

# ***Walking in the Good Way***

***A Christian Discipleship  
Study Guide  
by Robert Parham***



***Four Study Sessions for Individuals or Groups  
(Revised and Expanded)***

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Baptist Center for Ethics  
P.O. Box 150506  
Nashville, Tennessee 37215-0506  
615-627-7766  
EthicsDaily.com

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Study: Robert Parham, executive director of Baptist Center for Ethics and executive editor of EthicsDaily.com.

Leader's Guide: Zach Dawes Jr., EthicsDaily.com managing editor.  
Editor: Michael Leathers, EthicsDaily.com copy editor.

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# SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS STUDY GUIDE

*Walking in the Good Way: A Christian Discipleship Study Guide* is a four-week study on ethics and discipleship.

This guide can be used by a:

- Bible study class,
- Small group,
- Churchwide seminar,
- Weekend retreat or for
- Individual self-study.

The study is practical and easy to use.

Each session has a study guide for class participants and a leader's guide for the teacher.

The leader's guide engages Scriptures related to the corresponding study guide session. It is designed to assist the group leader in helping the class better understand and apply the material from each session. The questions at the end of each session guide will prompt discussion (and individual reflection).

Participants should read each study guide session ahead of time. The group leader should read both the study and leader's guide in advance, using both to better teach the class.

## INTRODUCTION

Denzel Washington is a "walker" named Eli in the movie *The Book of Eli*. He is a man on a mission and is determined to "stay on the path." He is a pilgrim going west through a destroyed, lawless nation.

In a broken-down town with an outlaw chieftain whose gang is illiterate, a young woman named Solara notes Eli's age and asks what it was like in "the world before."

He replies regretfully: "People had more than they needed. We had no idea what was precious, what wasn't. We threw away things that people kill each other for now."

When the chieftain, a literate man named Carnegie, discovers the next day that Eli has a copy of the Bible, he demands it.

"I need that book ... I'll kill ya'. I'll take the book," threatens Carnegie in a face-off in the middle of the street reminiscent of a Western shootout.

"Why?" asks the unemotional Eli. "Why do you want it?"

"I grew up with it. I know its power. If you read it, then so do you. That's why they burned them all after the war," answers Carnegie.

"Just staying alive is an act of faith. Building this town is an even bigger act of faith. But they don't understand that. None of them do. And I don't have the right words to help them. But the book does," says Carnegie. "Imagine, imagine how different, how righteous this little world could be if we had the right words for our faith."

Carnegie mocks Eli: "It's not right to keep that book hidden away. It's meant to be shared with others."

A few scenes later, when Carnegie's senior officer disparages the book, an angry Carnegie explodes.

"It's a weapon ... If we want to rule more than one small ... town, we have to have it. People will come from all over. They will do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book," spews Carnegie.

He reflectively mutters, "It has happened before."

Later in the movie, at a campfire, Solara asks Eli, "What did you mean when you said, 'It's not just any book'?"

"It is the only one," mumbles Eli. "After the war, people made it their business to find and destroy any that the fires didn't get already. Some people said this was the reason for the war in the first place. Anyway, it's the only one that survived."

Still later, Eli reflects: "All these years, I've been carrying it and reading it every day. I got so caught up with keeping it safe, I forgot to live by what I learned from it ... Do for others more than what you do for yourself."

The Bible is foundational for those who want to walk in the good way. Many of us have multiple copies of the Bible. We carry, read and quote from the Bible. Yet, too often we fail to live by it.

*Walking in the Good Way* is intended to help Christians live faithfully by the Bible in a complex, confusing and conflictual world.

It is designed to help believers, studying individually or in groups, focus on strategic areas of discipleship.

Answering Jesus' call of "follow me" is a beginning rather than an ending. A wide range of discipleship opportunities await believers who are serious about their commitment to Jesus Christ and sensitive to what it means to be a proactive Christian.

If we find our country in critical condition, where is the most appropriate starting point for healing? Perhaps we need look no further than ourselves and our understanding of right and wrong. A strong emphasis in this study is challenging Christians to rethink their understanding of ethics.

How do we deal with issues such as family fragmentation, lack of decency and just plain meanness in relationships?

Thoughtful believers are concerned with biblical ethics, and biblical ethics highlights knowing right and doing right because of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is a matter of the heart.

Doing the right thing long enough and often enough does not transform people into believers. We do not act ourselves into becoming Christians. A spiritual transformation that results in right behavior is necessary.

Added to this equation of transformation is knowing the difference between what you have the right to do and what is the right thing to do. This means Christians act more often than they react.

As you work your way through *Walking in the Good Way*, you will discover how strongly the author urges Christians to be positive instead of negative, proactive instead of reactive. Much too often Christians are known primarily for what they are against instead of what they stand for. Being civil and avoiding the practice of scapegoating are positive steps in the right direction for a proactive believer.

Are you a stumbling block or a stepping stone? In all honesty, probably a mixture of both. While even believers are vulnerable to the “seven deadly sins,” this study demonstrates that by practicing the “seven lively virtues,” stumbling blocks can change into stepping stones. Then, in this world desperately in need of a positive witness, believers can practice Christian citizenship and help transform society.

One of the most perceptive sections in this study guide is “rules of thumb” for citizens who want to be involved politically and, at the same time, bear a positive Christian witness.

*Walking in the Good Way* is easy to read, and the leader’s guide offers a Bible study related to the content of each session. In this study, Baptist Center for Ethics wishes to speak of biblical paths that lead Christians toward becoming more proactive disciples.

## SESSION ONE: RIGHT WALKING

*In those days ... all the people did what was right in their own eyes. – Judges 21:25*

*But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. – James 1:22*

In the movie *Grand Canyon*, Mack takes a shortcut to avoid traffic after a basketball game. His shortcut takes him into a dark, dangerous neighborhood where his luxury car breaks down. In this frightening setting, Mack is confronted by a gang of five teenagers who threaten him. They want his car, and maybe his life.

Then Simon, the tow truck driver, arrives. The teenagers demand respect from him, as well. Simon whispers to the leader of the gang, “Man, the world ain’t supposed to work out like this. I mean, maybe you don’t know that. But this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. That dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything is supposed to be different from what it is.”

This statement, *everything is supposed to be different from what it is*, clearly summarizes the feelings of many Americans and Christians.

We have a good sense of the way things ought to be. And things ought to be much different.

American life is marred by brutality and incivility: violent shootings of innocent people, availability and use of assault weapons, abandoned babies, street people, infidelity in the office, obscene and hostile drivers, children who are convinced they will not live to see their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, and mothers who wash the blood of their children from the sidewalk.

### **A Crisis in Ethics**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with unbridled optimism for many Christians. The Social Gospel movement expected significant moral progress and social reform. A Christian magazine from that period still bears the name *The Christian Century*.

World War I stripped away the optimism about human goodness and social progress. The Nazis reinforced the awareness of human sinfulness and how evil people can become when they are dominated by a “pack” mentality. The Vietnam War taught Americans about government deception.

The beating of civil rights advocates and the national disgrace of Watergate left many disturbed about the moral character of the nation.

The 2008 collapse of the stock market from fraudulent mortgages, the lack of government oversight and unmitigated greed rattled consumer confidence and impoverished many.

Many Americans have become increasingly aware that our nation suffers from a growing crisis of ethics on every front. From church houses to financial houses, from corporate boardrooms to family bedrooms, from the halls of Congress to the fields of sports, ethics continue to erode. Like the three monkeys, we see no ethics, hear no ethics and speak no ethics.

### **Family Fragmentation**

Family units experience ongoing fragmentation. Divorce, out-of-wedlock births and fatherless families are widespread. Yet some scholars, marriage therapists, lawyers and family-court judges advocate a culture of divorce and non-marriage, supporting the goals of the individual’s right to self-actualization and the “good divorce.”

### **Common Indecency**

Civil decency collapses. Some pro-gun owners had a few years ago bumper stickers that said, “First Lincoln, Then Kennedy, Now Clinton.” Radio talk show host G. Gordon Liddy told his listeners to shoot agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the head because they wear bulletproof vests. A 2016 presidential candidate referred to undocumented Mexicans as “rapists.”

Such hateful speech is defended on the grounds that individuals have the right to free speech.

### **Dishonesty in the Marketplace**

The term *business ethics* is viewed by many as an oxymoron, the combination of mutually exclusive concepts. Corporations declare bankruptcy to avoid lawsuits over products that are harmful to consumers. A highly successful businessman tells business school graduate students, “greed is good.”

Simon, the tow truck driver, voices the disappointment many of us feel: “Everything is supposed to be different from what it is.”

The problem is not simply the failure of right behavior. At a more fundamental level, we no longer share a common agreement about what is right and what is wrong. We are like the people of Israel during the days of the Judges who “did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

### **The Ethics Movement**

Although *Grand Canyon* portrays the coarse nature of urban society, it also shows random acts of kindness. Some characters do the right things. A middle-aged mother discovers an abandoned baby in neighborhood bushes and convinces her husband that they should become foster parents. Mack befriends Simon and locates an apartment for Simon’s sister in a safer neighborhood.

Random acts of kindness are part of the ethics movement that flows through our culture. Intentional efforts to emphasize ethics are also present. Business schools require ethics courses. Corporations sponsor ethics seminars. Hospitals establish ethics committees. Professional groups adopt codes of conduct. Christian-centered organizations address ministerial ethics. Public school systems develop character programs.

William Bennett’s *The Book of Virtues* becomes a best-seller. Cal Turner, president of Dollar General Corporation, endowed Vanderbilt University with a \$4 million gift to foster individual moral integrity in professional practices.

### **Ethics: A Practical Definition**

Many people have a general idea of the meaning of ethics, but they have a difficult time verbalizing the concept. Many ethics books do not include a practical definition of ethics, and the books that define ethics generally do so in ways that are hardly usable outside graduate school seminar rooms.

**Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have the right to do and what is the right thing to do. – Former Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart**

## **Ethics from a Biblical Perspective**

The word *ethics* does not appear in the Bible. Yet the core message of the Bible is about human beings knowing and doing the will of God for their own good and the welfare of their neighbors. Biblical ethics, then, is about knowing and doing the will of God according to Scripture.

### **Knowing Right**

The Hebrew concept of *to know* is multi-dimensional. It encompasses head knowledge about God's law. In addition, to know God means to have an intimate relationship of deep loyalty and enduring commitment to God. To know God is to obey statutes, to pursue righteousness and to seek justice.

***Knowing the Difference Between Right and Wrong.*** The biblical story of Adam and Eve deals with knowing the difference between right and wrong. Adam and Eve are not to eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17). But the serpent tempts Eve with a promise: "When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).

Adam and Eve break God's command. Like Adam and Eve, we often violate God's direct instructions. We do what we want.

The Bible, however, calls us to know the difference between right and wrong, as well as to recognize the difference between what we have the right to do and what is the right thing to do.

For example, Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that although some activities are morally acceptable, they may cause harm to other Christians. "Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble" (Romans 14:20-21). Paul was concerned about recognizing the difference between rights and responsible actions.

Recognizing this difference takes place most effectively when we have a framework for moral decision-making. Making good decisions requires:

- Recognizing the obstacles to decision-making – such as being unaware of blind spots, refusing to ask for help and fearing an imperfect decision.
- Knowing how the Bible applies today – including identifying the Bible's purpose and using the entire Bible.
- Being aware of factors that go into a decision – such as understanding a particular situation, the values under consideration, the character of those involved and the consequences of the decision.

- Putting together a framework that incorporates our relationship with Christ, the overall biblical witness, Christian heritage and the church.

These requirements are addressed more fully in *Standing at the Crossroads*, a companion study on Christian decision-making by Ray Higgins.

Making this journey is a noble activity. The Bible says the tribe of Issachar was identified as “those who had an understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

***Knowing God’s Laws via Moral Education.***

Knowledge of God’s laws through moral education is one of the themes running through the history of Israel. The introduction to the Ten Commandments begins, “You shall learn them” (Deuteronomy 5:1). Proverbs 1:5 says, “Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill.” The prophet Isaiah calls the people to “learn to do good” (Isaiah 1:17). Jeremiah instructs: “Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

The *shema* is about knowing God and teaching God’s ways: “Here, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

“Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Moral education is fundamental to building good character in children and strengthening good decision-making among adults so that all might learn to *walk in the good way*.

***Knowing God and a Better Society.***

Knowing God and following God’s moral code lead to a better society. Conversely, the prophet Hosea says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” about God (Hosea 4:6). He observes that because “no knowledge of God” exists in the land (Hosea 4:1), the consequences are disastrous. Sinful behavior permeates society. Swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery become commonplace (Hosea 4:1-3). People do what they think is right.

***Knowing God and Moral Responsibility.***

Knowing God leads to moral responsibility. When God asks Cain about his brother, Cain replies, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Having murdered his brother, Cain denies any knowledge of Abel and, thereby, claims no responsibility for him.

The story of Cain and Abel ties together knowledge and responsibility.

Lloyd John Ogilvie, a former chaplain for the U.S. Senate, said in *The Communicator's Commentary* that knowing God “calls forth our integrity. ... Integrity is ... consistency between what we believe and what we do.”

### **Doing Right**

Ethics is about doing the right thing. In fact, *halacha* (rabbinic interpretation of the Law) is a concept in Judaism that relates to our understanding of ethics. The root meaning of *halacha* is walk or behavior. Ethics is about how we ought to walk. Ethics is about right walking.

**Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary. – Saint Francis of Assisi**

Many people draw a distinction between *talk* and *walk*. Athletes recognize that “trash talk” is no substitute for real skills in the game. Parents tell their children that actions speak louder than words. Church members sometimes say they would rather see a sermon than hear one.

Christians know that talk is cheap, and that “Christian talk” is sometimes much different than the Christian walk. The tension between talk and walk surfaces on two levels.

***Walking the Talk.*** At one level, all of us fail to live out what we say we believe. We say one thing but do another. We are hypocritical.

Martin Luther King Jr. recognized this human failing in his book, *Strength to Love*. He wrote: “One of the greatest tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. ... How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds! We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism.”

***Walking in Obedience.*** At another level, many Christians make the content of their belief a priority over their behavior. Their actions demonstrate that they feel what they believe is more important than the way they behave.

The German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writes that Christians should not make faith primary and obedience secondary, or obedience primary and belief secondary.

Bonhoeffer, who was executed for his resistance against the Third Reich, focuses on the “indissoluble unity” of faith and obedience. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he notes that “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”

**Walking in Faith and Action.** Christians are required to walk their talk and resist the temptation of making creeds more important than deeds. Walking is faith in action!

All of us understand the importance of words. Contrary to the childhood expression, words do hurt. Words can break a person's spirit as surely as sticks and stones can break a person's bones. Words can also build and bless a person's spirit. Although words have great power to bless and to hurt, a talking-only faith is inadequate. The talk is to be highlighted and strengthened by the walk.

**The righteous walk in integrity; happy are the children who follow them. – Proverbs 20:7**

James urges Christians to be “doers who act” (James 1:25). We are to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22).

When John the Baptist preaches his fiery message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, his listeners realize the need for action.

They ask, “What then should we do?” John answers, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (Luke 3:11). He calls for an action-oriented faith.

**Walking after Jesus.** Biblical ethics is about knowing and doing the will of God. For our ethics to be clearly and distinctly Christian, we must focus on Jesus Christ. We must ask, “What does Jesus want me to do?”

Ray Higgins discusses this question in *Standing at the Crossroads*. He observes: “Although the question is a good one, it does not mean that God expects us to do exactly what Jesus did. If that was true, then Christians would have to remain single, not own any property and not have a job other than to be full-time gospel ministers.”

Two of Jesus' most important words are “Follow me.” Jesus calls Peter when Peter is fishing in the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:17) and again after his resurrection when Peter and other disciples are fishing (John 21:22).

Jesus tells would-be followers to drop what they are doing and follow him. Jesus calls for an unconditional obedience expressed in action. Commitments to fishing, burying the dead and saying goodbye to family are secondary obligations (Luke 9:57-62).

Jesus calls his followers to walk the second mile (Matthew 5:41), to walk with an accuser to court (Matthew 5:25-26), to walk through the narrow gate (Luke 18:24-25) and to walk with his cross (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus says, “Walk after me.” But he gives us the freedom and responsibility to determine the walking shoes we wear, the pace we set and the route we take.

## **SESSION TWO: WEARING NEW SHOES**

*Of [the tribe of] Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. – 1 Chronicles 12:32*

*You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world. – Matthew 5:13, 14*

A *paradigm* refers to a theory, model, frame of reference or way of seeing the world. How we understand reality is determined by our paradigm. Our paradigm can help us to see the world accurately and interact appropriately or cause us to walk in darkness and stumble into mistakes.

A paradigm shift happens when an old way of thinking changes and a new way of thinking emerges. Copernicus caused a paradigm shift when he observed that the sun instead of the earth was the center of the universe. Columbus created a paradigm shift when he successfully sailed west and returned. A change in paradigm causes turbulence.

American Christianity is undergoing a paradigm shift. The dominant *Christian* culture is fading and is being replaced by a pluralistic culture where the Christian faith is one of several belief systems and centers of power.

The Christian response to the culture shift varies. Some deny the shift. Others condemn the shift. Still others argue that the shift can be reversed if only the church does more evangelism. And still others celebrate the change, saying it will let the church be the church.

Another response is the Issachar option. The tribe of Issachar, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, “had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). The Issachar option means grasping accurately the present situation and offering a good course of action.

We live in a time when everything is changing. Belief systems are becoming either more tolerant and eclectic or more intolerant and exclusive. Denominational loyalties are weakening. Political alignments are eroding dramatically. The nation is graying, while it moves from being predominantly an Anglo-nation to a people-of-color nation.

During this period of “flux and fragmentation,” we need to rethink the way we do ethics and how we can *walk in the good way*. We ought to be positive instead of negative, proactive instead of reactive, responsible for others instead of always asserting our rights, and civil with our critiques instead of blaming others.

## Positive Instead of Negative

In an episode of the almost-forgotten TV show *Taxi*, Alex confesses, “I’m not ethical. I’m chicken. I don’t lie because I’m afraid I’ll get caught.” Alex’s moral code reflects a negative approach. He is *against* lying instead of *for* truth telling.

## Anti-Everything Christians

In recent decades, American Christians have been caricatured as taking an anti-everything stance. We are known as the “against people,” the “negative voices.”

We are anti-alcohol, anti-gambling, anti-pornography, anti-hunger, anti-racism and anti-pollution. Many are anti-abortion, some anti-war.

We are known for what we are *against*, instead of what we are *for*. Can you name 10 things that Christians stand *for*? Difficult, isn’t it? We are more inclined to think in terms of what we are against than what we stand for.

## Positive Christians

Rather than be anti-everything, we should reframe our approach by seeking ways to be positive: Pro-health, not anti-alcohol; pro-women and pro-people of color, not anti-discrimination; pro-poor people, not anti-poverty; pro-peacemaking, not anti-war; pro-environment, not anti-pollution and anti-business; pro-human sexuality, not anti-sex; pro-character development, not anti-moral failure.

Why should we shift our way of thinking from an *anti-posture* to a *pro-posture*? In a time of dramatic cultural change, Christians will give a stronger witness and receive a better hearing by speaking and acting in new ways. Since we are caricatured as being against everything, our message has become predictable, tired and ignored.

To walk right is to reframe issues in a positive way so we will gain a new hearing. The first step is to be more positive.

### **Proactive Instead of Reactive**

Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan in Nebraska, Larry Trapp, harassed Michael Weisser, a Jewish rabbi, with hateful phone calls and letters.

Weisser initially reacted with fear. Then he retaliated by leaving friendly messages on Trapp's answering machine. One day, Trapp angrily picked up his phone while Weisser was leaving a message. Weisser calmly offered Trapp, who had trouble getting around, a ride to the grocery store. Weisser's kindness changed Trapp's tone, and some of his anger diminished.

Trapp later called Weisser to ask for help with his hateful behavior. When Weisser and his wife, Julie, ate dinner in Trapp's home, they gave him a silver ring as a peace offering. He burst into tears.

A *Time* magazine article reported that Trapp removed his two swastika rings, one on each hand, and gave them to Julie, saying, "I want you to take these rings; they just symbolize hatred and evil, and I want them out of my life."

Weisser's initiative of kindness, even though born in anger, changed the relationship between a Jewish rabbi and a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon.

### **Reactive Christians**

Too often, Christians are reactive. We let others determine our attitudes. Technology defines our ethics. Culture determines the way we express our faith. Social movements drive our activities.

When we are reactive, we let people and circumstances set our agenda. We forfeit our ability to set the agenda and become reactionaries instead of proactive leaders.

### **Inactive Christians**

Christians often avoid getting involved. We are too indifferent. Like the first two men in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), we simply walk past human needs.

*The Book of Common Prayer* has a confession about inaction: "We confess that we have sinned against thee ... by what we have left undone."

## Proactive Christians

Christians are called to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). Salt and light permeate their environments. As salt and light, we make things happen rather than being inactive or only reactive!

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, indicates that proactivity has two dimensions: responsibility (or *response-able*) and initiative.

He writes, "Taking the initiative does not mean being pushy, obnoxious or aggressive. It does mean recognizing our responsibility to make things happen."

Jesus is our best example of proactivity. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) uses vivid images to describe the initiative to alter relationships: walk the second mile; walk with an accuser to court to seek reconciliation; do to others what you want them to do to you.

Jesus models a proactive lifestyle when he feeds the 5,000, establishes a relationship with Zacchaeus, heals the lame and restores sight to the blind. Jesus makes things happen.

Christians would do well to understand the signs of the times and offer proactive solutions to problems.

## Responsibilities Instead of Rights

Gordon Bonneyman, a staff attorney with the Tennessee Justice Center and 2003 Tennessean of the Year, has worked throughout his career to advance the rights of those without a voice.

Early in his 23-year career with Legal Services of Middle Tennessee, he advanced the rights of a patient in a mental institution. His client, a paranoid schizophrenic, had been placed in a state-run hospital without a hearing. His client's rights had been violated. His client wanted to be released.

Bonneyman charged into battle. He argued his case before the Tennessee Supreme Court. The court's chief justice acknowledged the man's rights had been violated. The judge said to Bonneyman, "Young man, I think you are foolish to ignore the realities of this person's circumstances. But you've made your point; he's entitled to it as a matter of law, so I'm ordering him released."

Delighted with the court's decision, Bonneyman rushed to his client's hospital. "Al, great news! You're out! Here it is! Here's the paper signed by the chief justice of the State Supreme Court! You're outta here!"

Al replied, “What about the flies?” “Flies?” Bonneyman asked. “Did you do anything about the flies. The flies in my head,” said Al.

Bonneyman learned the difference between seeking rights for the disadvantaged and being responsible for them.

### **Living in a Rights-Centered Culture**

America is a rights-centered culture. We feel more comfortable with declarations about our rights than acknowledgments about our responsibilities.

Public debates center on the right-to-life and the right-to-die, women’s rights, smoker’s rights, civil rights, gay rights, animal rights and the right to health care.

**The West has finally achieved the rights of man, and even to excess, but man’s sense of responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer.  
– Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn**

Some rights are enshrined in our constitutional system: the right to worship, the right to free speech, the right to assembly and the right to bear arms. We Americans believe that rights are good.

### **Reasserting Responsibility**

The problem in our culture is not the absence of rights but the constant assertion of rights over responsibilities. Sometimes we claim rights even though the pursuit of rights harms others.

The Apostle Paul understands this danger: “I know ... that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:14-15). Paul adds, “It is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat” (Romans 14:20).

Paul’s ethics recognized the right of a believer to consume any food group *and* a believer’s responsibility to avoid harming other believers. Likewise, contemporary Christians must balance personal and corporate rights with the responsibility to pursue the welfare of neighbors.

Olga, a leader of Christian women in Ukraine, was asked if her title was president. She said such a title was too presumptuous. She was asked if her title was director. No, she said, men would not like such a title for a woman. Then, Olga said that her title was “the first responsible.”

Indeed, Christians are called to be responsible.

## Civil Critique Instead of Scapegoating

Government leaders, radio talk-show hosts and the rest of us must draw a line between scapegoating and civil critique in debates over controversial issues. Scapegoating rips the national fabric, while civil critique expresses disagreement respectfully.

The idea of scapegoating originates in the biblical ritual called the Day of Atonement. According to Leviticus 16:7-22, two goats are selected. One goat is sacrificed. The other is held while the chief priest ceremonally places the collective sins of the people on its head. The goat is then driven into the wilderness, symbolically carrying off the sins of the people.

We no longer force goats to carry the blame for social ills and moral sins. Instead, we self-righteously blame others, placing the burden for wrong-doing on individuals and groups.

Liberals blame radio talk-show hosts for flaming the widespread hatred in our country. Radio hosts blame liberals for all our national woes. Conservative Christians blame the “liberal media” and “Hollywood elites” for increasing out-of-wedlock births and teenage pregnancy. The “liberal elites” blame conservative Christians for social bigotry and injustice. Scapegoating has become very popular in contemporary culture.

## Scapegoating

Scapegoating is wrong. It resolves no disputes and solves no social ills. It is reckless and fuels hate speech. Scapegoating is destructive for three reasons:

- Scapegoaters pridefully see themselves as faultless. Scapegoaters are so blind that they fail to see the contribution they make to social ills. Their pride is destructive (Proverbs 16:18).
- Scapegoaters justify themselves by claiming that they stand for good against evil, even though evil results from their words and deeds.
- Scapegoaters lack genuine care for others, even though they accuse others of lacking care.

Scapegoating can be seen today in those who refuse to accept Syrian refugees, fearing and blaming them for Islamic terrorist attacks. It can be witnessed in the anti-immigration rhetoric when undocumented immigrants are accused of using up government benefits, failing to pay taxes and taking jobs away from citizens. In reality, refugees and immigrants do not drain government services, they do pay taxes and they take on jobs many citizens refuse to do.

**It is time, in the West,  
to defend not so  
much human rights  
as human obligations.  
– A. Solzhenitsyn**

## Civil Critique

Civil critique expresses disagreement respectfully. Civil critique often resolves disputes and offers a course of action to solve social ills.

Civil critique is constructive and responsible speech. It allows us to judge the words and actions of others, but only with humility, prudence and empathy.

Civil critique happens when we humbly acknowledge our own responsibility for social failures, injustice and hatred. We are all in this mess together.

Simon, the tow-truck driver from the film *Grand Canyon*, could say of all of us, *“Everything is supposed to be different from what it is, and it is our fault for the way things are.”*

Civil critique occurs when we recognize that even our best efforts to do good may cause harm. Our own self-judgment leads us away from the temptation of self-justification that energizes scapegoating.

Civil critique is when we genuinely care about the opinions and feelings of those with whom we vigorously disagree. Empathy means we listen carefully and refuse to make demons of our adversaries.

The Sermon on the Mount offers wise insights in this era of scapegoating. Jesus warns against the blind leading the blind when he says, “Get the plank out of your own eye” (see Matthew 7:1-5). Jesus urges us to engage in thorough self-judgment before we evaluate others.

Christians must lead the way in our society by drawing a line between scapegoating and civil critique. We must stop scapegoating and start judging the words and deeds of others with civility.

## **SESSION THREE: STUMBLING BLOCKS AND STEPPING STONES**

*What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,  
and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the  
flesh. – Galatians 5:17*

*Seek good and not evil, that you may live ... Hate  
evil and love good, and establish justice in the  
gate. – Amos 5:14, 15*

A young Arab girl in the Baptist school in Beirut asks a missionary, "Are you a Christian?" Leola Ragland answers, "I love Jesus." The girl sighed with relief, "Oh, good. I was afraid maybe you were one of those murdering Christians."

What kind of Christians are we? Are we murdering Christians? Do we display the name but bear a false witness to Christ by our behavior? Do we claim the name and walk as "little Christs"? To walk in the good way means we are stepping stones not stumbling blocks.

### **People and Character**

Our core character is shaped by personal traits, molded by past experiences and tested by our circumstances.

Positive qualities of character are called virtues. Virtues build good character and construct a better society. Vices are the opposite. Vices are negative qualities of character. Vices are destructive and harmful obstacles to good behavior. Vices corrupt our personal character and tear down society.

Talking with an older man in *Killer Angels*, a novel by Michael Shaara about the Battle of Gettysburg, Joshua Chamberlain quotes Shakespeare: "What a piece of work is man ... in action how like an angel!" The elderly man replies, "Well, boy, if he's an angel, he's sure a murdering angel."

This story reflects two competing views about humanity. One praises the goodness of humanity. The other sees human beings as fallen, corrupt creatures of evil.

Virtues strengthen human character. Vices tear down human character.

### **The Bible and Moral Character**

The Bible focuses on moral character. Numerous stories tell about character, including Abraham's misrepresentation of his wife Sarah, Laban's deception of Jacob, David's courage and Solomon's wisdom. The Bible offers numerous lists of virtuous and sinful behaviors. The works of the flesh contrast sharply with the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-26).

***The Right Heart.*** Samuel's search for Saul's successor is a biblical story about character. Samuel goes to Jesse's family, searching for the next king.

When Samuel sees Jesse's oldest son, he thinks surely this striking, tall man is God's chosen vessel. But the Lord says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

As the story unfolds, six other sons parade past Samuel. None is selected. David, the eighth and youngest son, is chosen because his *heart* is right.

***The Battle between Flesh and Spirit.*** Right character is a major concern in the New Testament with its pictures of our two natures waging war with one another.

Concerning this conflict between the sinful nature and the Spirit-directed nature, Paul writes, "What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh" (Galatians 5:17). He talks about "stripping off the old self" and clothing ourselves with "the new self" (Colossians 3:9-10). He urges Christians to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

The Bible recognizes the struggle between good and evil, right and wrong. Sin leads us into destructive deeds. Sinful behavior surfaces in "good" people and distorts their character. Grace forgives our sins and gives us the power to be and do good.

### **Contemporary Culture and Character**

Our culture circles the character issue. Many public schools launched "character counts" programs to teach about values such as respect for others, hard work, truth telling and honesty. The moral character of candidates has been a key issue in presidential campaigns. Leadership books like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* underscore the centrality of character.

### **Stumbling Blocks: Two Vices**

The Bible defines sin in a variety of ways: failure, error, perversity, injustice and lawlessness. Biblical images for sin include missing the mark, straying from the fold, stiff neck, hard heart and blindness. Biblical stories about sin underscore that sin is against God, harmful to the self and damaging to neighbor. Such vices are hindrances to walking in the good way.

Struggling to live without being tainted by the world and bodily appetites, some early Christians tried to escape by becoming hermits in the Egyptian desert.

The term *monk* was later used for those who lived together but apart from the world in monasteries. Here, the Christian concept of vices arose. Monk Evagrius compiled a list of eight primary sins that beset his community. Later, Pope Gregory the Great revised the list to seven and applied them to all Christendom.

*Vices* and *sins* are interchangeable terms for deadly consequences. Christian writers refer to the seven chief vices as the seven deadly sins. The first five are sins of the spirit – pride, sloth, envy, anger and greed. The next two are sins of the flesh – lust and gluttony. These seven sins twist our thoughts and deeds in destructive ways. Knowledge about vices alerts us to those qualities of character that stunt our moral growth and cripple our society.

### **Pride**

What animal comes to mind when you think of the word *pride*? A strutting peacock; a camel with his nose in the air; a swaggering lion? These animals convey the idea of self-conceit, inordinate self-worth and complete dominance.

**Pride is the “divine pretensions of finite creatures.” – Reinhold Niebuhr**

What is the most popular Bible verse about *pride*? The answer is easy, Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goes before destruction; a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Pride is that human trait that “unrealistically denies our inherent sinfulness and imperfection,” noted M. Scott Peck in *People of the Lie*. It blocks our ability to see our own inadequacies, our total dependence upon God and our interdependence with others. Pride is a destructive illusion about our self-worth and independence.

Pride cannot be healthy. Healthy self-confidence is the satisfaction derived from work well done or the parental pleasure felt at the success of a child. Pride is different from healthy self-confidence.

***Spiritual Pride.*** Spiritually, pride rules when we refuse to accept our right relationship with God. When Adam and Eve seek the same knowledge as God’s, they attempt to change the relationship with God. When the people build the Tower of Babel, they want to become God. In each case, pride is a form of idolatry.

Western Christianity has recognized pride as the tap root of all sin. Augustine said, “Pride is the beginning of sin.” C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “The essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness ... are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil.”

**Individual Pride.** Greek mythology has a story about a handsome young man who rejected all the young maidens. He was totally in love with himself. One day Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool. Transfixed by his own beauty, he fell into the water and drowned.

From this myth comes the idea of narcissism or distorted self-love. Narcissism is a preoccupation with one's self to the point where destructive habits occur.

**Group Pride.** Nations, tribes and gangs are driven by a deep desire for power over others rooted in their own exalted and distorted sense of worth. Recall that Greeks called non-Greeks "barbarians." Germans thought they were the master race. Some Americans called Vietnamese "gooks." Navahos used a term for themselves that means *the people*. The ethnic cleansing conflicts in Rwanda and the former nation of Yugoslavia are gruesome examples of the evil inherent in group pride. The conflicts in South Sudan are rooted in ethnic or tribal pride. The evil deeds of ISIS against Christians and other Muslims represent religious group pride. Group pride expresses itself in multiple forms.

## Sloth

If a strutting peacock characterizes pride, what animal best resembles sloth? A sleepy brown bear emerging from hibernation; a slow moving South American animal that hangs upside down?

The Bible contrasts sloth with industriousness in Proverbs 6:6-9: "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer and gathers its sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O lazybones?"

Paul speaks in support of work in offering the idea of "no work, no eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13).

While the word *sloth* is generally associated with laziness, it literally means "no caring." Sloth is apathy, indifference or inaction. Theologically, sloth is the refusal to be responsible.

**It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. – Dorothy Sayers**

**Laziness.** One of the clearest images of sloth is found in the Bible. “The lazy person buries a hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to the mouth” (Proverbs 19:24). Can you imagine people too lazy to lift food to their mouths?

Sloth is well-represented in our “couch potato” society by those who express their religious convictions by only watching religion programs and parents who disregard the TV viewing habits of their children. Killing time, making excuses and being bored are examples of sloth.

**Moral Indifference.** Sloth, however, is a deeper moral problem than laziness. Sloth is moral indifference. Sloth is our unwillingness to inconvenience ourselves for our neighbors. Ethicist Dennis Ford writes in *Sins of Indifference* that sloth “is the failure to see, to acknowledge or to act on behalf of others.” It is the sin of omission.

### Stepping Stones: Four Virtues

If vices are deadly, virtues are lively. Virtues build up life. Virtues are traits for the kingdom of God.

This section looks at the four *cardinal virtues* of prudence, temperance, courage and justice. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis points out that the word *cardinal* is derived from a Latin word that means “the hinge of a door.” These virtues, then, are pivotal. All other virtues depend upon them.

### Prudence

Prudence means “practical common sense,” according to C.S. Lewis. Prudent behavior begins when we think about doing the right thing and the likely consequences of our actions. Prudence concerns wisdom and conduct.

**The Bible and Prudence.** In *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga noted, “In the biblical view, the wise are righteous and the righteous are wise.”

The book of Proverbs ties wisdom with good actions and protective behavior: “For the Lord ... stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice” (Proverbs 2:6-8). The New Testament underscores discernment's importance: be wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16) and build a house on a rock (Matthew 7:24-27).

**Discernment and Action.** “Don't just sit there. Do something,” is an often heard slogan. “Don't just do something. First, sit and think” is much better. Prudence means engaging in serious thinking before acting. Many Christians escape serious thought with the confession, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

**Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a destiny.**  
– George Munzing

Such spiritual immaturity explains in part why Christians often are on the wrong side of so many issues.

But prudence is not thinking only. Prudent people avoid the trap of the “paralysis of analysis,” where all that is done is analysis without action. Prudence is about wise action.

**And it isn't the thing you do, dear, it's the thing you leave undone, which give you a bit of a heartache at the setting of the sun. – Margaret E. Sangster**

### **Temperance**

Another virtue is temperance. Unfortunately, this virtue is often confused with the complete abstinence from the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Temperance actually refers to moderation in behavior or the habit of restraining oneself. A temperate person goes the correct distance and no further.

**The Bible and Temperance.** Temperance, or self-control, is the last fruit of the Spirit in Paul's list in his letter to the Galatians. The King James Version uses the word *temperance*, while the New Revised Standard Version uses the word *self-control*. The Greek word here is used only in two other New Testament passages and refers to that inner mastery of one's desires and impulses.

**Temperance and Moderation.** Temperance is not popular. Our society is geared toward excess: extra value meals, double portions and two-for-one sales. We have an ethic of “shop until you drop.” We celebrate those who work hard *and* play to excess. Temperate people enjoy their life without being destroyed by over-indulgences.

### **Courage**

At first, Johtje Vos and her husband kept a suitcase for a Jewish friend during the Nazi occupation of Holland. Then they agreed to care for a Jewish child. Much later, Johtje explained their action, “That's not heroic. That's just doing what your heart tells you to do at the moment.”

Have you noticed that we often associate courage with the heart? We say courageous people like the Vos family have brave hearts. Conversely, we identify cowardice with a failure of heart. This association results from the fact that the Latin root word for courage means *heart*.

**The Bible and Courage.** During periods of leadership transition in the Old Testament, the phrase “be strong and of good courage” is repeated. Moses gives this advice to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:6). David instructs Solomon with the same phrase (1 Chronicles 22:13). Leaders need boldness and bravery when facing opposition. They also need such inner strength to remain faithful and obedient to God's commands.

**Courage in Four Spheres.** One sphere is physical courage. Fortitude and strength are words used to describe behavior in the presence of danger. One example of such fortitude was Oskar Schindler, the real-life hero in Steven Spielberg's movie, *Schindler's List*, who risked life and fortune to rescue more than 1,000 Jews.

Another example is the largely unknown story of what Christian missionaries did in 1966 during a time of genocide in Nigeria when tens of thousands of Igbos were killed with machetes and crude instruments. Missionaries hid the targeted Igbo people, drove some to safety, cared for the wounded, made arrangements to airlift hundreds to their original homeland, and met secretly with the government to work on evacuation plans. These missionaries showed physical courage.

A second sphere is moral courage, such as Joseph's "No" to Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). This requires an inner determination to walk in the good way even when no one else will know.

Social courage is a third sphere. Children who resist peer pressure demonstrate social bravery. Parents who live beneath their means resist the American culture of debt and materialism. A fourth sphere is existential courage: strength of character to strive after God's calling. Courage is a virtue enabling us to manage fears and to walk in the good way.

## Justice

The American symbol for justice is a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales. The blindfold keeps her from seeing the defendant so that she is able to render judgment without prejudice.

Another symbol for justice is a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales with one hand and lifting part of the blindfold with the other hand. She is peeking through the blindfold. She can see who stands before her. She renders judgment in favor of the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed.

Which symbol do you favor for our society? Before which version of justice would you prefer to stand? Is blind justice or sighted justice closer to the biblical concept of justice?

**The Bible and Justice.** The Bible writers identify justice as a core characteristic of God. Isaiah observes, "the Lord is a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:18) and quotes God, "For I the Lord love justice" (Isaiah 61:8; see Psalm 33:5 and 37:28).

Not only does God love justice, God also executes justice. The Psalmist says, "The Lord works ... justice for all who are oppressed" (Psalm 103:6) and "the Lord maintains the cause of the needy and executes justice for the poor" (Psalm 140:12). Out of God's love and work for justice comes God's expectation that his people will do justice.

In the years of Israel's formation, Moses tells them what God wants: "You must not distort justice. ... Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:19-20).

The Hebrew prophets condemn the exploitation of the poor, dishonest business practices and bribery of officials (Amos 5:10-12; 8:4-6). They warn that harsh judgment falls upon a society riddled with injustice (Amos 2:6-8). The prophets call the people to "seek good" and to "establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:14-15).

**Justice and Fairness.** Christians should pursue justice on two levels.

First, we must seek to be justice-people – what some call personal righteousness, not to be confused with self-righteousness. Personal righteousness means we strive toward purity of thought and inner motive, as well as honest, truthful and respectful relationships with others.

Second, we must advance social justice. We seek to walk in the good way by building a society that protects those without adequate legal representation, meets the nutritional needs of the very young and old, houses the homeless and ensures equality of employment regardless of gender, race and age. The true greatness of a nation is based on how we treat others, especially those at the dawn and the sunset of life.

## SESSION FOUR: PATHS FOR RIGHT WALKING CITIZENS

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds – Romans 12:2a*

*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened – Matthew 13:33*

Years after serving a prison sentence for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, Charles Colson described his pre-Christian convictions when he served in the White House in his book, *Against the Night*.

"I really believed that people could be changed by government being changed," he writes. "But when I became a Christian, I gained a new perspective on the actual influence political structures have over the course of history. I began to see that societies are changed only when people are changed, not the other way around."

Many Christians, Colson observes, suffer from the illusion that "political structures can cure all our ills." These Christians ignore two truths: "First, the solutions to all human ills do not lie in political structures; and second, it is impossible to effect genuine political reform solely through legislation."

Instead of withdrawing from political involvement, however, Colson calls Christians to recognize that the lordship of Christ extends to every area of life, including politics. He says, “We cannot abandon the political arena because progress there is elusive, excruciatingly slow or even nonexistent. We must dig in for the long haul.” The critical question is: How do we dig in?

## **Digging in Through Well Worn Paths for Christian Citizenship**

One of the foremost challenges facing Christians in a highly pluralistic culture is finding ways to express our strongly held moral convictions in a constructive way. How do we witness to our values without degrading those with different values? How do we act as Christian citizens in a rapidly changing culture? How do we dig in?

This session explores different options for digging in to change our society and recommends specific options for Christian involvement in politics as believers seek to walk in the good way.

### **Withdrawal**

One option is *withdrawal* from society. Advocates of *withdrawal* support their beliefs and values by forming “islands of holiness in a sea of sin.” They see themselves as separatists or resident aliens. They form a “colony of heaven” (Philippians 3:20).

**Historical Examples.** The earliest separatists were some New Testament Christians who were persecuted by the Roman Empire (see Revelation 13). In their view, the government was completely pagan, a source of beastly evil. Not surprisingly, they avoided the state.

Later Christians, called hermits, escaped from the sinful world by fleeing into the Egyptian desert. They fasted, prayed and pursued rigorous self-denial. Hermits eventually formed communities but still remained apart from the world. Males lived in monasteries, and females resided in nunneries.

Centuries later, the Anabaptists sought to live away from the world. They wanted to live in complete obedience to the law of Christ, especially as defined in the Sermon on the Mount, and to avoid the compromises that accompanied life within Lutheran and Catholic societies. Anabaptists formed societies patterned after their interpretation of the New Testament.

A 20<sup>th</sup> century representative of this option is Clarence Jordan. After completing his doctorate in New Testament Greek at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Jordan founded Koinonia Farm, an interracial, agrarian community in southwest Georgia.

Jordan and others modeled a lifestyle based on what they believed the New Testament taught. Private gain was discouraged, racial reconciliation was sought and a prophetic critique was offered about the surrounding society.

***Distinctive Characteristics.*** The withdrawal option has two distinctive marks. (1) These Christians are Christ-centered. They speak to social issues, as Jesus did, but they never try to manage the world or use government to accomplish their goals. (2) They form counter-communities that speak against and model alternative values to the prevailing culture.

The withdrawal option is quite attractive to those who see society as hostile and find the concept of compromise unwholesome for Christians. Theologically, such an approach limits the lordship of Christ and sees some segments of society as unredeemable. Sociologically, some advocates of withdrawal are frozen in the past.

### **Theocracy**

At the other extreme is *theocracy*, or government by God. Theocrats believe that society ought to be governed by divine law based upon their own unerring interpretation of the Bible. They want to Christianize society and use the state to fulfill the mission of the church. They do not permit political dissent and theological disagreement.

***Historical Examples.*** The earliest example of a theocracy was Old Testament society. God established a covenant with the people of Israel and gave them divine commandments, codes for behavior and frequent directives through prophets and priests. Eventually, Israel's kings were anointed by God's prophets. The chosen people were ruled by a theocratic form of government until the exile from the Promised Land.

The first example of a Christian theocracy emerged in 312 AD when a Roman general named Constantine won a decisive battle for control of the Roman Empire. The night before the battle, Constantine saw in a dream the first letters in the name *Christ* and heard the words, "By this you will conquer." He had a Christian symbol painted on the helmets and shields of his soldiers. Victory convinced him that the Christian God had blessed him.

Christianity was established as the official state religion. Christian persecution ended. Work on Sunday halted. Clergy received special treatment and gifts. Christianity spread due to state support.

Although church and state were a web, society did not enter a golden era. Corruption was widespread. Holy wars were common. State Christians persecuted dissenting Christians and non-Christians. Europe entered a period known as the Dark Ages.

The Protestant Reformation divided the Holy Roman Empire. Nevertheless, church and state remained wed. Martin Luther advocated the idea of a Lutheran state. John Calvin established a Christian government in Geneva. American Puritans instituted their own brand of religion through the channels of government. Only the Anabaptists favored the separation of church and state.

### ***Distinctive Characteristics.***

Theocratic movements exist in the U.S. today. One is Christian Reconstructionism, which believes that American society ought to be ruled forcefully by their interpretation of Old Testament laws. Reconstructionists virtually ignore the Sermon on the Mount. They oppose church-state separation and believe deeply that the Bible contains *the* blueprint for government.

Another theocratic effort is less strident and obvious. Elements within the so-called religious right are using the electoral process to gain control of one political party for the sake of capturing the presidency, the Congress and the judicial system to impose their moral agenda on the nation. They want to moralize America through the state instead of through the church and religious institutions.

The theocratic option appeals to those who mistakenly believe that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and that the nation's deep social problems began when "God was ejected from the public school system." Theologically, theocrats ignore their own sinful captivity to culture, reduce the biblical ethics agenda to a few issues and assign too much hope to government redemption.

### **Transformation**

The best of historic Baptists and mainline Protestants are transformationists. They see government as a God-ordained, yet fallen, institution that is capable of good and evil. They urge Christians to seek constant reformation of government and culture for the sake of the common good.

***The Bible.*** Transformationists recognize that the Bible gives us no blueprint for government. The Bible ordains no economic order, domestic agenda or foreign policy. The Bible does give us guidelines for being good citizens. Biblical principles tell us to:

- Respect our leaders (Romans 13:7)
- Pray for government leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-3)
- Pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)
- Pay taxes (Romans 13:6)
- Defend the weak (Isaiah 1:16-17)
- Seek fairness in marketplaces (Amos 5:11-15)

The biblical images of salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) highlight our transformation of society by our presence in society.

A noted Christian minister observed that while the Bible calls us to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), human beings must use their most prudent judgments and faithful efforts to work out the irrigation system!

The Bible gives us broad outlines for good citizenship. But human beings must work out the details with full awareness that pride, sloth and greed cause us to stumble in the public arena. Nevertheless, we press forward with courage, prudence, temperance and justice.

**Lordship of Christ.** Transformationists believe that Jesus is truly Lord of all, including politics and culture. Christians must work in every arena, in spite of the pitfalls and compromises that often accompany political involvement. Separation from society is unacceptable if it means escapism from the sweaty, risky work of politics. Conquest of society is wrong, if it tears down the wall of separation and uses the arm of the government to override freedom of conscience, dictate belief and advance injustice.

**The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world. – Reinhold Niebuhr**

## **Rules of Thumb for Politically Involved Christians**

We are being squeezed into a reactive posture that distorts citizenship.

From one direction, we are pushed toward alignment with one political party, in spite of our serious doubts about the character of many politicians and substantive disagreement with their agendas.

From another direction, we are pushed away from the public square, regardless of personal convictions that we have a duty to seek the public good. But the mounting criticism about Christians injecting our values into a pluralistic culture and their religious toleration leanings make us timid about political involvement.

Christians must resist the temptation to affiliate with any political party as *the* moral party and reject the idea that faith may be rightly divorced from the public square. But once we have resisted and rejected, we might remain in a reactive posture.

One of the troublesome issues for Christians is how to engage pro-actively in the public square in the midst of the culture wars. Here are several rules-of-thumb for evaluating our involvement and helping us walk in the good way.

### **Rule No. 1: Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.**

Martin Luther King Jr. interprets Matthew 10:16 in *Strength to Love* to mean that Christians should combine “a tough mind and a tender heart.”

A tough mind is “characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal and decisive judgment.” A tender heart refers to passionate and compassionate commitments.

Tough mindedness alerts Christians to the truth that no political party represents all moral truth. Political parties and leaders are neither perfectly moral nor thoroughly immoral. Tough mindedness guards us against those who claim they represent *the* moral viewpoint and campaign as *the* moral choice. Similarly, tough mindedness keeps us from naively accepting campaign promises and enables us to see narrow self-interests disguised as public good.

Tender heartedness, the opposite of hard heartedness or moral indifference, enables us to see our duty to initiate constructive change and gives us the moral energy to do justice.

Christians engage in the political process for the good of neighbor without placing *the* Christian mantle on any political party or position.

### **Rule No. 2: Be prophetic.**

Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel describes the prophet as “someone who sees people as they are, and as they ought to be.” In his book, *Five Biblical Portraits*, Wiesel identifies the prophet as one who is “an irritant.”

Many Christians confuse being prophetic with being politically correct. For example, some conservatives believe that being prophetic means only being anti-abortion and militaristic. For some liberals, being prophetic means opposing military involvement and favoring a woman’s right to abortion. Both positions have more to do with political correctness than the prophetic witness. A consistent pro-life ethic, which advocates life-protection from the womb to the tomb, is closer to the prophetic witness. This approach irritates conservatives and liberals!

Christians must avoid confusing the prophetic with political correctness. Being prophetic means we tell the truth, speak in defense of the weak against the powerful, resist the seductive advances of political leaders and avoid ideological loyalties.

### **Rule No. 3: Be resident aliens.**

Duke University religion professors Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe the church as “an adventurous colony in a society of disbelief” in their book, *Resident Aliens*.

As an outpost, the church is “a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident alien are lovingly nurture and reinforced.” Hence, Christians are a “colony of heaven.”

Despite their naïve optimism about the pristine nature of church life, Hauerwas and Willimon correctly observe that both conservatives and liberals demand government to do what the church cannot do through moral persuasion and conversion.

We need to remind ourselves that the church is our *best* social strategy without also accepting the position that the church is our *only* social strategy.

#### **Rule No. 4: Be transformers.**

Christians face twin temptations. One is accommodation; the other is domination.

**Accommodation.** Too often believers conform to the prevailing political culture. The Bible is used to justify our pre-existing political philosophy instead of being allowed to shape our political viewpoint.

For example, a Christian Republican candidate running for a U.S. Senate seat in Tennessee campaigned that opposition to gun control is a measure of one’s moral orthodoxy.

During the same election cycle, the Democrat-controlled White House asked a religious organization for biblical quotations to support an already-determined position.

**Domination.** The other temptation is domination. Too many Christians use political parties to pursue their moral agenda. Some right-wing Christians have used the Republican Party to try to outlaw abortion and mandate school prayer. Some left-wing Christians have used the Democratic Party to push for abortion and immigration reform.

**Transformation.** A better way than accommodation or domination is transformation. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed” (Romans 12:2). The biblical metaphor of leaven (Matthew 13:33) calls us to transform our culture by a persistent presence throughout the culture.

Thoughtful Christians do their best social change through moral persuasion, teaching values in congregations, nurturing character in children, confronting dishonesty, framing public issues with truthfulness, offering moral arguments with civility in public debates and urging politicians to advance the public good instead of private gain. Equally important, Christians must model their values through their congregational life and mission.

### **Rule No. 5: Be civil.**

Some Christians tend to demonize their opponents. They polarize churches and society into artificial camps of us against them. They ignore Paul's admonition to live by two elements of the fruit-of-the-Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), kindness and gentleness, which we may properly call decency or civility.

"To be civil does not mean a refusal to contend for a position; it means we contend in a Christ-honoring manner. The Apostle Paul gives us guidance in Ephesians 4 when he talks about the 'new life' we put on when we follow Christ (verse 24)," states a Bible study guide on civility produced by the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

What are some touchstones for civility?

***Civil speech is constructive.*** It allows us to speak strongly to issues on which we care deeply and to address the words and actions of others with whom we disagree vigorously. Civil speech is tempered by humility, prudence and empathy.

***Civil speech is honest.*** It happens when we humbly acknowledge our own contribution to social failures, injustice and hatred. We all misstep and refuse to take steps to correct wrongs. We are all in this mess together. Humility guards us from self-righteous judgment.

***Civil speech considers the bigger picture.*** It occurs when we prudently recognize that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent, a time for prophetic utterance and a time for pastoral care. Prudence means we think about the consequences of our words and avoid torching another group.

***Civil speech takes place when we genuinely care.*** It takes into account the opinions and feelings of those with whom we most vigorously disagree. Empathy means we listen carefully and refuse to make demons of our adversaries.

**Two politically involved people with the same biblical standard who are struggling over an issue are not like a couple of alley cats fighting and snarling over a scrap of food; they are more like two neighbors who disagree and have sat down to try to work out a mutually satisfactory solution.**

**– Stephen V. Monsma**

## YOU MIGHT ALSO ENJOY THE FOLLOWING BIBLE STUDIES:

**Being Doers of the Word:** This 13-lesson online Bible study uses the book of James to help people who profess faith to back it up with love-based actions – and to expect nothing in return. Lessons include: “Developing a Mature Faith,” “Being Doers of the Word” and “Pursuing Wisdom.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

**Honoring the Ten Commandments:** This 13-lesson online Bible study explores how people of faith can honor the Ten Commandments through lives that uphold them. Lessons include: “Toward a Moral Way of Life” and “Approaching the Ten Commandments with Care.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

**Questions Jesus Asked:** This 13-lesson online Bible study considers Jesus’ questions as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, exploring ethical issues that Jesus raised and showing how these same issues related to our lives today. Lessons include: “Who Is Your Neighbor?” “What Is Faithful Stewardship?” and “What Do You Owe the Government?” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

## OTHER AVAILABLE RESOURCES:

**Different Books, Common Word: Baptists and Muslims:** A documentary that reveals how Baptists and Muslims are changing history by the way they are engaging each other. Tired of being defined by extremists, some U.S. Baptist and Muslims have sought and found common ground: the common word in both traditions to love neighbor. Learn more about the film at [DifferentBooksCommonWord.com](http://DifferentBooksCommonWord.com).

**Gospel Without Borders:** A documentary that brings more light and less heat to the issue of immigration. It separates myth from fact, examines what the Bible says about treatment of the “stranger,” shows the experiences of documented and undocumented immigrants and provides handles for Christians to advance the common good. Learn more about the film at [GospelWithoutBorders.net](http://GospelWithoutBorders.net).

**Through the Door:** A documentary that highlights the faith community’s engagement with prisons (including inmates and officers, being in prison and out, both charity and justice). Learn more about the film at [ThroughTheDoor.info](http://ThroughTheDoor.info).