever gave me a present at Christmas time, it went right to the driver of my limousine. They used to send in bottles of whiskey, boxes of candy, and all sorts of things. Right to the driver of my automobile. I wouldn't accept a thing.

Patty and I were taken out on someone's boat one day. I discovered it was a chartered boat, and ended up paying for half of it because I didn't want to give the appearance of impropriety. Imagine me worried about things like that!

I ended up going to prison. So much for the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative says that with our own rational process we will arrive at that judgment which, if everyone did it, would be prudential and the best decision for everyone. In other words, that which we would do, we would do only if we could will it to be a universal choice for everybody.

I really thought that way, and I never once in my life thought I was breaking the law. I would have been terrified to do it because I would jeopardize the law degree I had worked four years at night to earn. I had worked my way onto the Law Review, Order of Coif, and Moot Court—all the things that lawyers do—and I graduated in the top of my class. I wouldn't put that in jeopardy for anything in the world!

I was so sure. But, you see, there are two problems. Every human being has an infinite capacity for self-rationalization and self-delusion. You get caught up in a situation where you are absolutely convinced that the fate of the republic rests on the reelection of, in my case, Richard Nixon. I'm sure that next year people will think the same thing about George Bush. There's an *enormous* amount of peer pressure, and you don't take time to stop and think, *Wait a minute. Is this right by some absolute standard or does this seem right in the circumstances? Is it okay?*

I was taught to think clearly and carefully. As a lawyer that's what you do—you briefcase it, you spend four years in law school, and you go like a monkey. You're briefing cases, briefing cases. We used the case method, as you use the case method here in business. The case method in law school, however, is a little bit different, because you always have a fixed law that you would arrive at. I had all the mental capacity to do that. I was capable of infinite self-delusion.

Second, and even more important—and this goes to the heart of the ethical dilemma in America today—even if I had known I was doing wrong, would I have had the will to do what is right? It isn't hindsight. I have to tell you the answer to that is no.

The greatest myth of the twentieth century is that people are good. We aren't. We're not morally neutral. My great friend, Professor Stan Samenow, happens to be an orthodox Jew. I asked him one day, "Stan, if people were put in a room and no one could see what they were doing or no one knew what they were doing, would they do the right thing half the time and the wrong thing half the time? Would they do the wrong thing all the time, or would they do the right thing all the time?" He said they would *always* do the wrong thing.

We aren't morally neutral. I know that's a terribly unpopular thing to say in America today, but it happens to be true. The fundamental problem with learning how to reason through ethical solutions is that it doesn't give you a mechanism to override your natural tendency to do what is wrong. This is what C.S. Lewis—whose writings have had such a profound influence on my life—says.

My blessed friend Tom Phillips gave me the book *Mere Christianity* when I came to him in the summer of 1973 at a moment of great anguish in my life. I wasn't so worried about what was going on in Watergate, but I knew I didn't like what was going on in my heart. But something was different about him. So I went to see him one evening.

I went, and that was the evening that this ex-Marine captain, White House tough guy, Nixon hatchet man (and all kinds of things you can't write about in print or wouldn't say in polite company that I was called in those days—much of it justifiably) found myself unable to drive the automobile out of the driveway when I left his home, after he had told me of his experience with Jesus Christ. I was crying too hard.

I took that little book he had given me, *Mere Christianity*, and began to read it and study it as I would study for a case. I'd take my yellow legal pad and get down all the arguments—both sides. I was confronted with the most powerful mind that I had ever been exposed to, I saw the arguments for the truth of Jesus Christ, and I surrendered my life 18 years ago. My life has not been the same since and can never be the same again.

I discovered that Christ coming into your life changes that will. It gives you that will to do what you know is right, where even if you know what is right—and most of the time you won't—you don't have the will to do it. It's what C.S. Lewis wrote in that tremendous little book, *Abolition of Man*.

I'd love you to read *Mere Christianity*, but if you had to read just *Mere Christianity* or *Abolition of Man* for today's cultural environment, read *Abolition of Man*. Wonderful book.

I don't know how to say this in language that is inclusive, but he wrote a marvelous essay called "Men Without Chests." It's a wonderful article about the will. He said the intellect can't control the passions of the stomach except by means of the will—which is the chest. But we mock honor—and then we are alarmed when there are traitors in our midst. It is like making geldings, he said, and then bidding them to multiply. He was talking about the loss of character in 1947 and 1948, long before the results we are witnessing today of the loss of character in American life.

So much for the individual. What about society as a whole? Margaret Thatcher delivered what I consider to be one of the most remarkable speeches in modern times two and a half years ago before the Church of Scotland. You'll find it reprinted only in the *Wall Street Journal*. Margaret Thatcher said—and I'll paraphrase that marvelous, eloquent speech—that the truth of the Judeo-Christian tradition is infinitely precious, not only because she believes it to be true—and she professed her own faith—but also, she said, because it provides the moral impulse that causes people to rise above themselves and do something greater than themselves, without which a democracy cannot survive. She went on to make the case—I think quite convincingly—that without Judeo-Christian values at the root of society, society simply can't exist.

Our founders believed this. We were not formed as a totally tolerant, neutral, egalitarian democracy. We were formed as a republic with a certain sense of republican virtue built into the citizenry, without which limited government simply couldn't survive. No one said it better than John Adams: "Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

There are four ways in which that moral impulse works. Someone sent me a letter suggesting the topic for this speech, "Why Good People Do Bad Things." I didn't have time to write back and say I really think that it would be more appropriate to address "Why Bad People Do Good Things," because that's a more difficult question.

**W**hy do we do good things? If we live in an age of ontological individualism, if radical individualism is the pervasive ethos of the day, if we simply live for the gratification of our senses, of our personal success, and vivid personal feelings, why do anything good? Who cares? It won't make a particle of difference unless it's important to your balance sheet. But that's pragmatism, that isn't doing good things. That's pure utilitarianism.

First, we do good things because there is something in us that calls us to something greater than ourselves.

Prison Fellowship is, of course, a ministry in the prisons—not a very glamorous place to be. I visited three prisons this weekend. I was so moved in one prison because there were 600 inmates that came out and saw their lives change. Now those were people who were lost and forgotten. One man stood up

and said, "Ten years ago I was in this prison, and two of your volunteers came in, Mr. Colson, and they befriended me, this couple from Akron, Ohio." He said, "You know, they've been visiting me every month and writing to me ever since, for 10 years." He continued, "I get out of prison in September, and they've invited me to live in their home." He said, "I'm going to make it."

Why do people do things like this? Why do they go to the AIDS wards? One of my friends goes into the AIDS ward of a prison all of the time, and people die in his arms. Do we do it because we have some good instinct? No! It's a moral impulse.

Why did William Wilberforce stand up on the floor of the Parliament in the House of Commons and denounce the slave trade? He said it was barbaric and cost himself the prime ministership of England when he said it! But, he said, I have no choice as a Christian. He spent the next 20 years battling the slave trade and brought it to an end in England because of his Christian conscience.

What is it that makes us, as otherwise self-centered people disposed to evil—if the history of the twentieth century and civilization is correct—what is it that makes us do good?

Second, Margaret Thatcher is absolutely right. A society cannot survive without a moral consensus.

I tell you this as one who sat next to the president of the United States and observed our nation's fragile moral consensus during the Vietnam era. We did some excessive things, and we were wrong. But we did it feeling that if we didn't, the whole country was going to fall apart. It was like a banana republic having the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne down in the basement of the White House. One night my car was firebombed on the way home. They had 250,000 protesters in the streets: You almost wondered if the White House was going to be overrun.

**T**he moral consensus that holds our country together was in great peril during that era and during the entire Watergate aftermath of Vietnam. A free society can't exist without it.

Now, what gives it to us? Thomas Aquinas wrote that without moral consensus, there can be no law. Chairman Mao gave the other side of that in saying that morality begins at the muzzle of a gun. Every society has two choices: whether it wants to be ruled by an authoritarian ruler, or whether there can be a set of shared values and certain things we hold in common that give us the philosophical underpinnings of our value system in our life.

I submit to you that without that—call it natural law if you wish, call it Judeo-Christian revelation, call it the accumulated wisdom of 23 centuries of Western civilization—I don't believe a society can exist.

The reason we have the most terrible crime problem in the world in America today is simple: We've lost our moral consensus. We're people living for ourselves.

We doubled the prison population in America during the 1980s. We are today number one in the rate of incarceration per capita in the world. When I started Prison Fellowship 15 years ago, the U.S. was number three. We trailed the Soviet

Union and South Africa. Today we're number one. While we build more prisons and put more people in, the recidivism rate remains constant at 74 percent. Those people go right back in.

The answer to it is very simple. There are kids being raised today from broken families who are not being given values. Remember that Stanley Hauerwas said the way you foster ethics is in tradition-formed communities. They're not being given values in the home, they're not being given values in the school, they're watching the television set for 7 hours and 36 minutes a day, and what they're seeing is, "you only go around once, so grab for all the gusto you can." Now if that's the creed by which you live, then at 12 years old you're out on the streets sniffing coke. We arrest them and put them in jail. They think we're crazy. So do I.

Until you have some desire in society to live by a different set of values, we'll be building prisons in America until, as is the case today, 24 percent of the black, male inner-city population in America is either in prison or on probation or parole. We can't make it without that moral consensus. It will cost us dearly if we can't find a way to restore it.

Professor James Wilson, formerly at Harvard Law School, wrote one of the most telling pieces I've ever read, and I refer to it in one of my books, *Kingdoms in Conflict*. He wrote a primer, while he was here at Harvard, about the relationship between spiritual values and crime. It is really interesting.

The prevailing myth is that crime goes up during periods of poverty. Actually, it went down during the 1930s. He found that, during periods of industrialization, it went up as what he called Victorian values began to face. When there was a resurgence of spiritual values, crime went down. He saw a direct correlation. Crime went up whenever spiritual values went down; when spiritual values went up, crime went down.

Third, I think we often miss the basis of sound policy because we have become secularized in our views in America and afraid to look at biblical revelation. We're terrified of it.

When Ted Koppel gave the commencement speech at Duke University a few years ago, in which he said the Ten Commandments weren't the Ten Suggestions, and that God

handed the Commandments to Moses at Mt. Sinai, you know what the press did to him. It was horrible. A fellow like Ted Koppel couldn't possibly say something like that! So we blind ourselves to what can often be truth.

I have spoken to over half of the state legislators in America and have spoken with many of the political leaders around this country. I always make the same argument to them about our prisons. We have way too many people in prison. Half of them are in for nonviolent offenses, which to me is ludicrous. They should be put to work. People should not be sitting in a cell at a cost of \$20,000 a year to taxpayers while doing absolutely nothing, and while their victims get no recompense. Offenders ought to be put in a work program paying back their victims. Whenever I speak about that, the response I get from political officials is amazing. It really is.

In the Texas legislature, I gave that talk and they all applauded. Afterward the Speaker of the House said, "Mr. Colson, wait here. I'm sure some of the members would like to talk to you." They came flooding in afterward. They all said that restitution is a wonderful idea—where did that come from? I asked, "Have you got a Bible at home?" They say, "Have I got a Bible at home?" "Well," I responded, "you go home and dust it off and you'll see that's exactly what God told Moses on Mt. Sinai."

That's biblical truth. That's the lesson of Jesus and Zacchaeus. We blind ourselves to it because we think there's something wrong with that in today's tolerant society. But in a pluralistic society that ought not to be wrong. We ought to be seeking that out. If we can find wisdom, find it. So often we find wisdom in the teachings of the Holy Scripture.

Fourth, no society exists in a vacuum. Vacuums don't remain vacuums—they get filled. In a vacuum, a tyrant will often emerge. You've just seen 70 years of that crumble in the former Soviet Union. Isn't it interesting that when it crumbles, it so often crumbles because people have an allegiance to a power above the power of that earthly potentate?

I remember when Pope John Paul II said that he would return to Poland if the Soviets invaded during Poland's period of martial law in the early eighties. Years earlier Stalin had said,



“Hah! The Pope! How many divisions does he have?” Well, as a result of the Solidarity movement, we saw how many divisions he had—a whole lot more than the Soviets.

I remember getting on a plane and coming up to Boston to see our first grandson when he was born, back in 1981. A man got up in the aisle of the plane and was all excited to see me. He said, “Chuck Colson!” He was blocking the people coming behind me, so I finally got him into his seat. He was talking so fast that I couldn’t understand him. To make a long story short, he introduced himself as Benigno Aquino.

Aquino told me that when he was in jail for seven years and seven months, as a political prisoner of Marcos, he had read my book *Born Again*. He was in a prison cell and had gotten down on his knees and surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. He said after that his entire experience in prison changed. Well, Nino and I became pretty good friends. We did some television programs together, and we visited frequently.

He called me up one day and said, “I’m going back to the Philippines.” I said, “Nino, do you think that’s wise?” He said, “I have to. I’m going back because my conscience will not let me do otherwise.” He was safe here in America, he had a fellowship at Harvard, he could lecture anywhere he wanted. He and his wife had everything they could possibly want.

But he knew he had to go back to the Philippines. “My conscience will not let me do otherwise.” He said, “If I go to jail, it’ll be okay, I’ll be president of Prison Fellowship in the Philippines.” He said, “If there are free elections, I’ll be elected president. I know I can beat Marcos. And if I’m killed, I know I’ll be with Jesus Christ.” He went back in total freedom. And he was shot and killed as he got off the airplane.

**B** an extraordinary thing happened—what’s known as people power. People went out into the streets. The tanks stopped. People went up and put flowers down the muzzles of guns: A tyrant was overthrown. A free government was reasserted because people believed in a power above themselves.

I was in the former Soviet Union last year and visited five prisons, four of which had never been visited by anyone from the West. I met with Soviet officials. It was really interesting. I met with Vadim Bakatin, then minister of interior affairs.

When talking about the enormous crime problem in the Soviet Union, he said to me, “What are we going to do about it?” I said, “Mr. Bakatin, your problem is exactly the one that Fyodor Dostoyevsky, your great novelist, diagnosed. In *Brothers Karamazov*, he had that debate between the older brother, who is unregenerate, and the younger brother, Alexis, who is the priest, over the soul of the middle brother, Ivan. At one point, Ivan yells out and says, “*Ah, if there is no God, everything is permissible.*” Crime becomes inevitable. I said, “Your problem in the Soviet Union is 70 years of atheism.” He said, “You’re right. We need what you’re talking about. How do we get it back in the Soviet Union?”

**A** I could think was how foolish we are in America to be squandering our heritage. In a country where they’ve ignored the king of greater power for 70 years, they’re losing it all.

I can only leave you with a very simple message, as someone who had thought he had it all together and attained a position of great power. I never thought I’d be one of the half-dozen men sitting around the desk of the president of the United States, with all of that power and influence. I discovered that there was no restraint on the evil in me. In my self-righteousness, I was never more dangerous.

I discovered what Solzhenitsyn wrote so brilliantly from a prison—that the line between good and evil passes not between principalities and powers, but it oscillates within the human heart. Even the most rational approach to ethics is defenseless if there isn’t the will to do what is right. On my own—and I can only speak for myself—I do not have that will. That which I want to do, I do not do; that which I do, I do not want to do.

It’s only when I can turn to the One whom we celebrate at Easter—the One who was raised from the dead—that I can find the will to do what is right. It’s only when that value and that sense of righteousness pervade a society that there can be a moral consensus. I would hope I might leave with you, as future business leaders, the thought that a society of which we are a part—and for which you should have a great sense of responsibility and stewardship—desperately needs those kinds of values. And, if I might say so, each one of us does as well. ■



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# Speaking of Religion and Politics

Edited by John B. Cobb, Claremont, CA: Pinch Publications, 2000.

*Book Reviews by Darold H. Morgan,  
President Emeritus of the Annuity Board of the SBC*

This book comes with a guarantee: it is controversial! The sub-title points specifically to this as it states: "The Progressive Church Tackles Hot Topics." In this the book succeeds!

Regardless of one's ethical position, it is helpful to come to this book with an open mind. Controversy lurks in every chapter, but it is definitely possible to glean some new insights from these pages. And considering the wide range of topics that are covered, new insights are urgently needed. There is a substantial amount of basic biblical directives in the volume.

Like it or not, Christians and churches must face these ethical issues which are becoming more numerous than ever. For example, who would have thought a generation back that the globalization of economic life would have such far-ranging ethical challenges as they do today? Could any among us have concluded that debt-forgiveness, especially to a whole bevy of poverty-stricken African nations, would be a very live area of discussion? When did environmentalism enter the ranks of a first-class Christian ethical issue?

Ordinarily when one has an edited book such as this one, there is an uneven quality in the writing and in the subjects handled. This is not the case here. Though there must be a host of unknown contributors, the editor maintains a balance throughout.

The reader will find fresh insights to many old problems. The initial chapter is on "Religion and the Public Schools." Most of us bring our preconceived ideas to the table on this issue, but the chapter is strong, particularly with reference to some needed historical background and its connection with religious liberty as it pertains to the prickly issue of school prayer. However, the chapter is unexpectedly weak in its approach to the voucher controversy.

One could approach each chapter and subject in this same way, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses around the issue being discussed. However, it will help to keep in focus the announced philosophical bias of the entire volume. The ecumenically committed "Mobilization for the Human Family" is seeking to oppose or enlighten (depending upon one's point of view) the ethical positions of the American Christian Right. The book clearly accuses this movement as being far more interested in politics than in biblical criticism or theology (p. 263), which ultimately should be the basis of an ethical posture. In fact, the final chapter is entitled "A Short History of the American Christian Right." It makes for very interesting reading indeed, but probably it should have been relocated to

the beginning of the book.

One of the genuine values of this ethical discussion is the input of updated statistics. Ordinarily statistical evaluation can be short-sighted, out of date, or even supernaturally dull; but not so in such chapters as "Pro-Human Family: Another look at Abortion," and the chapter on "The Global Population Crisis." Arresting, compelling, and electrifying are just a few of the words that come to mind as one reviews these issues in the light of the world community.

Here is a book that ought to be read because it hits directly the key ethical challenges that face every single person alive today. Not one of us is exempted from these problems. Widely held divergent opinions appear here. Some conservative Christians will definitely be offended by much that is in the book. Some, however, will read into these mandates new ideas that will expand their horizons. Some who love the classification of "liberal" may conclude that the book doesn't go far enough. Regardless of one's position, here is a book that ought to be read because it daringly challenges most of the critical and controversial ethical issues that are here to stay—at least in our lifetime.

## Faith Works

By Jim Wallis, New York: Random House, 2000.

Here is a volume from one of America's premier social activists who happens to be a preacher with genuine prophetic skills. If you are even remotely interested in some fresh new insights about poverty, racial injustice, or the inequalities of economic imbalance, then this book is for you. Replete with some powerful and timely illustrations from his international exposure, brimming with helpful quotations from a multitude of sources, and filled with delightful quips of humor amidst the profoundly serious subjects under review, Wallis' book is indeed hard to put down.

The book is quite readable because of his style, and also because of the wide range of experiences he brings into focus. If you bring any apathy with you as you read the book, Wallis can leave you uncomfortable. Perhaps the major strength of the book is found in this confrontation because it is possible to be shaken to the core about the issues, especially the problems of poverty.

Wallis organizes his book around fifteen guidelines or lessons on how to make faith a workable reality in a pluralistic society where stubborn ethical and human problems exist. Though some government programs and faith-based organizations have made significant progress, there are still major problems to solve. Wallis' lesson on "Recognizing the Three Faces of Poverty" is exceptionally timely. Additionally the lessons on "Tap the Power of Faith Communities" and "Be a Contemplative" not only make the price of the book a good investment for ethical judgments, it also offers basic and practical thought for ethical practice.

This book has a unique ability to make the serious student of ethics distinctly uncomfortable about one's personal involvement in solving these problems. Real progress has been made, for example, in welfare reform and in laws applicable to racial justice, but there are many who still fall through the social safety nets.

The author's own pilgrimage is forceful. From a boyhood in suburban white Detroit, Wallis early sensed something fundamentally wrong about white/black relationships. As a young man he discovered on his own the vibrancy of the black churches, which resulted in a lifelong connection with them. Black churches in Detroit, Chicago, and Washington D.C. have been centers of profound influence on the life of this conservative evangelical from Michigan.

If you are interested in understanding new and old concepts about poverty, about our deepening racism, about the inevitable impact of economic injustice in America, then this volume will prove valuable. The book contains some hard hitting opinions from the author, softened somewhat by his oblique style of writing and his penchant for helpful illustra-

tions. However, his intent never changes. Wallis seeks to open the reader's eyes and heart about these issues, often from the perspective of the oppressed. Other relevant ethical challenges he discusses are voter apathy, wounded family values, and church involvement. Simply and eloquently, he calls for renewal, involvement, sacrifice, understanding, and prayer.

Wallis' own encounter with major players in the world of social justice and human rights advocacy adds substance and color to his appeals. He shares numerous experiences and diverse opinions from a wide range of friends: Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., John Fife, Marian Wright Edelman, Billy Graham, Cardinal Bernadin, Ghandi, Dorothy Day, Harvey Cox, Bill Moyers, Ron Thielmann, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton. Rich illustrations and quotations abound.

Wallis has developed a Sojourner's community in the nation's capital, an organization that has become the social conscience for many people who deeply desire justice in our land. Wallis' message is primarily positive and ultimately optimistic despite the usual negativism that is endemic in this area of concern. The volume ends on an upbeat theme. Despite the deep roots of social problems, there is an increasing awareness that beginning steps are being taken in faith-based communities and governmental circles. The book ends on the note that there is in the air something, which closely resembles hope. Common ground between avowed liberal and the once-proud religious right is actually surfacing. Bill Moyers in his timely foreword hints that Wallis is somewhat responsible for this hope because "he is a rare breed who blends biblical and family values with social justice, human rights, and corporate responsibility." ■



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# A Time for Gathering and a Time for Scattering

By Ralph Wood, Baylor University

A Meditation for the Board of Regents, July 15, 2000

My text today comes from Matthew 12:30: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” Unlike most would-be, wannabe, failed preachers—since I am one of those folks whom nobody’s ever been willing to lay hands on—I have only two points rather than three. And they are gathered under my general theme “A Time for Gathering and a Time for Scattering.” The first is that Jesus’ declaration about those who are for and against him has to do with the all-important Baptist doctrine of God’s own sovereign decision to choose and elect us as his people. The second is that Jesus’ prophecy about gathering and scattering has to do a phenomenon happening in our own time: on the one hand, it has to do with a wondrous convergence of Christians across denominational lines; and, on the other hand, with a terrible divergence that is also occurring within denominations such as our own.

## I.

Our Lord’s aphorism about those who are for and against Him is not nearly as obvious as it may seem. It is set amidst a passage about the casting out of demons and about the sin against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven. Such a setting should give us pause. If our relation to Jesus, both as individuals and as institutions, were an obvious matter of balloting for or against him, nearly everybody would play it safe and cast an affirming vote. There would be nothing demonic associated with it, no worry about blaspheming the Holy Spirit. It should be plain that Christ’s saying strikes far deeper than that. The stakes here, it should be clear, are very high indeed. It’s a matter of who and what comes first. It’s a question of who calls and who answers, of who offers and who receives, and of who authors and finishes and who is authored and finished. Over and again, Jesus makes it plain that being “with Him” and “in Him” and “for Him” is never our own doing. In John’s gospel, He stresses repeatedly that it is He who has first loved and chosen us, not we who have first loved and chosen Him. We would not seek God, said Pascal, unless He had already found us.

No wonder that our Baptist ancestors were so insistent on using such good biblical terms as *election* and *predestination*. These are not words to be scared of but gladly and eagerly to affirm because they lie at the heart of the Gospel. That Israel is God’s *chosen* people is the most fundamental biblical claim. That Jesus is God’s *chosen* messiah for the salvation of the world is the very essence of the Good News. That God in Christ has undeservedly *chosen* us rather than deservedly

rejecting us is our one hope and joy. Election and predestination do not concern God’s arbitrarily choosing of the favored few or his even more arbitrary rejecting of the unfavored many. To belong to the rejected, to be against Christ, is to seek our salvation, to believe that God owes his grace because we are religious; to think that our own goodness and righteousness make us worthy of God’s honor. To belong to the elect, by contrast, to be “with Christ,” is to live and move and have our very being in total and utter reliance on God’s prevenient grace—the grace that comes before and enables all our faithful responses to Christ’s will. Salvation is not akin, therefore, to voting for a political candidate or purchasing a gift at the shopping mall. Rather is it to be given and to receive the one true Gift, the sheer undeserved gift of saving faith.

How dare we here at Baylor let ourselves be robbed of this central Christian and specifically Baptist doctrine of election because certain hyper-Calvinist fundamentalists have distorted and mangled our own tradition? For Baylor University to be shorn of its biblical and Baptist heritage, for it to have its own academic and religious life dictated by fundamentalists who despise everything this university stands for—this would not be merely an irony or an anomaly but a scandal and an outrage.

## II.

Jesus speaks not only of those who are with and against him, but also of those who gather and scatter. I believe that such a gathering and scattering is occurring in our own time. Once again it is occurring around this single figure who gathers and scatters everything: Jesus Christ. Those who are with Him are gathering, and those who are against Him are scattering. We live, I believe, in an age of unprecedented convergence and divergence. Nearly half a century ago, C.S. Lewis proved prophetic in this matter as in so many others. As an Ulster Protestant himself—a countryman of those folks who wear bowler hats and orange vests and who march angrily through Catholic neighborhoods in Northern Ireland—he wrote these words to a recent Roman Catholic convert in 1955: “The world will not be converted by a miscellany of denominations,” Lewis declared, “each defining itself against the others. In the present divided state of Christendom,” he added, “those who are at the heart of each division are all closer to one another than those who are at the fringes.” Lewis discerned that he had far more in common with a believing Catholic than with many unbelieving or half-believing fellow Anglicans in his own communion. Hence my own thesis: Those who are

willing and able to affirm the fundamental claims of the Christian faith are thus converging across denominational lines to form new alliances and common enterprises. By contrast, those who either cannot or will not accept the authority of the Scriptures and the bedrock doctrines of the Faith are embracing various kinds of sexual and religious paganism. There is a wondrous gathering and a terrible scattering.

Let me be specific, first of all about those who are rending and scattering the Body of Christ. Rather than cast stones at other denominations, we would be more faithful and honest to speak of our own heretics. Three examples will suffice. First, there are those Baptists who deny that Catholics are Christians. Though they are found on both the left and the right of our denomination, they are typified by Al Mohler. He has recently declared that Roman Catholicism is a false church, teaching a false gospel, and having a false leader. These words are meant to scatter rather than gather. They deny that we Protestants sprang from the mother church called Catholicism, and they would not be Christians today were it not for her witness. These anti-Catholic Baptists constitute an anti-Christian slur, not only against Catholics in general, but especially against the 1400 Catholic students and the many fine Catholic faculty with whom we practice Christian solidarity here at Baylor. And so I declare that my late Roman Catholic teacher Paul Barrus was my brother in Christ, while Albert Mohler remains merely my heretical fellow-Baptist.

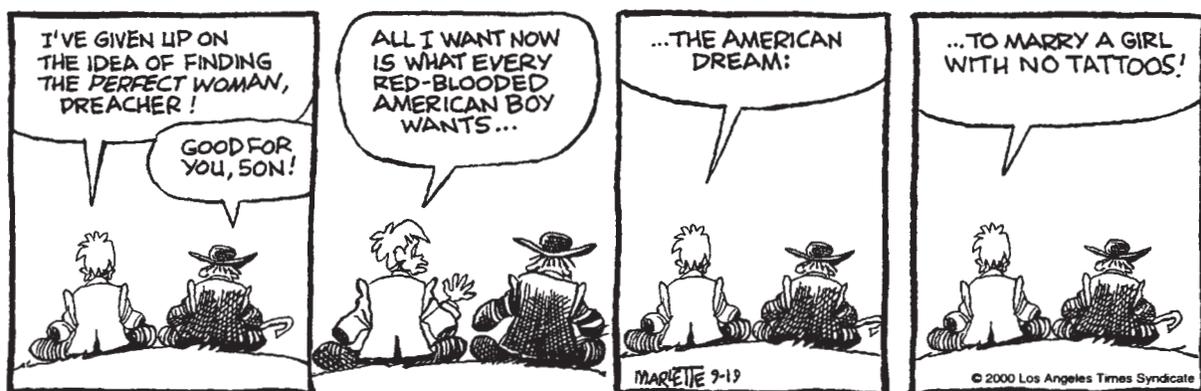
There are also Baptists who reject the very clear teaching of both Scripture and Tradition that, while homosexual orientation is not sinful—any more than a native inclination to anger or the love of money is sinful—its actual practice is indeed sinful. Indeed, it requires redemption and thus it cannot be made the equivalent of heterosexual married love. Among Methodists and Lutherans, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, those who deny the sinfulness of homosexual practice are rapidly breaking fellowship with their orthodox counterparts in a dreadful scattering that, I predict, shall soon visit us Baptists.

Finally, there are Baptists who deny that the Bible is God's written Word intended for the preaching and hearing of the Gospel. They turn it into a science and history book to be valued chiefly for its rules and regulations. They therefore deny

the central claim of Galatians 3:28 that, for those who are "with Christ," there is neither male nor female because we are all one in our common Lord. And so Amy Castello, one of my ministers at Seventh and James, and Julie Pennington-Russell, the pastor of Calvary Baptist here in Waco, are my sisters in Christian ministry and mission, while Paige Patterson, the ex-Texas heretic now ensconced in North Carolina, has scattered himself and others from our midst.

Far more remarkable than these terrible acts of scattering is the great gathering that is occurring not only in our denomination but also across denominational lines. Again, I speak personally. As a Christian, I have much more in common with certain Presbyterians and Catholics and Eastern Orthodox than I do with many Baptists. One of my best friends in the faith is Tom Currie III, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Kerrville. Because we share a deep commitment to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, he recently invited me to lecture for an entire weekend at his church, where I had a splendid reception. Father Timothy Vavarek, pastor of the St. Jerome Catholic Church on North I-35 here in Waco, is another deep comrade in the Faith. He has a doctorate in Roman Catholic-Southern Baptist relations from Rome, and he is one of Truett Seminary's very best friends—again, because he and we are gathered under the same arbor of utter reliance on salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Father Thomas Hopko, dean of St. Vladimir's Russian Orthodox Seminary in New York, may be the deepest and most learned Christian whom I've ever met. He will soon be coming to lecture here at Baylor, and for the same reason: he knows that we are engaged in a great spiritual gathering and convergence that will result in a Christian university like few others.

But the chief Christian influence on my life has been a Baptist preacher named Warren Carr. It was he who first taught me that to be Christian is to be neither conservative nor liberal but radical: to have *radix*, roots as deep as the Cross, roots able to encircle all the dead. To be made crucified with Christ is also to have arms as wide as the Cross, gathering in all the living. Warren Carr taught me that to be Christian is to be salty and angular, to be immoderate and eccentric, to be scandalous and offensive, to be comical chiefly in making fun of oneself—all because we want first and last and always to be messengers of the unsurpassable Glad Tidings of Jesus Christ



crucified, risen, and returning. Holding to this radical and scandalous Gospel has got Warren Carr in a lot of trouble. He has made enemies on both the left and the right because he knows what a Friend he has in Jesus. Nor has he ever been elected to any Southern Baptist office, because his radical kind of Christianity makes conventional people uncomfortable.

### III.

What are we to say, then, about this convergence and divergence, this gathering and scattering, this “with me” and “against me,” that Jesus so scandalously insists upon? How does it pertain to Baylor? I believe that our university is destined, by the grace of the triune God, to become one of the great centers of convergence within the Christian academic world. We are called, I believe, to become a mighty gathering place for Christian teachers and students who want to put their intelligence and their faith into vigorous engagement with their science and their music, their engineering and their business skills—examining viewpoints that may at first seem alien. Baylor will become such a magnet for both vital faith and rigorous learning precisely to the extent that we remain a Christian university in the Baptist tradition.

This insistence that we remain first of all Christian does not require any diminution whatsoever of our desire to make a distinctively Baptist witness here. On the contrary, Baptists must remain not only the people of God who birthed us in the beginning, but also the people of God who continue to sustain and nurture us, and therefore the people of God whom we seek first to serve. Yet we shall serve our Baptist constituency well only as we remember that we Baptists are not a church unto ourselves but rather a powerful reform movement within the church universal. Though we have our own distinctive practices—believer’s baptism and the centrality of the local church being the chief—we cannot be authentic Christians by ourselves. We are called to gather in common effort also with believing non-Baptists whose faith we truly share, far more than unbelieving or half-believing Baptists with whom we have little in common. When such gatherings and convergences occur here at Baylor, I believe that we will become a veritable wonder to behold: a university which is increasingly sought out by prospective faculty and students alike, not only in increasing numbers but also in increasing quality. Rather than being the Baptist Notre Dame, as it is sometimes said, I believe that we have the unique opportunity to be none other than Baylor University: a distinctively Christian school in the distinctively Baptist tradition.

So it is, my brothers and sisters, that I am convinced that we live in one of the most challenging and frightening times in the annals of Christian history: a time of wondrous gathering and of terrible scattering. I believe and hope and pray that Baylor will be counted among those schools that, by God’s grace alone, stand with Christ rather than against Him. If our prayer is answered and we are found faithful, then Baylor will become a place for gathering and bringing in the academic sheaves of the Christ’s Kingdom, rather than scattering them asunder. ■

## How Far Is It To Bethlehem?

*(continued from page 2)*

verse, and He chose your heart. What about the Christmas gift He sent you in Bethlehem; not to mention that Friday at Calvary. Face it, He’s crazy about you.”

### Final Thoughts at Year’s End

- Thanks for numerous calls, letters, and personal words of encouragement during this transition time—they have really provided strength for each day.
- Thanks for your contributions. Since July 1 more than 40 of you have sent from \$20 to \$100, five others have given \$300 to \$1000, and one church in Jackson, Mississippi has CET in their budget.
- Fifty-seven complete sets of the Journal have been ordered. We have about 30 sets remaining, so if you want Issues 1-31 let us know soon.
- The income from the 35 contributions and the sale of sets has helped greatly. Through judicious economizing, we have reduced the publication costs to about \$8000 per issue (\$3-\$4 per copy). However, as you can easily deduce, all the income received since July would produce only one issue. Our Board will convene (by phone) in January to assess the future. We are exploring, with Foy’s help, a few possible large donors. PRAY with us that the funding will be found. Consider GIVING a year-end contribution. We are committed to providing the Journal free of charge to anyone who asks. Your support makes this possible.
- Editing the Journal is a great joy. Thank you for the privilege. JET ■

## We’ve Got Mail

*(continued from page 3)*

*worthy and true because of their infallible Word, I insisted, not because of their fallible words. . . . As always, I learned more lessons from defeat than victory. I discovered how little I am able to deal with fundamentalists, after having spent my career engaging liberals. Though theologically I am closer to the zealots on the right than to the corpses on the left—and though there is more hope of cooling down the former than warming up the latter!—the fundies have little willingness to learn from me. I also discovered that there is virtue in the academic tenure system, even if it also protects slackers and idiots. They could fire me for two days but not for life. And while I still refuse to call myself a moderate (i.e., a self-confessed Laodicean), I now can more deeply sympathize with Baptist liberals whose jobs have been destroyed by fundamentalists. Hence this question to sundry readers: Is there any way that orthodox but non-literalist Christians can work with fellow believers who have encased God in the iron box of biblicism?*

**Ralph Wood, Baylor University Professor ■**

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# Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories\*

By George Marsden

Professor of History University of Notre Dame

**Editor's Note:** *The article is the text of Professor Marsden's lecture delivered on February 2, 1999, at the Austin Presbyterian Seminary commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture lectures. Reprinted with permission from Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Fall 1999, Vol.115, No. 1.*

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\*Niebuhr's five categories are Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. Familiarity with Niebuhr's classic text is not necessary to appreciate Marsden's evaluation and application of the categories to modern religious groups (fundamentalists, liberals, etc.). *The Editor*

Exactly fifty years ago, in 1949, H. Richard Niebuhr delivered the lectures at Austin Seminary that became the book, *Christ and Culture*. I have long been an admirer of Niebuhr and, even though our theologies are rather different, throughout my career I have been influenced by his work, especially by *Christ and Culture*. I have often used his typology as a tool in teaching. Also, throughout my adult life, the question it poses—of how Christians should relate to their surrounding culture—has been a central one to me, both intellectually and spiritually.

Despite its enormous influence in the past fifty years, I think Niebuhr's analysis in its present form could be near the end of its usefulness. Although *Christ and Culture* still is very widely used as a teaching tool, much of the scholarly attention it attracts is along the line of saying that its categories are wrong or misleading. Often they are said to be hopelessly wrong and misleading. My good friends from Duke, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, argue that "few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*."<sup>1</sup> As a historian I can also appreciate the force of other historians' critiques that see Niebuhr's categories as simply not helpful. I deal every day with the particulars of how Christians have negotiated their relationships to culture and can see countless illustrations of the problems inherent in describing these in any neat theological categories.

Moreover, as a historian I am acutely aware of the degree to which *Christ and Culture* is a product of its time. The theological and cultural questions that Niebuhr took for granted in the post-World War II era were vastly different from those today. The 1940s are virtually a lost era to most of us today. We can hardly imagine what it was like to be an adult in that time. Just to mention the most obvious difference that separates us: we live in an era in which we take multiculturalism for granted. Niebuhr wrote at a time when "Amos 'n Andy" was a top radio show, racial segregation was still legal, and the principal agenda for himself and his audience was building a

unified culture, *e pluribus unum*. To what extent can categories generated in that context be relevant to ours?

So the question I want to deal with is: Can these categories be saved? In answering that question I do not intend to present an analysis of Niebuhr or his theology. There are many helpful such analyses already and many who could do that better than I. Rather I think it may be more of a tribute to Niebuhr to take some of his most helpful thoughts of a half-century ago and to see if we can translate it so that it may continue to be useful in this very different era. I want to clear the way for that by briefly looking at some of the principal critiques of *Christ and Culture* and offering some answers to those critiques.

First, however, it will be helpful to provide a brief review of what Niebuhr himself says. Here I will not go into any great detail, but simply try to clarify the essential points. "A many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilization is being carried on in our time." So Niebuhr begins, setting his lectures in the context of a debate that has since been forgotten. After the debacle of Nazism, the Holocaust, fascism, the horrors of World War II, the rapidly rising threat of international communism, and the danger of the bomb, American and British cultural leaders were engaged in intense debates over the future of Western civilization. Was there any way of strengthening its moral base so that it could meet the challenges of the technological age? How could the civilization avoid falling back into barbarous tribalism or succumbing to pseudo-scientific Marxist moralism? What is often forgotten is how prominently Christianity figured in these debates. While some cultural leaders (such as John Dewey and Sidney Hook) were saying that the open-minded attitudes of liberal secular science were the only ways to build a civilization free from prejudice and irrational intolerance, many other prominent spokesmen were saying that Christianity and the Judeo-Christian tradition could provide the best basis for a truly tolerant and liberal civilization.<sup>2</sup> For people like Niebuhr,

totalitarianism abroad and racism at home provided the most immediate context for thinking about the reforms that a progressive Christianity might bring to civilization. Tolerance was therefore a central issue. While Niebuhr had no illusions about building the Kingdom of God on earth, he favored a unified civilization to which Christian influences could make positive contributions.

In the context of this debate, Niebuhr begins by addressing accusations that Christianity has no positive contribution to make to civilization or culture (he uses the two terms more or less interchangeably). The secular proponents of a healthy tolerant civilization are thus those who really set the terms for Niebuhr's analysis. These cultured despisers of Christianity say, in effect, that civilization is the supreme value and that Christianity is essentially a threat to its health. They say that Christians either become so otherworldly that they are irresponsible citizens or they take over civilization and become intolerant. In effect, these critics say that Christianity should therefore be subordinated to cultural ideals. Progressive cultural ideals should reign supreme and traditional religion is either best abandoned or brought into line with those higher ideals.

Niebuhr responds to this secular culturalist critique by developing his famous typology. The relationships of Christianity to culture, he points out, have always been far more complicated than the critics recognize. True, some Christians have withdrawn from culture and some have been intolerant, but these are not the only Christian cultural attitudes. In fact, we can identify five distinct motifs that describe how Christians typically have related to their cultures. Each of these has biblical precedents and each has been advocated by some of the leading thinkers in the tradition. These categories, he recognizes, are what sociologists call "ideal types." No person or group will conform to them precisely and exemplars of one type will often show traits of others. So he acknowledges that they are "historically inadequate." Nonetheless, he believes, they are helpful for identifying recurrent motifs in Christians' typical stances toward culture.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr's categories have been subjected to numerous critiques and present a number of problems if we are to continue to use them. Without attempting to be exhaustive, let me summarize what I see as the major criticisms that bear on our purpose, which is to see if we can refine and clarify his categories so that they may be useful to future generations.

### **1. Niebuhr's abstract category of "Christ" is inadequate and misleading.**

One of the most basic critiques of Niebuhr is that his very use of the terms "Christ" and "culture" in defining the problem sets up a theological dualism that will be unacceptable to many people today. Niebuhr, following his teacher Ernst Troeltsch, on whom he wrote his dissertation, is working in the Kantian tradition which posits a gulf between the transcendent truths of faith, such as the ideal of "Christ," and the historically conditioned culture, which shapes everything

else.<sup>4</sup> The problem for modern theologians is how to bridge this gap between faith and history. Hence the whole "Christ and culture" problem depends on a dichotomy that many theologians today may find unacceptable. Niebuhr, for instance, like a lot of his contemporaries, tended to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history.

The practical implication, many people will say, is that Niebuhr's Christ and culture terminology seems to imply that "Christ," or more strictly speaking, Christian attempts to follow Christ, are not themselves culturally conditioned. Niebuhr seems to be working with an idea of a transcendent Christ who stands above culture. One can understand how someone might argue for such a transcendent ideal. For instance, if one believes that Christ is in some sense God incarnate, then there is a sense in which the divine second person of the Trinity stands above history. There is also a sense in which the teachings of Christ might be said to have some trans-cultural character, despite being embedded in very particular cultural forms. Whatever Niebuhr's theological intentions, his examples all suggest that what he is really talking about is various Christians' efforts to follow Christ. These conceptions of what the Christian ought to do, the objector will point out, are themselves very much shaped by culture. So to speak of them as "Christ" and everything else as "culture" is very misleading.

I think this point is well taken and an important reminder not to misconceive what Niebuhr is talking about. However, I expect that he would heartily agree with the point. He had no intention of talking about a culturally disembodied "Christ" as opposed to culture. Rather he is simply adopting a language to juxtapose that which we see as duties shaped by Christian commitment and the dominant culture.

It is curious, I think, that Niebuhr in this book puts his emphasis on the seemingly more abstract "Christ," rather than on the church or Christianity. In earlier writing he had become known for his outspoken declarations that the church must distinguish itself from the world. In a well-known essay published in 1935 in a collection titled *The Church Against the World*, Niebuhr deplored the captivity of the church to the spirit of capitalism, nationalist idolatry, and anthropocentrism. He even wrote that "no antithesis could be greater than that which obtains between the gospel and the capitalist faith," by which he meant faith in wealth. And far from sounding like a transformationist he deplored that "the church has often behaved as though the saving of civilization and particularly of capitalist civilization were its mission."<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, these earlier remarks may also suggest why he does not usually speak simply of "the church" or "Christianity" in this book. If one talks about "the church" or "Christianity," one is talking about people, entities, or traditions that are obviously so compromised with their cultures that it would be hard even to state the problem. The term "Christ," on the other hand, makes it clear that the problem that he is dealing with is the teachings of Christianity, especially with respect to what various groups have meant by "following Christ." For the same reason, I think, he deals primarily with leading Christian

theologians, rather than with denominations or historical movements. He wants to get at the problem of how Christian faith should be related to the dominant surrounding culture and to point out the various types of ways leading thinkers have addressed that problem. Certainly he recognizes that the views of these thinkers were themselves historically conditioned.

Further, though it is true that Niebuhr developed his categories in a particular theological context for his own theological purposes, that does not necessarily mean that we cannot appropriate them for other purposes or adapt them to other theologies. True, if we hold to another theology, we should not be taken in by the specifics of his theological formulations. But, as with anything else that may have origins in an ideology with which we may disagree, once we recognize those origins we are in a position to selectively appropriate tools that may be employed in the framework of our own outlooks.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, if we are to continue to use the Christ and culture language, we have to do it with a warning label that using the term “Christ” as opposed to culture can be misleading. The Christ and culture juxtaposition may reinforce the tendency of Christians to forget that their own understanding of Christianity is a cultural product.

The importance of underscoring this warning becomes clearest if we think of the cross-cultural exchanges involved within world Christianity. British Anglicans and African Anglicans, for instance, may differ in many ways that are shaped by their cultures, despite the formal similarities of their creeds. Western Christian missionaries inevitably bring with them the Gospel message, but it is already embedded in Western cultural forms. So missionary work is not simply a matter of bringing Christ to an alien culture, it also always involves a cultural dialogue and an exchange between two cultures. The two cultures learn from each other and the mission is shaped by “Christ” only as part of this cultural exchange. So it is also when Christians encounter non-Christians within one country, such as the United States. One sub-culture encounters other sub-cultures. Properly speaking, we should frame the question as “the culture of Christianity,” e.g. urban American Catholicism, “and other cultures,” e.g. American urban political culture.

One step in the right direction to remind us of this essential point is to shift the terminology, as I do here, from “Christ and culture” to “Christianity and cultures” and to point out that this is shorthand for saying “The culture of Christianity and other cultures.” With Niebuhr we still want to say that we are talking about the teachings of Christianity or what it means to follow Christ and that these have some transcendent reference. But we also need to emphasize more clearly that we have these spiritual treasures in earthen vessels.

## **2. Niebuhr’s undifferentiated use of “culture” confuses the issue.**

Closely related to these latter points are what have been the most devastating critiques of Niebuhr’s actual analysis, those aimed at his use of the term “culture.” These critiques,

which have been best articulated by the Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, grow out of underlying differences in theological viewpoint. What Yoder recognized is that Niebuhr’s use of “culture” is loaded against traditions such as the Mennonite, which Niebuhr classifies in the “Christ against culture” category. The problem is that Niebuhr uses culture almost indiscriminately as equivalent to “anything people do together.”<sup>7</sup> So it includes everything from language to warfare. Having defined culture in this monolithic way, Niebuhr then turns around and criticizes “Christ against culture” advocates for not being consistent in their anti-worldly profession. They may reject the pleasures of sex and of wealth, renounce learning and the fine arts, and refuse to participate in civil government or warfare, but they inevitably adopt some other cultural forms, such as language, learning of earlier eras, or agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

Yoder points out, however, that this is precisely what Christians should be doing, at least by most accounts. His summary is worth quoting at length:

Some elements of culture the church categorically rejects (pornography, tyranny, cultic idolatry). Other dimensions of culture it accepts within clear limits (economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, paying taxes for peacetime civil government). To still other dimensions of culture Christian faith gives a new motivation and coherence (agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, empowerment). Still others it strips of their claims to possess autonomous truth and value, and uses them as vehicles of communication (philosophy, language, Old Testament ritual, music). Still other forms of culture are created by the Christian churches (hospitals, service of the poor, generalized education).<sup>9</sup>

Clearly if we are to save Niebuhr’s analysis from this critique, we must adopt much more discriminating and specific meanings when we use the term “culture.” It seems to me, however, that this can be done. In fact, Yoder illustrates some very good ways to do it. The real question is whether one wants to use this flaw in Niebuhr’s own account in order to dismiss Niebuhr’s analysis or whether one might want to correct the flaw so as to better use Niebuhr’s analysis.

Most of the time Niebuhr was not thinking about things like language, agriculture, or hospitals, and his examples have to do with just two general areas of culture toward which Christians have characteristic stances. The first is toward higher learning, secular reason, and the arts. The second is toward the dominant cultural structures as represented by government, business, and the common ideologies and values that underlie these. It should be obvious, however, that when we describe various Christian groups as having characteristic attitudes on these matters, we are not saying that they have monolithic attitudes toward them. Almost all Christian groups accept some higher learning and employ some of the arts, even if they characteristically reject most of their culture’s versions of these. Furthermore, attitudes toward government or busi-

ness or the cultural ideologies on which they are based will vary greatly depending on the particular culture we are talking about. Christians of a particular theological heritage may find themselves to have very different attitudes toward a seemingly benign liberal democracy than they will have to a tyrannical Marxist police state.

Closely related to these observations is what might be called the “multiculturalist” objection to the entire Niebuhr project. Niebuhr wrote in the “consensus” era of American history. His principal concern was with building a healthy and unified mainstream culture to which socially progressive Christianity might make a contribution.<sup>10</sup> Today there is much more awareness that “culture” means different things to different people. Often people define themselves against the mainstream culture by defining themselves in terms of a sub-culture, particularly an ethnically based sub-culture. That was true in Niebuhr’s day as well. He had even grown up in a German ethnic community. Nonetheless, he pays little attention to how one’s sub-cultural identity may cut across attitudes toward “culture” generally. Similarly, he says little of how social class may be a factor in determining cultural attitudes, though that also is a factor he was well aware of and had even written about in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

Once again, the proper response to the various objections that Niebuhr uses the term “culture” too monolithically is therefore not to throw out his categories but rather to start using the term “culture” in more specific and discriminating ways. We always need to ask what general culture or sub-culture we are talking about and further what specific aspect of that culture is our matter of concern.

### 3. The categories are not historically adequate.

This brings us to a further potentially decisive difficulty, that the categories are simply not historically adequate. A few years ago two conferences were held at Vanderbilt University to discuss the legacy of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. One of the major components of these conferences was that historians of Christianity were asked to assess the usefulness of the categories for actual historical analysis. The results were fairly negative. While the historians expressed respect for Niebuhr and for his influence, a number argued strongly that his categories would not work for real history.

At the root of such complaints is that Niebuhr’s categories are a theologian’s ideal types, derived from logic more than they are from history.<sup>11</sup> History is simply a lot more messy than that. If we look at particular groups who are supposed to be representatives of one of the types, we find that there are many ways they do not fit the type at all. That is why Mennonites, such as Yoder, have been up in arms about being classified as “Christ against culture,” when they actually fit that category in only a few respects. (Neither did it help that Niebuhr apparently confused the Mennonites with the Amish). Charles Scriven in *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* argues that the Anabaptist position provides the most adequate means to transform cul-

ture. Or one can find Lutherans who are transformationists and Calvinists who withdraw from culture.

My response to this complaint is to say, if the categories are too abstract and seemingly inflexible as Niebuhr presents them, why not translate them into terms that are historically more adequate? Then historians, theologians, other scholars, and ordinary people would still have very useful analytical tools for thinking about certain fundamental issues.

The way to fix up the categories is to get away entirely from the idea that the cultural attitudes of each spokesperson or group can be fit neatly into one of the categories. Niebuhr himself recognized that the types were “historically inadequate” and that actual historical figures or groups sometimes displayed all of the traits. But since he was developing a new typology, he played down the complexities and emphasized the typology’s heuristic or explanatory powers. He also lapsed from his own cautions at one notorious point by criticizing the “Christ against culture” representatives for not being consistent in their position. That was an unfortunate inconsistency on his part, as he does not criticize any other group on that ground, and often notes that a group might be classified under more than one motif.

Nonetheless, by usually speaking as though his ideal types characterize real historical figures, he leaves the impression that each Christian or group can be adequately typed by one or the other of the cultural attitudes. To correct this misleading impression, what we need to emphasize is that the categories are simply, as Niebuhr himself acknowledges, leading motifs. A motif should be seen as a dominant theme with respect to some specific cultural activities. It suggests a musical analogy. A dominant motif may be subordinated in one part of a symphony while another takes over. Identifying a dominant motif in a particular Christian group toward some specific cultural activity should not lead to the expectation that this group will not adopt other motifs toward other cultural activities.

This brings us to the crucial point that the categories work if we emphasize that they are not mutually exclusive. Virtually every Christian and every Christian group expresses in one way or another all five of the motifs. With respect to one cultural activity they may typically express one motif, with respect to another they may characteristically adopt quite a different stance. Even with respect to a particular category of cultural activities, as regarding learning, the state, the arts, contemporary values, popular culture, business, leisure, and so forth, Christians are likely to manifest something of all five of the attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

One might ask then, why bother? If we all express at one time or another all of the attitudes and our attitudes are so complex, do not the categories simply leave us with a muddle? Perhaps so. But the very point is that we will be even more in a muddle without some such categories with which to talk about these complexities. The reason for the muddle is that history—like individual life—is extraordinarily complex and filled with complications and ambiguities. Such analytical cat-

egories help us to begin to sort out these complexities. They provide a workable way to think about our attitudes toward these questions and to help evaluate what our attitudes should be. Furthermore, even though we can now see that everyone is likely to adopt all five of the attitudes, still, with respect to particular cultural questions, we can usually identify one attitude as dominant. So we really do have a clarifying set of classifications. Moreover, these classifications, or some combination of them, might be helpful in establishing rules of thumb for thinking about how we should characteristically relate to some particular types of cultural activities.

Let me give an example of how this more complex analysis might work with respect to one historical case with which I am most familiar, the history of fundamentalism and post-fundamentalist evangelicalism in twentieth-century America. Writing from the vantage point of Yale Divinity School in the late 1940s, Niebuhr had little interest in this tradition and little notion of its potential for continuing vitality. He delivered his lectures just a few months before Billy Graham hit the big time in Los Angeles. Niebuhr talked about this movement, as was then common, as simply “Fundamentalism,” and it was clearly an outlook for which he had little time. Accordingly, he relegates fundamentalism to, of all places, the “Christ of culture” category. This in spite of the fact that he must have known well that fundamentalists defined themselves primarily as militant opponents to many cultural trends. Niebuhr, however, saw them as simply leftovers from the past, opposing twentieth-century cultural trends only because they were so deeply committed to nineteenth-century outlooks and mores. They accepted a pre-Darwinist cosmology, and insisted on prohibition of various vices, thus reflecting the mores of nineteenth-century revivalism more than the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

It is certainly true that there is some justice in this critique. One of my interests in the study of fundamentalism and American culture was to understand the degree to which this religious tradition, which claimed to be based purely on New Testament Christianity, was actually shaped by American cultural traditions. Fundamentalists, like many other Christians, have often confused Christianity with certain dimensions of their culture. The clearest examples of such a “Christ of culture” attitude is that they have sometimes lapsed into nationalism that has virtually merged American patriotism with the cause of Christ. They sometimes speak as though America is the new Israel.

Nevertheless, one can find all the other motifs within fundamentalism as well. They are militantly against some dimensions of the culture and often speak of America not as Israel, but as Babylon. At other times they adopt a “Christ above culture” attitude, for instance, in adopting the prevalent American attitude that “business is business,” while adding to it higher spiritual practices. At still other times or toward other issues, they often have taken a “Christ and culture in paradox” view, perhaps best expressed in the pietist motto, “In the world but not of the world.” Yet while they have sometimes been political quietists, they have at other times, as in the recent rise of the Christian Right, been ardent transformers of culture.

What can be said for fundamentalists can be said for virtually any Christian tradition. We can understand far better how its proponents deal with particular issues by sorting them out with these categories. For instance, even American Protestant liberals whose theology may seem as bland as a Hallmark card, can be shown to stand firmly against the culture on certain issues. Let them be confronted by overt racism, sexism, or sexual exploitation and they will be up in arms thundering anathemas and warning their constituents to stay away from certain cultural practices.

These observations also bear on the inevitable objections of today’s politically correct that Niebuhr’s categories are useless because he himself does not deal with issues such as gender or race, or that he deals with the thought of elites instead of what the ordinary people thought or did. The fact of the matter is that once we get away from Niebuhr himself and try to use the categories constructively, they are extraordinarily useful for analyzing the attitudes of almost any Christians on almost any cultural issue. To what extent is contemporary Christian feminism shaped by adopting the views of the dominant culture, and to what extent might it represent an attempt to transform or Christianize those views? How have they negotiated the relationship between Scripture, Christian tradition, and their feminist views? Why do many women resist feminism? Or to what extent has Christian African American political thought in the past half century been shaped by a desire simply to be full-fledged participants in American culture and to what extent has it been shaped by a separatist impulse? One could do a lot worse than to employ Niebuhr’s categories for sorting out these issues and clarifying how participants should think about them.

#### 4. We need more categories.

Once we have dealt with the central issue—that almost all Christians exemplify something of all the types, but that on particular issues we can find dominant motifs—it is easier to deal with this last objection, that we need more categories.

Many people who have commented on Niebuhr have suggested that this or that group does not fit any of Niebuhr’s categories and that new ones need to be constructed. To suggest just two examples, where does militant liberation theology fit?<sup>14</sup> Or what about the many Christians who see the conversion of souls as the preeminent task and will embrace any cultural means to further that end?

My view is that one can deal with most such anomalies by emphasizing once again that actual historical groups will be characterized by combinations of dominant motifs. So, even though we start with only five unhistorical ideal categories, various combinations of these can help us understand a much larger number of actual historical types.

Further, we have to recognize that dwelling on the Christ and culture question does load our discussion in ways that does not do justice to some groups. Many revivalist Christians, for instance, who see the conversion of souls as their preeminent task are simply not thinking much about their attitudes

toward culture, even though they have some very definite attitudes. Niebuhr's categories would help them think more clearly about their actual approaches to various aspects of culture, but we can not impose on them an agenda that seems to say that this is the most important thing they should be thinking about.

As to the possibility of adding categories, one of the most constructive suggestions comes from University of Chicago Law professor Michael McConnell. He suggests that if one approaches the question not on the basis of theological rationales, but rather on the basis of what Christians actually do, new categories will emerge. For instance, he thinks that "Christ against culture" could be divided into "Church apart from culture" and "Church in conflict with culture." On the other hand, he thinks the third and fourth types could be consolidated under "Church accommodated to culture." Despite differing theological rationales, he argues, they do not make any difference in practice. "Christ transforming culture," he suggests, might better be called "church influencing culture." He also thinks we should add two additional types, "church controlling culture" and "culture controlling church."<sup>15</sup> I can appreciate the usefulness of these suggested revisions of the categories. I certainly think there is a distinction that can be made between "Christ against culture," by which Niebuhr means Christ separated from aspects of culture, and "Christ against culture," in the sense of Christians feeling at war with aspects of the culture.<sup>16</sup> However, as my analysis of fundamentalism suggests, the sense of warfare can already be expressed under the rubric of any of three of the existing categories. Some who see themselves at war choose to separate from the mainstream culture, some live militantly in a paradoxical relation to that culture, not of the world but still in it. Or others might be engaged in warfare of transformation, as in recent culture wars or in liberation theology. So in this case I would not suggest adding any category, but simply making clear that, for Niebuhr, "Christ against culture" means "Christ separating from culture."<sup>17</sup>

Generally my attitude is that if the categories are to remain useful, we should take a conservative approach to them, preserving the five we have and not adding new categories. Five is as large a number as most people can easily remember anyway. And there is very little chance that a new set of categories will catch on the way Niebuhr's set has.

Each of the major objections, then, can be adequately answered. If we adopt the flexibility and interpretations I have suggested, recognizing the complexity of any real historical subjects, then Niebuhr's five categories can be extremely useful analytical tools.

I should say in closing that they are introductory tools. They are useful primarily for getting people to begin thinking more clearly about these issues. Once that has happened they may want to modify the tools to suit their purposes and will likely want to keep them out of sight in their finished work. Like any typology they invite simplistic thought and too easy categorizing of other Christians. Nonetheless, if used properly, they can continue to be a rich resource for helping Christians

think about their relationships to the world.

One final potential criticism may be mentioned in the light of what follows. It is sometimes argued that the way Niebuhr frames his categories makes it inevitable that his own transformationist position turns out to be the most favored. Yet while Niebuhr is clearly an advocate of such an outcome, I see no reason why the use of his five categories should dictate that result. For now it is sufficient to give just one counter example—which is my own view. I think that "Christ and culture in paradox," or some version of a two cities or two kingdoms view, should be the most usual rule of thumb for Christian attitudes toward mainstream culture, although each of the other attitudes is sometimes appropriate as well. ■

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## ENDNOTES

1 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 40.

2 See for example C. T. McIntire, *God History, History, and Historians: An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

3 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 43-44. He also acknowledges in this same passage that "traits will appear that seem wholly unique and individual," so he does not regard his types as exhaustive.

4 Michael J. Baxter, "Let's Do Away with Faith and History: A Critique of H. Richard Niebuhr's False Antinomies," *Modern Theology* (forthcoming). Cf. John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ And Culture*," Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 58-61.

5 H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Independence of the Church," in H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis P. Miller, *The Church Against the World* (Chicago: Harper and Row, 1945), 128-139.

6 Stanley Hauerwas, who has been one of the most vocal critics of Niebuhr for loading his account in favor of transformationism, nonetheless concedes that the categories have heuristic value. *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 246-47.

7 Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," 56.

8 Cf. a similar critique in Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1988).

9 Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," 69. Yoder adds "egalitarianism, abolitionism, and feminism," which are more confusing, since they both reflect wider cultural trends, yet in their particular church forms are cultural products of churches.

10 Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralism and Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 134-40, offer a helpful discussion of this point.

11 For instance, a helpful analysis of this point is provided by Diane Yeager, "The Christ who comes into the world comes

into his own: The Method and Theoretical Perspectives Informing *Christ and Culture*,” (Paper for conference on “The Enduring Problem: H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* After Forty Years,” Vanderbilt University, May 14-16, 1993.) The second conference was held in 1994. I am indebted to John R. Fitzmier, for furnishing me with copies of the conference papers.

12 Niebuhr recognized this complexity, when he wrote in his essay, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 26, “The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of the Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now the one that does not know what the Church knows, now the knower of what the Church does not know.”

13 *Christ and Culture*, 102. For Niebuhr’s view of fundamentalism see his “Fundamentalism,” *Encyclopedia of Social Science*, vol. VI (New York: Social Science research Council, 1931), VI, 526-27.

14 Liberationists might see a dictatorship as very much of the Devil—and so separate themselves radically against the current political culture—but still be transformationists, hoping eventually to change it. Or a variation on the question is some recent Catholic liberation theology that has been based on a theology of grace, articulated by Vatican II, which sees all people as already to some extent the objects of God’s grace, making it difficult to draw a clear line between the “natural” and the “supernatural.” Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 206. This theology and the liberationists’ appropriation of Marxism for their cultural analysis does not fit in exactly with any of the theological motifs that Niebuhr relates to his types. My inclination is to say that liberation theology is principally a sub-type of the transformationist motif. While Niebuhr illustrates his type with theologians who appeal primarily to the doctrine of creation, the precise theology is not essential to defining the type.

15 Michael McConnell, *DePaul Law Review* 42:1 (Fall 1992), 191-221. I am indebted to the summary in John F. Wilson, “The Last Type in *Christ and Culture* and the End for which it was Created,” (Paper for conference on “The Enduring Problem: H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* After Forty Years” Vanderbilt University, 1994), 14-15.

16 Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 426 and 447, argue that world “fundamentalisms” can be classified into four types: “the world conqueror, the world transformer, the world creator, and the world renouncer.” They also suggest that fundamentalist groups progress historically from one type to another.

17 Niebuhr himself recognized the additional type in which culture controls the church, but uses it only to state the problem of defining what the Christian alternatives ought to be. Historically there might be a category for the church controlling the culture. I would say, however, that such attitudes could be absorbed in the category of “Christ transforming culture.”

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“Whatsoever things are . . . lovely . . . think on these things.”

*Philippians 4:8*

## Christmas: Magic and Miracle

*By Foy Valentine, Founding Editor*

Christmas is a magic word.

It is laden with a thousand images.

Images bright and beautiful, warm and wonderful, exciting and joyful.

Christmas, however, is more than magic.

It is miracle. It is God’s doing.

Like a treasured gold coin, Christmas has two sides. One is magic; the other is miracle. One is natural; the other is supernatural. One is of the earth, earthy; the other is straight from the heart of God, heavenly.

It is right for us to affirm both, to reject neither, to embrace the whole.

Christmas, of course, means different things to different people. Country people have a take on it that is different from city people. Children understand it differently from adults. Poor folks face it with different recollections and different expectations than the rich. The Americans and the English, in spite of our common language, experience Christmas in quite different ways. Germans and Italians have significantly different perceptions of the season. Christmas celebrants in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres naturally mark the occasion in strikingly different ways. The dour Puritans rejected the holiday altogether, seeing it as a popish practice with which true believers should have no truck; but faithful Roman Catholics were admonished by no less an authority than Pope Gregory I in 601 A.D. to “celebrate a religious feast and worship God by their feasting, so that still keeping outward pleasures, they may more readily receive spiritual joys.”

Only God in heaven now knows, of course, actually *when* Jesus was born. Various dates were vigorously debated for the first five hundred years of the Christian era. January 6, March 25, and December 25 were front-runners in the speculation; but May 20, April 19 or 20, November 17, and March 28 were all put forth and stoutly defended. About 245 A.D. Origen, one of the most prominent of all the early church fathers, argued against celebrating Jesus’ birthday at all, sniffing “as if he were a king Pharaoh.” December 25 was observed by pagan Romans as a feast day related to the sun; and pre-Christian era Britons observed December 25 as Mother’s Night. Because of the winter solstice, falling on December 21 or 22, when the days begin to be longer with daily increase of light and decrease of darkness, and there was universal recognition of this major natural phenomenon,

there came to be gradual acceptance of December 25 as an acceptable new feast day when the birth of Jesus could be appropriately celebrated. Roman Catholics set aside the four Sundays prior to December 25 as the “Advent season” ending with their midnight Eucharist, Christ’s mass. Thus the term Christmas metamorphosed over nearly two thousand years to become what it is today.

The associations related to Christmas which I find most deeply embedded in my psyche are those formed when I was quite young: a well-formed but always smallish cedar tree cut from our own woods, a very few little packages (remember that this was in the heart of the Great Depression), fine, big fires in our living room fireplace, stockings stuffed with apples and oranges, nuts, and a few pieces of candy, and lots of wonderful food—chicken and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, candied yams, hot biscuits, and homemade fruitcake. My best things, though, were the fireworks—firecrackers, sparklers, and Roman candles.

Surely these are the kinds of things that Pope Gregory I must have had in mind with his reference to “outward pleasures.” They certainly pleased me.

And why not?

In his Christmas oratorio “For the Time Being,” W. H. Auden has the Magi to say, “To learn to be human now is the reason we follow this star.”

The magic of Christmas lets us affirm our humanity, the fruitcakes and firecrackers, the chicken and dressing, the mashed potatoes and hot biscuits, and all the other pleasures of hearth and home.

Oh, I suppose there will always be hair-shirted Puritans who want us to be miserable, to eat no fruit salad and to shoot off no firecrackers. These Grinches would, without a qualm, steal the fun and wonder of Christmas from little

boys and girls, and from the rest of us as well. However, like Paul who knew not only how to be “abased” but also how to “abound,” I am inclined at this Christmas season to the abounding option, learning better, like Auden’s wise men, how “to be human now.”

I invite you, then, to join me this Christmas to revel at the twinkling lights, to join in joyful singing of “Here Comes Santa Claus” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” to read together again as my father used to read to me when I was a boy sitting in his lap, “Twas the night before Christmas . . .,” to indulge in a second helping of chicken and dressing, to throw another log on the fire, and to splurge by giving something extravagant to someone you really love. Salute the magic. Merry Christmas.

Now lest you slam judgment on me for being obscenely hedonistic, please stay tuned.

Christmas is also miracle.

In Jesus Christ, God has become one of us. Identifying with us in the incarnation, the eternal Word of God has been made flesh, and the Reason of God has been thus expressed in a language that everybody can understand. As we are told in the beginning of the Gospel of John, God’s light has shined in the darkness, enlightening everyone, and full of grace and truth so that in the miracle of Christmas we behold the glory of God Himself and are enabled to experience salvation, full and free which is God’s gift to all who in repentance and faith come willingly to Him.

Christmas is the best time of the year.

Bask in its sunshine.

Warm by its fire.

Join in its Hallelujah Chorus.

“Whatsoever things are . . . lovely . . . think on these things.” ■



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**Fax (512) 847-8171**  
**email jtrull@wimberley-tx.com**

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