I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

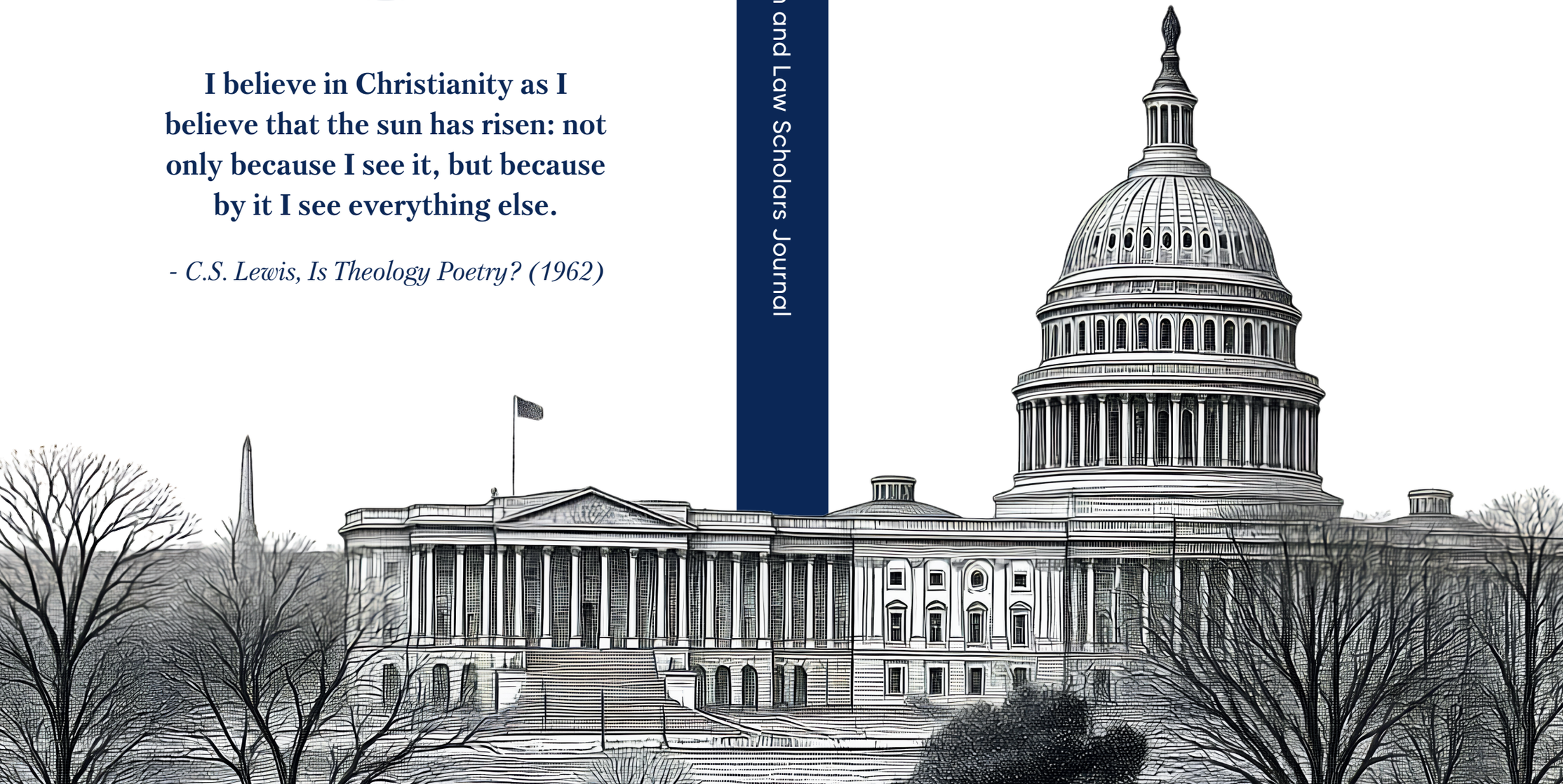
- C.S. Lewis, Is Theology Poetry? (1962)

1

2026 Faith and Law Scholars Journal

FAITH AND LAW
WASHINGTON • DC

2026 Scholars Journal



Faith and Law is a non-partisan organization operating on Capitol Hill since 1983. Faith and Law's mission is to equip and encourage policymakers to consider the implications of the biblical worldview for their calling to the public square. We affirm historic Christian commitments to life, marriage, and sexuality, and support strong protections for religious liberty for people of all faiths.

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NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Means and Ends – Both Matter

Faith and Law seeks to equip congressional aides in both the "what" and the "how" of public policy. Our Mentorship program pairs junior staffers with more seasoned Capitol Hill alum, offering them the chance to build both the virtue and vocational skills needed to thrive (and survive) a vocation in public service.

With an eye to the "ends" or telos of policymaking, the Faith and Law Scholars program invites more senior congressional aides to consider and employ the biblical worldview – Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration – as a clarifying lens for distilling the "what" of public policy. Scholars begin by considering creational "goods," how the Fall distorted them, and the means of restoration, starting with individuals and families, communities and ultimately government's role.

Taken together, these programs rest on the idea that the Christian faith should inform both our policy agenda and the means by which we pursue it. As Os Guinness said in a 2024 Friday Forum, "We need to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way."

This first issue of the Faith and Law Journal showcases that work. The first section features reflections of junior congressional aides applying the classical virtues to the "trials and tribulations" of a public vocation. In the second section, Scholars apply the biblical worldview to deepen their understanding of complex policy questions including foreign aid, religious liberty, pornography, civil discourse, and war.

These writings are the fruit of busy staffers' time and energy. They are not official white papers, nor are they intended to represent a particular partisan position. They are personal reflections about issues that are deeply American, often polarizing, yet brimming with biblical and theological insight and innovative approaches.

This compendium is also the fruit of genuine community. Staffers with diverse political views who might not have otherwise encountered one another on the Hill shared meals and forged trusting relationships, which are perhaps the most consequential outcome of our program.

Tacking between means and ends requires godly humility, wisdom and skill. Even in politically turbulent times, Christians are called to be faithful to both.

Faithfully,
Susan Gates

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Note from the Executive Director 1

SECTION 1: REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUE

PRUDENCE

Mobilizing Prudence in the Workplace
Jordan Jantzen 5

The Virtues' Charioteer
Georgie Hilby 6

PIETY

Piety and the American Dream
Ileana Braddock 8

Piety as Practice: Serving Between Heaven and Earth
Jaymey Hedberg 9

JUSTICE

Rawls and Christ for Justice
Jackson Hern 10

FORTITUDE

The Measure of St. Crispin's Day
Henry Keating 12

Leading with Boldness and Humility
Janae Joachim 13

TEMPERENCE

Witnessing a Greater Power
Gabi Gies 14

WISDOM

Civilization Begins with Civility
Alana Burdo 15

SECTION 2: SCHOLARS' PAPERS

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
Free Excercise:
Preserving Religious Organizations in Higher Education
Marcos Barrios 18

FOREIGN AID
Faith and Foreign Aid:
Biblical Directives for Humanitarian Assitance
Jake Middlebrooks 32

MILITARY INTERVENTION
Assessing Operation Southern Spear
Through Christian Just War Traidition
John Bleed 42

WAR ON TERROR
Just War:
How Scripture Shapes Conceptions of War and Peace
Hayden Upchurch 54

INFERTILITY
Thinking Biblically About Infertility
Katherine Huiskes 62

PORNOGRAPHY
Liberty and Human Dignity:
A Christian Realist Approach to Pornography Policy
Laura Sanders 69

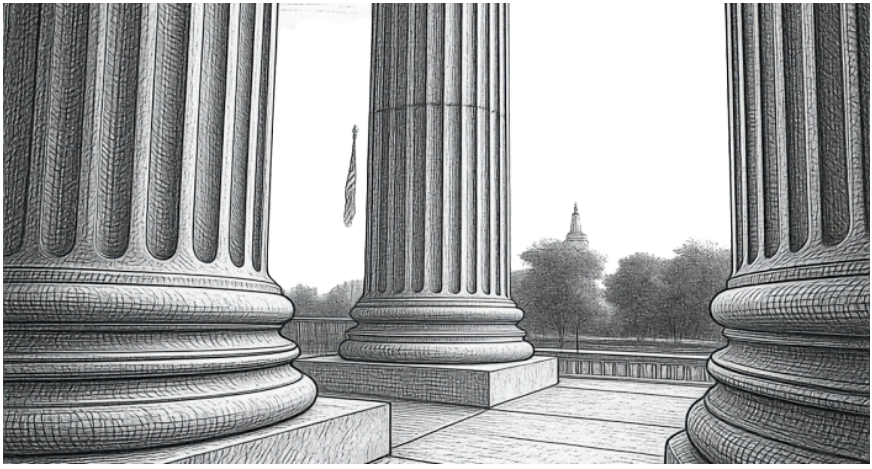
TRUTH IN STORIES
Building a Biblical Communications Narrative
on Capitol Hill
Peyton Holliday 80

CIVIL DISCOURSE
Against Such There is No Law:
Love, Peace and Self-Control in a Divided Country
Noah Jackson 88

Scholar Biographies 96

SECTION 1:
REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUE





PRUDENCE

Mobilizing Prudence in the Workplace

Jordan Jantzen

Followers of Christ navigate a complicated and often treacherous world. Thankfully we have the great comforter, the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we bring our various talents to bear in the workplace. Formed in prudence, we can learn to navigate the twists and turns of the workplace with clarity and deftness. When we rely upon the Holy Spirit, we obey Jesus's command in Matthew 10:16 to "...be wise as serpents and innocent as doves," or in other words, to exercise prudence.

For Aristotle, prudence is practical wisdom: the ability to govern one's actions through the right use of reason. God's grace builds, suffuses and corrects the power of reason. For the Christian, reason should direct us to govern and discipline ourselves in the likeness of our Savior. This practical application of prudence and reason must be our foundation lest we succumb to folly, impulsivity, and the ever-changing whims of the workplace.

To truly grow in Godly prudence, the Hill staffer must treat the beginning of his day as a catalyst. It is these first moments in the morning twilight that set to motion the foundation of the workday and all its challenges and opportunities. He ought to spend time intentionally inviting the Holy Spirit to be at work within him. For the Holy Spirit will inform the staffer's every decision and interaction as he seeks to fulfill God's commands. This practice functions as a necessary reminder for the Christ-follower, who will regularly recall both his need for a Savior, as well as the Savior's commandment to be his light in the darkness. To grow in the virtue of prudence we only need only ask Jesus (James 1), the *logos* who is knowledge and wisdom itself. It is he who animates us to act in prudence as we labor in our respective vocations.

The Virtues' Charioteer

Georgie Hilby

Prudence is the virtue concerned with excellence in practical judgment and is therefore critical to the Christian Hill staffer's ability to make sound decisions. Staffers frequently face high-stakes choices carrying significant long-term consequences. Even the most granular decisions entail risk. Providing good governance to a country begins on a personal level with good governance of oneself. My own work requires me to make decisions guided not by temporary feelings, but by the duty of determining what will benefit my countrymen. This reflects what Scripture says about the danger of fleeting emotions: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered" (Prov. 28:26). In order to make sound decisions, staffers must keep their eyes fixed on God's unchanging wisdom.

Without prudence, all the other virtues lose their direction and balance. Prudence entails careful deliberation and judgment. When we cannot judge fairly, we lose our capacity for moderation; we neglect our everyday duties. We likewise

fail to show courage when difficulties come our way; indeed, we become rash and thoughtless, failing to consider the impact our words and actions have on others. We must continually seek the Lord in order to obtain prudence (James 1). The harmony of the virtues that staffers actively pursue depends upon prudence, the true "charioteer of the virtues" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 8).

As I navigate work on the Hill and seek to grow in virtue, I strive to become more prudent through prayer, supplication, immersion in the Word, and the guidance of wise mentors. Through prayer and supplication I bring my concerns before the Lord; I ask him to show me the best way to handle difficult decisions. Prayer and supplication also allow me to listen for His guidance and to make decisions rooted in faith. As I read Scripture, I learn how faithful leaders respond when faced with challenging circumstances. Job's story is illustrative in this regard. Despite losing everything, Job continued to praise and honor the Lord. He trusted in God's promises even when faithfulness brought him no material benefit. Yet Job persisted in his obedience. In time, the Lord rewarded Job for his trust in divine wisdom. Leaning upon the Lord's wisdom is the first step toward prudent action.

We can also lean upon the wisdom of others. Wise mentors in the workplace can help us reflect on decisions, both large and small, alongside someone with greater experience. Mentoring relationships allow Hill staffers to deliberate well when faced with high-risk decisions. Such communal deliberation helps us discern whether a particular course of action is driven by wisdom and experience or by mere emotion. Scripture encourages us to welcome correction because it strengthens us: "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (Proverbs 3:11–12).

When a staffer invests in a strong mentoring relationship, immerses himself in the Word, and seeks the Lord's wisdom

through prayer and supplication, he begins to develop prudence. Prudence can play a transformative role in the life of a staffer. It can make him more deliberative, more receptive to correction, and more decisive in action. Indeed, prudence enables Hill staffers to be bold, standing up for what is right even when doing so risks career advancement or reputation. I strive to continue growing in prudence so that every action I take may draw me closer to the Lord's wisdom.

PIETY

Piety and the American Dream

Ileana Braddock

All are tempted to pursue ambition without concern for authentic excellence. C.S. Lewis' *The Inner Ring* discusses this dynamic: the pursuit of fitting in with increasingly grander people. Once you enter their circle, you slowly find yourself compromising your moral code in order to win social status or professional advancement. Yet human ambition ought to be ordered rightly.

Too often, scandal occurs when an individual allows unbridled ambition to govern all of her actions. Like Lewis, Alexis de Tocqueville argued against materialism and an epidemic of secular achievements. In a country focused on the American dream (which citizens often mistake for worldly pleasures, such as wealth and status), it is easy to lose sight of the virtues required for achieving that same dream. Tocqueville writes:

> "This is how, from time to time, the American escapes in a way from himself, and how, tearing himself away for a moment from the petty passions that agitate his life and from the transitory interests that fill it, he enters suddenly into an ideal world where everything is great, pure, eternal."[1]

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Part II, Ch. 15, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010).

Tocqueville's observation applies particularly to the lives of public servants. Public servants often confuse genuine success with personal image and influence. Lasting public character, however, is defined by orienting your actions toward the ends of disinterested self-service and moral responsibility. The classical virtue of piety, when construed as self-sacrifice for goods beyond oneself, is helpful for understanding how the public servant might virtuously pursue the American Dream. Piety provides a North Star for the public servant's actions, reminding her that the formation of public character is contingent upon the disinterested service of goods beyond oneself.

Piety as Practice: Serving Between Heaven and Earth

Jaymey Hedberg

Piety shapes the activities of public servants in two primary ways: (1) it sets the present in the context of the eternal, and (2) it recognizes both temporal and spiritual authority. Piety is often defined as reverence or duty. It can be understood both as an admirable quality to embody, as well as a mean between extremes. A deficiency or absence of piety breeds indifference and neglect toward one's duty. On the other extreme, excess or unbalanced piety yields either blind allegiance to temporal authority or escapist withdrawal from earthly duty.

In his observations of 19th-century Americans, Alexis de Tocqueville notes that, for Americans, piety "[keeps] the soul turned to Heaven."[1] He continues, "in centuries of faith the final goal of life is placed after life."[2] In this sense, piety acts as a spiritual antidote to materialism — the temptation to live solely for earthly pleasures and rewards. Materialism falsely proposes to make gods of men and paints lawmakers in a near-messianic

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume Two, 2.15, 517.
[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume Two, 2.17, 522.

light, fixing their attention on temporary gains while losing an eternal focus. The first end of piety in public service, then, is to maintain a heavenly perspective without neglecting the present duty to improve the world around us. Ignoring the eternal end to which our work is directed is not only morally dangerous; it severs us from our immortal purpose. The eternal endows the temporal with meaning.

The second tension has existed at the intersection of Christian and civic duty for centuries: the proper relationship between religion and government. As inherently spiritual beings, humans cannot completely sever religious convictions from public life. Jesus spoke to the idea of believers inhabiting both kingdoms in his earthly ministry: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."[3] For public servants, this commandment demands the responsible stewarding of temporal power and influence while remaining grounded by a transcendent, absolute truth and accountable to a higher authority. As public servants, this requires respect for earthly authorities and faithfulness to a higher authority. We may simultaneously view elected officials as vessels for the Lord's will, and yet hold them accountable when contravening it. Thus, in public service, piety is not merely passive reverence, but an active, discerning duty one takes upon oneself to practice daily.

JUSTICE

Rawls and Christ for Justice

Jackson Hern

Justice is a complex concept for young people to grasp. Christians learn in Sunday school that they ought to believe in a just and righteous God. Yet they experience a gravely broken and unfair world. It is difficult to reconcile that God, who is

[3] Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25 (NKJV).

Justice, permits injustice to endure within this world He created. For the marginalized, justice may even feel like a myth or far-fetched dream. In a world where citizenry increasingly relinquishes its commitment to public justice, I cannot think of a principle more crucial to preserving than civil society.

A core argument in Rawls' Theory of Justice provides an excellent case study of ensuring justice remains foundational to any political system. Rawls argues that decision-makers should organize society behind a "veil of ignorance" that prevents them from knowing in advance how they will be situated in the system they create. This schema ensures that the rules for picking winners and losers avoids unfair benefits to the designer. The goal is securing a political arrangement conducive to the wellbeing of all. This "veil of ignorance" (and the ways in which it can be a helpful intellectual exercise toward preserving justice) is not entirely dissimilar to Christ's universal outpouring of radical love to everyone around Him. Only Christ is capable of a love bearing universal scope. Christ painted a very clear picture of a Heaven that is free from injustice and suffering. Indeed, "[there is neither] Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Perhaps one of Christ's most notable teachings is the Love Commandment: each is to love God and love their neighbor. The Golden Rule — the principle of treating others the way one wishes to be treated oneself — is an expression of that normative love command. In Christian ethics, love and justice are coextensive. Public and political figures have numerous opportunities to make decisions that will affect huge populations. Yet elected officials cannot control how their constituents' lives evolve as a result of their policies. They cannot guarantee their constituents' health and prosperity. They can however show up to work every day committed to treating their constituents as they would wish to be treated. Legislators cannot guarantee fairness, but they should never stop pursuing justice, particularly on behalf of the marginalized.

The Measure of St. Crispin's Day
Henry Keating

Fortitude is, among other things, the capacity to endure in the midst of difficult trials. When habituated, fortitude is an indispensable virtue for public service. Fortitude appears often in Shakespeare's Henry V: a large, loud, powerful, and kingly virtue that regularly announces its entrance. When Henry delivers his famous "Crispin's Day Speech," he reminds his troops that a hard-fought battle offers a chance at immortal victory: "He that outlives this day and comes safe home / Will stand o' tiptoe when this day is named / And rouse him at the name of Crispian." Yet the speech also shows that fortitude is quiet. Fortitude entails fighting the good fight when you might be the only one who will remember it: "Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot / But he'll remember with advantages / What feats he did that day." A soul possessed of fortitude refuses to surrender to devastation, disaster, or slow-growing apathy.

St. Augustine famously wrote that fortitude reveals the character of those willing to endure suffering, but those who embody fortitude are guaranteed to encounter suffering. In public service especially, fortitude is essential. Each day brings fresh opportunities for practicing the virtue. Some of these opportunities arise from the scope of the work itself, and others from the limits on how the job must or can be done. Public servants who endure with humility and conviction become the steady hands that guide communities through confusion and trouble.

Fortitude is more than reacting to trials. Fortitude remains faithful through trial or ease alike. Fortitude is marked by constancy. In the same way a tree grows toward the sun that both nourishes and scorches it, a servant grows stronger under adversity and by resisting passivity. The hardships that

threaten to break us are have also the means to shape us into instruments of good. Lasting change is never built by those who quit when the road becomes difficult. It is built by those who stay, endure, and keep serving, those who have cultivated the virtue of fortitude.

Leading with Boldness and Humility

Janae Joachim

The Christian virtue of fortitude enables the Christian Hill staffer to push through challenging periods rather than avoid them altogether. Yet the cultivation of fortitude is a demanding endeavor. Acting with real fortitude might entail loss of one's job, reputation, or political standing in defense of what is right. The cultivation of fortitude also calls Christians to advocate for justice for the marginalized. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged advocating for the civil rights of African Americans, despite the stance being politically and socially unpopular. A bid for fortitude lay at the heart of that particular struggle for civil rights; without the courage to persevere amid fear and opposition, meaningful progress toward racial equality would not have been possible.

St. Augustine describes fortitude as the golden mean between "brashness" and "cowardice." Achieving that balance is difficult, yet deeply important. It does not mean the absence of fear, but rather the decision to stay and fight despite compelling reasons to be fearful. In my own career on Capitol Hill, I have already relied on fortitude to remain humble and discerning while cultivating the boldness needed for effective leadership within my office. As I look ahead to continued service on Capitol Hill, I know I will need fortitude to remain on a straight and narrow path: a path away from the pursuit of fame and money for their own sakes, and toward joy in my toil for the glory of God.

Witnessing a Greater Power

Gabi Gies

When discussing what initially drew them to work in Congress, Hill staffers frequently highlight the power they sense thrumming through Washington, D.C. This city is a place with tremendous potential to create change, and this potential is not lost on the staffs of Capitol Hill. Yet these immense opportunities for power, influence, and personal status offer a critical opportunity for Christian Hill staffers to cultivate the virtue of *temperance*.

In the Republic, Plato famously defines temperance, one of four Cardinal virtues, as "the harmonious mastery of desires and passions by reason." For Plato, temperance exists as the perfect midpoint between abstinence on one extreme and gluttony on the other. Christianity affirms the Platonic notion of temperance, and elevates it. Instead of mastering one's desires through reason alone, the Christian leans upon the grace of God to tame unruly passion. God's grace allows the Christian to straddle the ditches of complete avoidance and gross overindulgence. Temperance thus becomes a holy medium that directs our affections toward the glory of God. Traditionally, applications of temperance tend to be reserved for the tactile pleasures of the world, like food, drink, or sex. But of course it encompasses more than a small sample of baser appetites. Temperance is a foundational virtue assisting the Christian in cultivating a holy moderation. By cultivating this internal moderation, the Christian Hill staffer learns gradually to wield power for genuine legislative change without being swept up in the whirlpools of ego and status that so often ensnares good labor.

The surging appetites of human nature often push us to extremes, and Washington D.C. certainly offers countless opportunities for indulgence. One easy way to avoid falling into

the rat-race for the next title, position, or pay bump is to isolate oneself completely, moving away from DC, from Capitol Hill, or even isolating oneself from the world within a bubble of fellow Christians. Occasional solitude is good for the soul, but staffers should resist temptations of escapism and instead, through prayer and intentional community, cultivate the virtue of temperance. When we publicly forego cheap power grabs, we not only foster the habit of temperance; we witness the far greater power of Christ.

WISDOM

Civilization Begins with Civility

Alana Burdo

As a Christian congressional staffer, I often look to George Washington's *Rules of Civility* to guide my actions at work. Washington's wisdom is just as relevant to the 21st century as it was in the 18th century. Throughout my workday, I recall Rule 6: "sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not on when others stop." This rule reminds me to "read the room" during meetings, to maintain humility before my colleagues, and to imitate the virtues I observe in my superiors and the Congresswoman I serve. In the fast-paced Hill environment (particularly on the House), exercising prudence is essential to judging rightly when to speak and when to listen.

Yet the digital world offers another fast-paced "workspace" that calls for similar discernment. Washington's Rule #50 states: "Be not hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of any." To carry out my communications work with excellence, I must regularly create and navigate social media content. In an age of "fake news" and clickbait articles, it is imperative that I fact-check all of the information and news sources. I must avoid the gossip and in-person rumor mill of the Hill. Prudence is vital.

In Rule #108, Washington again advises: "When you speak of God or His attributes let it be seriously & [with] Reverence." My generation has lost the capacity for awe and wonder for the Lord and his creation. It is imperative to remember that though He is our friend, He is also the Creator of the universe. I thus seek to direct my speech toward proper piety for the Lord and his children, who bear His image. The reverence with which I address God is then reflected in a different way through respect I show my superiors and peers.

Proper awe for God's creation and stewardship of speech necessarily entails right use of conscience, which Washington reflects upon in Rule #110: "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience." A Hill staffer might have many talents, a high-level job title, or a well-known boss, but these are insignificant without possessing a strong conscience.

Ultimately, the staffer must own her decisions and act on principle. She must apply her conscience amid every decision and seek out perennial sources of wisdom, like *The Rules of Civility* which has guided this very reflection. Wisdom and experience are critical for cultivating the interior civility necessary for shaping external civilization through our work.

SECTION 2:
SCHOLARS' PAPERS





RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Free Excercise: Preserving Religious Organizations in Higher Education

Marcos Barrios

Student organizations are the backbone of student life and culture on many college campuses. From academic societies to Greek life, affinity groups to debate teams, school clubs serve as central nodes of community and expression for college students. Nowhere is this more vital than in the context of religious student organizations. For students of faith, campus ministries and religious associations offer opportunities for fellowship through organized prayer, worship, education, and service. Students far from family and their home religious communities rely on these campus organizations as crucial faith havens, especially those students in secular school environments. Like all clubs, religious organizations flourish when they can freely interact with the broader campus community and utilize its resources. The ability to table at the club fair, host dinners and worship nights in university buildings, and share literature on the green are key examples of the rights religious organizations enjoy.

Unfortunately, these liberties are under threat. A long history of controversial legislative and judicial decisions has left a muddied national landscape where religious student organizations are often not allowed equal access to participation in campus life. Across the country, religious students find their clubs and associations harassed, derecognized, or banned, often because of their expression of traditional religious beliefs regarding sex and gender.[1] This is most prevalent when student groups uphold formal doctrinal standards for their student leaders. Derecognized student groups lose access to funding, campus spaces, the ability to promote events, and other vital rights of organizations. This problem is now entrenched and spreading, affecting students of all faiths.[2] A recent report found that since 1990, *hundreds* of student religious organizations representing thousands of students have been aggressively investigated by universities. Approximately 175 have been completely denied official recognition and countless incidents between campus organizations and colleges continue to go unreported each year.[3] The rate of recognition incidents on campus universities has only increased, with "roughly three times as reported incidents" in the last fifteen years than in the twenty years prior.[4] This phenomenon is especially rampant in public universities.[5]

This chilling of religious expression on college campuses presents challenges to both the church and the state as generational transmission of faith is hindered and uneven enforcement of federal civil rights laws leaves American students' constitutional rights vulnerable. For years, litigation efforts have tried to better secure the rights of religious students to organize and run campus organizations according

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[1] Fleshman, Benjamin, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Martinez?" Texas Review of Law and Politics 29 (2025): 232.

[2] A small cross sample of affected student groups include the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Imam Mahdi Organization, the Latter-day Saint Student Association, the Sikh Awareness Club, and Christian Legal Society.

[3] Fleshman, "How Do You Solve a Problem like Martinez?," 258.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

to their faith – with only mixed success. Just as some jurisdictions, through statutory protections or friendly court decisions, strengthen religious organizational rights, others actively prosecute campus organizations and reduce religious protections. It is precisely this imbalance and deepening inequity among the states that demands federal action. The United States has an interest in enforcing civil rights law across the land, especially when public and private universities directly rely on federal funding streams. Only the federal government has the power to ensure consistent policy across the states, most famously modeled through Congress's Equal Access Act of 1984, which addressed this very issue in the public primary and secondary school context. The nature of federal civil rights protections, the financial strings attached, and precedent of successful legislative action all confirm the federal government as the most appropriate sphere of decision-making to expand religious protections for higher education students.

1. **Theological Foundations**

Recognizing that at the heart of every political question lies theological and spiritual first principles, this section will attempt to explore the theological underpinnings before turning to practical policy solutions. Albert Wolter's foundational reformational worldview, featuring a Christian meta-narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, is especially helpful in this regard. Through it we will briefly consider the origins of religious freedom as a part of God's original design for mankind, how it has been corrupted by sin, and why Christians ought to fight for its preservation in the university context for all students as part of the restorative work of the church.

Made in the *Imago Dei*, man enjoys participation in many of the attributes of God – reason, creativity, and love being among the most fundamental. Yet it is man's capacity for free will that is perhaps the most striking, and at the very heart of religious freedom. Though God showers his creation with love,

we know that love "does not insist on its own way," (1 Corinthians 13:5).

The radical way that God allows for freedom of worship in his creation is the origin of religious freedom.

God consistently refrains from coercing man's affections towards him. In Eden, he gives Adam and Eve the choice to worship the Lord with lives of obedience or to pursue the false gods of selfish pride and sin. In perhaps the greatest theological mystery, God allows for the decision they ultimately make. He respects their dignity as free and rational beings, even as they choose death itself, because that autonomy is part and parcel of their inviolable god-likeness. This mystery, the radical way that God allows for freedom of worship, is the origin of religious freedom. If God does not cross the boundary of coercing the love of man, what right do we have to attempt it ourselves?

We see this godly boundary play out throughout the Old Testament as the Lord consistently beckons Israel to return to right worship of Him. He sends judges, teachers, and prophets to invite the people of Israel into repentance, but he does not supernaturally bend the will of a nation that is unwilling. Jesus himself models this relationship clearly as he presents an invitational, not coercive, gospel: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. Anyone who hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me," (Revelation 3:20). Worship can only be given freely by those who open the door to the truth and lordship of God.

And so, it's in this sense that "freedom of religion" is baked into creation, not as a product of sin, but as a part of our human nature. The conscience of man to worship as he sees fit is part of our identity as free beings. Paul recognized this when he wrote on conscience in his letter to the Romans and admonished believers that it is "to their own master" that "servants stand or fall," (Romans 14:4). And it is the church father Tertullian, arguing for religious toleration in the Roman empire, who pointed to the "privilege inherent in human

nature that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions." [6]

Does this mean then that religious freedom and toleration somehow cut against the truth of the gospel? Of course not. The price of religious freedom is accountability for our choices. The same command, to "love the Lord your God," applies to Adam and us alike, and just as Adam was cursed for his false worship, so will those who reject the call of Christ and follow other gods face judgment (Matthew 22:37). The role of the Fall, then, is limited to one of exacerbation and corruption. A fallen human nature and cursed creation opens the door to the gross development of oppressive false religions, violent religious conflict, and fearful persecution. Rather than using the freedom of worship to serve God, humans use it to inflict pain and suffering on one another.

Thus, the role of the church in its work of restoration is two-fold: to recognize and respect freedom of religion as a part of man's *Imago Dei* nature, while also stemming the tide of sinful violence and religious persecution in the world. Encouraging the development of legal and social structures that further these aims is the prime way the Church can protect its own ability to worship freely and the dignity of man writ large.

Religious freedom is the cornerstone of the constitutional order.

Thankfully the Church finds a great buttress of faith in American jurisprudence. Religious freedom is often called the "first freedom" because it serves as the cornerstone of our constitutional order. Through the free exercise clause of the First Amendment, we safeguard the freedom of man to exercise his religion as he pleases, a right not given by the government, but recognized as being "endowed by [our] Creator."[7] Its counterpart, the Establishment Clause, naturally balances this freedom with the state's corresponding duty; namel prohibiting

[6] Wilken, Robert Louis, *Liberty in the Things of God.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[7] The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, National Archives.

government coercion, or preferential treatment, of others in matters of faith. Our federal civil rights laws, most prominently the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, build on this foundation to protect religious people and organizations in every segment of society, from healthcare to the military to private industry. So too, should religious legal protections extend to the uniquely valuable domain of the college campus.

To freely exercise religious beliefs in campus organizations on an equal basis to secular students is a necessary policy position that must be defended by Christians for people of all faiths. Beyond the desire to uphold the fundamental dignity of man, there are also practical realities that demand special attention from the church to this matter. For the mission of the gospel to proceed, the generational transfer of the faith must continue. It is no secret that religious affiliation and rates of personal belief are in decline, especially among younger generations.[8] High school and college graduates are more likely to lose faith than at any other time in their lives.[9] Surrounded by secular influences and lacking religious instruction, many fall away. Campus ministries fill this gap and stem the tide of secularization. They bring hope and life to students across the country. They must be given every opportunity to flourish if the church is to grow and succeed in its generational mission.

2. Policy Proposals

Having considered the theological basis for religious freedom, we will now explore practical policy solutions from three politico-theological perspectives. Each represents different Christian approaches to alleviating the persecution of student religious organizations: first, the political theologian with a regular order legislative proposal bolstered by the power of persuasion; second, the Christian realist that uses creative

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[8] Jones, Jeffrey. "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups." Gallup.com, 25 Mar. 2024.

[9] "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group. https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/

partisan legislative strategies that rely on the power of process; and third, the emerging Christian nationalist with a radical constitutionalist executive approach that turns on power itself. We will explore each, briefly analyzing their process of execution, Christian grounding, and practical strengths and weaknesses.

3. Regular Order Legislation

Inspired by the practical public theology tradition, a Christian policy approach grounded in communicating natural law principles to the broader public, the first proposal is a "regular order" legislative bill that tackles the campus crisis head-on. This camp seeks to follow in the footsteps of Congress in 1984, which, as discussed previously, established protections for religious organizations in *primary and secondary* schools.[10] This proposal would attempt to recreate the success of the original statute through a new bill expanding protections to higher education. The most viable bill currently in consideration is the Equal Campus Access Act of 2025 (S.2859), whose core provision reads:

> None of the funds made available under this Act may be provided to any public institution of higher education that denies to a religious student organization any right, benefit, or privilege that is otherwise afforded to other student organizations at the institution (including full access to the facilities of the institution and official recognition of the organization by the institution) because of the religious beliefs, practices, speech, leadership standards, or standards of conduct of the religious student organization. [11]

The mechanism of a regular order bill would be the traditional legislative process, namely securing significant bipartisan support for, as it currently exists, a standalone bill,

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[10] *Equal Access Act of* 1984. Pub. L. 98-377. United States Statutes at Large, vol. 98, 1984.

[11] Text - S.2859 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): *Equal Campus Access Act of* 2025. Congress.gov, Library of Congress, 18 September 2025, https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/2859/text.

or as attached to a more comprehensive education reform bill. The language would be open to amendments, require majority support in the House, and need to surpass the 60-vote threshold in the Senate before being signed into law.

The public theology tradition is well suited to taking up this approach, as it emphasizes "bring[ing] biblically informed principles and insights from the experience of covenant community in the church to bear on questions about how to order our lives together in political society."[12] In other words, the practical theologian attempts to influence politics with the powers of persuasion, drawing on natural law principles of human dignity, freedom of conscience, and natural rights to make the case for policy. Under this proposal, where building bipartisan support is necessary, the practical theologian might use the language of human rights to describe the nation's commitment to religious freedom, appeal to student equality and equity as key values, and make social and sociological arguments as to why preserving the authenticity of student religious organizations helps everyone. They would focus on the universality of religious freedom as protecting not only Christians, but Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim students alike. The ultimate goal would be building a social consensus that makes members of Congress comfortable supporting the campus legislation in a bipartisan way. There are practical and theological strengths and weaknesses to this approach. With a desire to build widespread consensus, the Christian political advocate nobly works to preserve a path of peace in politics. A bill backed by a bipartisan Congress and the public at large is the ideal form of effective, long-term federal action. It is also the most difficult

The practical theologian seeks to pursuade, drawing on principles of human dignity, freedom of conscience, and natural rights.

[12] Jennifer Patterson, "Christian Formation in Practical Public Theology," Unio Cum Christo. 6. 147. (2020) 10.35285/ucc6.2.2020.art8.reconciliation. 10.35285/ucc6.2.2020.art8.reconciliationreconciliation

and time intensive path towards change. And while there are certainly proud examples of long legislative efforts to turn public and political opinion (just look to William Wilberforce's 20-year crusade to abolish the slave trade in England), it may be that certain political issues may be more or less malleable to public moral witness. In the student organization context, where we see a fierce commitment to gender ideological beliefs that run contrary to natural law principles of religious freedom, it is doubtful to expect change. Political messaging campaigns can hardly be expected to shake such grounded public convictions in any relevant time frame for the crisis students face today.

From a political perspective, the regular order process presents additional risks, as bill language remains open to amendment and compromise, potentially detrimentally weakening the text. The Equal Access Act of 1984 is itself a cautionary tale. Introduced by conservative legislators, political necessity required textual changes to win Democratic votes and the bill was expanded to provide equal access to political, philosophical, and other non-religious student organizations in schools that received federal funding. While it has proved a relative success, the bill had unintended consequences, allowing for fringe political and ideological associations to exist in schools that were not part of the Member's original intent. Considering these theological and practical challenges, the practical public theology camp's proposal is thus ill-suited for the task at hand.

4. Legislative Proceduring

With Congress's current polarization and tight vote margins, a second policy approach that favors strict partisan legislative maneuvering arises. This approach can be thought of in the Christian realist tradition as expressed by Reinhold Niebuhr, whose robust view of fallen human nature allows for a more flexible, yet still principled, use of the levers of political procedure. This proposal also hopes to pass the language of bills such as the Equal Campus Access Act, but is open to

unconventional legislative pathways. Two examples we will discuss here include 1) using the Appropriations conference process to insert bill text into must-pass legislation and 2) bypassing the Parliamentarian in a partisan reconciliation vote. Both would limit or completely eradicate opponents' say over the text of legislation, effectively ensuring its passage.

The Christian realist tradition emphasizes the role human corruption plays in social and political life. Recognizing the weight and scope of sin's destructive power, Christian realists understand the restorative responsibility of the church in terms of political necessity. The tradition understands that

> We are men, not God. We are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history; and probably no pure evil, either. [13]

In its political application, this vision can look like taking advantage of the powers of process. Legal procedural loopholes, even uncustomary or precedentially violative ones, can yet be viable political options. Facing the realities of political gridlock and recognizing that bipartisan federal action is nearly impossible, the Christian realist may lament the fact that sin has caused division that allows religious intolerance to spread, while also advocating for necessary partisan action. By using the processes of conference appropriation bills and partisan reconciliation, the Christian realist can drastically increase the odds of passing into law protective language for students. The mechanism for an appropriations conference bill would go something like this: the Equal Campus Access Act text is not introduced as a standalone bill, but slipped in as a provision into an education appropriations bill, which is itself caught up as part of a minibus of committee bills. Only needing majority support, the text can be passed through committee markup and then by the House. As the appropriations process

[13] Tafilowski, Ryan. "The Center for Pastor Theologians." The Center for Pastor Theologians, 19 Oct. 2020, www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2020/10/19/politics-and-christian-realism-in-niebuhr

moves to conference, the majority party in conference could ensure the text remains in the final compromise bill by strong-arming the opposition in negotiation talks. At that point, the collective appropriations bill returns to both chambers, where no amendments are allowed, and each chamber must pass the bill in its entirety. At this juncture, the minority party could theoretically tank the deal, but the threat of a lapse of funding resulting in a government shutdown made it nearly guaranteed the provision would survive.

A reconciliation party line approach would mostly take place in the Senate, as the Parliamentarian is responsible for enforcing the Byrd Rule, a procedural rule that limits the kinds of provisions that can pass through the appropriations-based reconciliation package. Attempting to include religious liberty language (even while emphasizing its federal funding budgetary impact) would be difficult, as the minority party would likely challenge the language directly to the Parliamentarian. At that point, the majority party would have to take the aggressive move of either (a) firing the Parliamentarian and replacing her with a more sympathetic ally or (b) outright refusing to enforce her decision and moving forward with the package (which is a violation of procedural custom but not forbidden). Both would accomplish a party-line vote that could bring the legislation to pass. These two approaches come with serious risks, not least undermining public and institutional trust in the political party long-term and violating protective institutional norms and safeguards. It leaves whatever law that is passed with serious opposition in a Congress that may try to overrule it in the future. And the proposal flirts closely with a deceptive and uncharitable spirit many Christians may want to avoid. And yet, the Christian realist perspective offers legitimate and legal legislative solutions that actually accomplishes the goal of improving student religious organizations' religious freedom.

5. Executive Action

Finally, there exists an executive policy proposal that would

harness the power of the executive branch to aggressively investigate and prosecute schools that receive fedeal funding and discriminate against student religious organizations. We've seen this play out in the context of anti-semitism in the current Trump Administration, which has been bold in its enforcement of federal civil rights law and has recovered millions in settlement fees from high-profile universities. This approach represents a muscular and aggressive political "radical constitutionalism" that springs from the popular, if grossly undefined, "Christian nationalist" movement.

Christian radical constitutionalism is used broadly to describe a political theory that is subservient to distinctly theological ends and is willing to "throw off the precedents and legal paradigms that have wrongly developed" in American history.[14] (Interestingly, this movement may itself be a progeny of the Christin realist and Catholic integralism traditions). With a view of the church that intimately influences the shape, structure, and flavor of government, the Christian nationalist embraces the use of political power to pursue policies that often explicitly support Christians and Christian values. As a movement unmoored from the natural law tradition, there is little incentive for executive enforcement to be used to protect the natural rights of minority or potentially "subversive" religious student communities and organizations.

The mechanism of this executive proposal would use federal funding and agency oversight capacities to directly target schools that violate federal religious civil rights laws when they derecognize and ban religious campus groups. The goal of the administration would be to intimidate schools to respect Christian student organizations' rights, or face costly lawsuits. As seen in the antisemitism context, this method can produce quick and immediate results, stirring up national conversation and attention to the crisis of systematic discrimination. It has the potential to significantly help student religious organizations who are facing persecution and chilling effects

[14] Russell Vought, "Renewing American Purpose." The American Mind, 2022. https://americanmind.org/salvo/renewing-american-purpose/

on their campuses. It also allows for more aggressive prosecution of private schools who rely on federal funding and who have more legal flexibility than public institutions.

Yet, the executive approach faces serious drawbacks. First, the executive is limited to enforcing existing legal standards and court precedent. Although there are jurisdictions across the country with strong religious liberty protections for students, most ongoing litigation happens in districts with weak or harmful judicial precedent. The administration's actions, as we've seen over the last year, would inevitably invite a plethora of court challenges, and losing any of those on religious liberty grounds could prove detrimental to student groups in the long-term. Additionally, and obviously, the power of an administration exists only so long as its political party remains in office; executive orders and agency directions can easily be overturned by future administrations.

For the church, the executive policy approach would likely have a negative effect. As the church aims to be an agent of peace and a safe haven for students on campuses, its claims are undermined when an aggressive and vindictive political theory is its main defense. This approach also likely violates principles of subsidiarity by jumping to supreme executive enforcement power to do the work of legislators who are more closely tied to home districts and better equipped to produce long-term solutions. And most fundamentally, Christian radical constitutionalism challenges the value of universal conscience rights discussed in the earlier theological reflections of this paper. It is thus an untenable solution for fixing a problem that students of all faiths experience nationwide.

6. Recommendation

Given the presented policy solutions, what then would be the best course of action to protect religious student organizations? As in most things, the proposals suggested are not mutually exclusive, and may in fact together prove most effective in resolving the campus crisis. The public theologian

can offer a strong, accessible defense for religious freedom that may do much to create common consensus to protect religious student groups from the worst forms of aggression and harassment. The Christian nationalist's inclination to use the force of the executive to support the needs of the church can be directed to a more moderate recognition that equal enforcement of existing laws is a good and necessary part of the executive's responsibility. But I believe it's the Christian realist model that recognizes the necessity of political partisanship and the opportunities of procedural loopholes that can most efficiently and effectively bring about change. Between the two scenarios presented in the second policy proposal, it is the appropriations conference process that is preferable, because it minimizes institutional norm-breaking and maintains a level of bipartisanship in the legislative process, however manufactured or forced it may be. This will go a long way in making sure the resulting legislation is strong, respected, and can stand the test of time.

7. Conclusion

For students of faith across America, campus religious organizations provide indispensable support for college life. Their presence helps foster dialogue and authentic pluralism in universities and provides space for students to freely worship according to the dictates of their conscience. This right has deep theological roots and can be traced to the *Imago Dei* created nature of man. When this freedom faces aggressive assaults and religious students are harassed and barred from equal access to campus resources and community life, action is necessary. Congress has a history of helping preserve the religious free exercise rights of students in the past, and there are viable solutions that fit within orthodox Christian worldviews to make that a reality in the present. Staff, lawmakers, and the public should continue to fight to push legislation across the line when it is central to protecting not just the constitutional, but natural rights of students. They should be encouraged that they are participating in the restorative mission of the church when they do.



FOREIGN AID

Faith and Foreign Aid: Biblical Directives for Humanitarian Assitance

Jake Middlebrooks

> And if of two, one be more closely connected, and the other in greater want, it is not possible to decide, by any general rule, which of them we ought to help rather than the other, since there are various degrees of want as well as of connection: and the matter requires the judgment of a prudent man.
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> — Thomas Aquinas

In 2023, I traveled to Madagascar with a congressional staff delegation to witness efforts that were then underway to provide aid in the form of food, clean water, and economic development across one of the poorest countries in the world. This work was funded by a wide variety of nations and carried out by organizations like Catholic Relief Services and the UN's World Food Program. While traveling through Madagascar, we saw starving children being nourished back to health through

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the provision of Ready to Use Therapeutic Food packets. We saw desalination systems being installed at a local elementary school so not just the school children, but nearly 6,000 members of the surrounding community could have access to clean water. In some areas where there was not a paved road in sight and tools as simple as watering cans and wheelbarrows were widely unavailable if not unheard of, we were greeted with smiling faces by members of the local Tandroy tribe performing a traditional song and dance of welcome. As a follower of Christ, it is difficult not to see this aid as a way to meet the commands laid out again and again throughout Scripture to feed the hungry, provide water to the thirsty, and give to the poor and "least of these" (Proverbs 19:17, Matthew 25:34-40, Luke 3:11, 1 John 3:17-18).

On that same trip, however, we met with local government officials, representatives of the European Union, and staff at the U.S. embassy who repeatedly shared that they were skeptical that any of these assistance efforts would address the underlying problems that led to widespread poverty and malnourishment across Madagascar. Some officials even believed that aid from foreign governments and multilateral organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) contributed to the institutional corruption and sclerosis perpetuating the country's ongoing cycle of poverty as it propped up the actors in power. They cited examples of funds being used to build schools without hiring teachers or hospitals without hiring medical staff simply so that the local authorities could host a ribbon cutting and appear to be working on behalf of the people, all while the same group of powerful individuals lined their pockets with international generosity. This all comes at a time when the United States' national debt has risen over $38 trillion with tens of trillions more in implicit obligations, which leads to valid questions about what the wisest allocation of resources is given scriptural advice against such debt and fiscal irresponsibility (Proverbs 22:7).

As a believer on Capitol Hill, I struggle with the question of what role the United States government ought to have in providing foreign aid, and how both Christian policy makers and the church more broadly should approach our role in international assistance beyond traditional missions work. The Scriptures provide fairly limited instruction regarding the role of governments, which includes direction "to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good," (1 Peter 2:14), to serve as the instrument of God's judgment for wrongdoers (Romans 13:3-4), and to build structures that allow citizens to "lead a peaceful and quiet life," (1 Timothy 2:1-2). God has also judged and punished kings and nations who promote injustice and oppression among their people (Isaiah 10:1-2, Ezekiel 16:49-50). However, it seems clear that there is not an explicit scriptural command for the government itself to engage in any particular level or form of foreign assistance, humanitarian or otherwise.

This question of the government's role in foreign aid has remained at the forefront in policy debates in recent years. In Fiscal Year 2024, the United States provided over $86 billion in obligated funds for foreign assistance, covering everything from foreign military financing and security assistance to humanitarian aid and economic development.[1] However, within a week of President Trump's second inauguration, the administration issued an executive order freezing all foreign aid for 90 days,[2] called for stop-work orders for nearly all existing foreign assistance awards, and began a systemic review of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Over the course of the following months, waivers were granted for certain aid programs, including the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and other forms of lifesaving humanitarian aid,[3] lawsuits were filed,[4]

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[1] U.S. Department of State, *Fiscal Year 2024 Foreign Assistance Obligations*, http://www.foreignassistance.gov.

[2] The White House, "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," January 20, 2025.

[3] U.S. Department of State, "Emergency Humanitarian Waiver to Foreign Assistance Pause," January 28, 2025.

[4] *American Foreign Service Association v. Donald J. Trump*, No. 1:25-cv-00352 (D.D.C. filed Feb. 6, 2025).

temporary restraining orders were issued, and more lawsuits were filed. By March 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that a six-week review had been completed, the result of which was the cancellation of 83 percent of programs at USAID.[5] By July 1, USAID officially closed its doors and was folded into the broader State Department.[6]

The Administration cited examples of waste, fraud, and abuse at USAID, including tens of thousands of dollars for a "transgender opera" in Colombia and "hundreds of thousands of meals that went to al-Qaeda affiliated fighters in Syria."[7] Upon USAID's closing, Secretary Rubio pointed to rising anti-American sentiment in areas where we had previously provided aid and numerous cases where assistance was ineffective or counterproductive, and called for a new era where aid was overseen and operated through the broader State Department.[8] The administration said these changes would be made in order to ensure that future assistance was both targeted and time-limited, with the eventual aim of moving beyond aid and into trading partnerships where developing countries were no longer dependent on American support. Critics on the other hand, decried these changes as neglecting our responsibility to care for "the least of these" and pointed to studies indicating that USAID cuts would lead to hundreds of thousands more deaths across the globe as evidence that they could not be in line with sincerely held pro-life beliefs.[9]

Last January, in a defense of the administration's efforts to limit further illegal immigration, Vice President J.D. Vance made an appearance on Fox News where he stated that, "You

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[5] Marco Rubio (@marcorubio), "After a 6 week review we are officially cancelling 83% of the programs at USAID," X, March 10, 2025; Melody Schreiber, "Rubio Announces That 83% of USAID Contracts Will Be Canceled," NPR, March 10, 2025.

[6] U.S. Mission to the Holy See, "Making Foreign Aid Great Again," July 1, 2025.

[7] The White House, "At USAID, Waste and Abuse Runs Deep," February 3, 2025.

[8] U.S. Mission to the Holy See, "Making Foreign Aid Great Again," July 1, 2025.

[9] Karen Feldscher, "USAID Shutdown Has Led to Hundreds of Thousands of Deaths," Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, November 20, 2025.

love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that, you can focus [on] and prioritize the rest of the world." He later responded to critics on X by citing this philosophy as rooted in the Catholic doctrine of *ordo amoris*, or "order of loves." St. Augustine expounds this idea in *On Christian Doctrine*:

> Further, all men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought Further, all men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you… Just so among men: since you cannot consult for the good of them all, you must take the matter as decided for you by a sort of lot, according as each man happens for the time being to be more closely connected with you. [10]

While this is not a limitation strictly on "loving" all mankind, it does impart some insight into our finite capacity for practically supporting or doing good to those around us. 1 Timothy 5 also seems to speak into the instruction of James 1:27 to "visit the orphans and widows in their affliction" by placing some strictures on the need for assistance to those who are "truly widows," and commanding the remaining family to "learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents."

However, further expansion on this doctrine by both Augustine and Aquinas seems to make clear that this is not a strict limitation on assisting those outside our immediate sphere of influence, but rather a calling to care first for those who are nearest us and not to neglect our own families and neighbors. Aquinas expands upon Augustine's work in his *Summa Theologica*, clarifying that while we are certainly called

[10] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. I, 27.

to care first and foremost for those with whom we are most closely connected, we are also called to prioritize those who are in greater need. As an oversimplification, any parent who witnessed a pedestrian get struck by a car would not be justified in ignoring the victim simply because they were dealing with their own child's paper cut. Aquinas emphasizes that many questions of beneficence will require wisdom in how to best care for others given our limited capacity:

> The case may occur, however, that one ought rather to invite strangers, on account of their greater want. For it must be understood that, other things being equal, one ought to succor those rather who are most closely connected with us. And if of two, one be more closely connected, and the other in greater want, it is not possible to decide, by any general rule, which of them we ought to help rather than the other, since there are various degrees of want as well as of connection: and the matter requires the judgment of a prudent man. [11]

There is also the question of who we consider our family and neighbor under this doctrine of *ordo amoris*. While we are called to honor our immediate family, Christ not only calls into question whether these familial ties are not less important than our heavenly ties among fellow believers in the body of Christ (Matthew 12:49-50), but also clearly declares that Christian love, unlike the love of non-believers, should not be limited to solely our family (Matthew 5:47). And as seen with the parable of the Good Samaritan, being a good neighbor means more than simply caring for those with whom we share geographical or cultural ties. Rather it means choosing to assist those who we see in need regardless of the closeness of our connection to them, (Luke 10). Christ even directs us to avoid inviting our family, friends, or neighbors if we are to host a banquet, "lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid" (Luke 14:12).

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[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 31, "Beneficence," trans. Fathers the English Dominican Province, New Advent, accessed March 15, 2026.

What would it look like if Christians actively engaged with this call to charity and beneficence? We have documentation of the cultural influence the early church had by assisting those both within and outside of their communities as they practiced active love and costly generosity towards all in need that they could assist. The Roman Emperor Julian, the last non-Christian emperor who ruled in the mid-fourth century, wrote to the high priest of Galatia: "For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us."[12] Dionysios wrote in the late second century to the church in Rome, thanking for them for sending aid to their brothers and sisters in Corinth and beyond: "For from the beginning this has been a custom for you, always acting as a benefactor to siblings in various ways and sending financial support to many assemblies in every city, thus relieving the need of those in want and supplying additional help to the siblings who are in the mines."[13] Paul speaks of the grace of God present in the generosity of the churches of Macedonia, "for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints – and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

To some extent, our problems today with the government's role in humanitarian assistance result from an abdication of responsibility by the modern church. While Christians do tend to be more generous than non-believers, one 2024 study found that the average American evangelical gives just 3.3 percent of

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[12] Julian, *Letters*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, Loeb Classical Library 157 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 69.

[13] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, in A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), bk. 19, chap. 23, Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

their income to church or charity.[14] This does not even begin to take into account the fact that we are living in the richest nation in the history of the world, or Jesus' commands to a similarly situated Zacchaeus to give away half of his belongings or to the rich young ruler to give all he had. While there are certainly Christian charities and NGOs that engage in admirable humanitarian work across the globe, ranging from Samaritan's Purse to Catholic Relief Services, even these efforts are funded in large part through government assistance. For those of us who have been so richly blessed by the Lord's favor, there are clear commands throughout Scripture that we must care for the poor, the oppressed, and even the stranger through our personal generosity (Ezekiel 16:49, Acts 4:34-35, Hebrews 13:1-2, 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Tim Keller writes in his book *Generous Justice*, "Jesus taught that a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is seriously wrong with one's spiritual compass, the heart."[15] What would it look like if the church took this responsibility more seriously both at home and abroad?

While there may be many instances where charity is preferable to governmental intervention, the leverage that the U.S. government has may place it in a position to be more effective in ensuring human flourishing in certain contexts throughout the world than any NGO or church organization could hope to be. Gary Haugen, founder of International Justice Mission, has written extensively about the problem of violence throughout the developing world as an impediment to the success of other forms of humanitarian assistance such as food, water, and education. Children and families cannot be expected to have access to the resources provided by governments or charities if their safety is not assured as they go about their daily lives, and many governments across the globe do not have either the resources or the desire to provide for effective law enforcement. In spaces where organizations like IJM may have limited capacity to force changes, the United States can and has stepped in to negotiate Child Protection

[14] Infinity Concepts and Grey Matter Research, The Giving Gap: Changes in Evangelical Generosity (2024).

[15] Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice* (Dutton, 2010).

Compacts that can be carried out in conjunction with IJM and foreign countries like Romania and the Philippines to improve those nations' ability to combat online child sexual exploitation or child labor trafficking. Likewise, government agencies like the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) can promote and incentivize private investment in foreign countries that leads to a positive return on investment both for American taxpayer dollars and in the foreign countries where the investments are made. As an example, the DFC invested just $3.4 million to assist with a mining and refining facility in Angola, which will begin producing next year at a rate of approximately 20,000 tonnes per year of invaluable rare earth deposits that are vital to our broader strategic aims and geopolitical competition with adversaries like China.[16] Work done by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom designating Countries of Particular Concern has drawn attention to persecuted people of faith throughout the world, from the genocide of the Uyghurs in China to the ongoing abuse of Christians throughout Nigeria, and the annual Trafficking in Persons Report provides accountability for those who tolerate or participate in forced labor and sex trafficking. Each of these arms of the United States foreign policy apparatus fills a void that would not otherwise be met if we were to withdraw completely from the world stage.

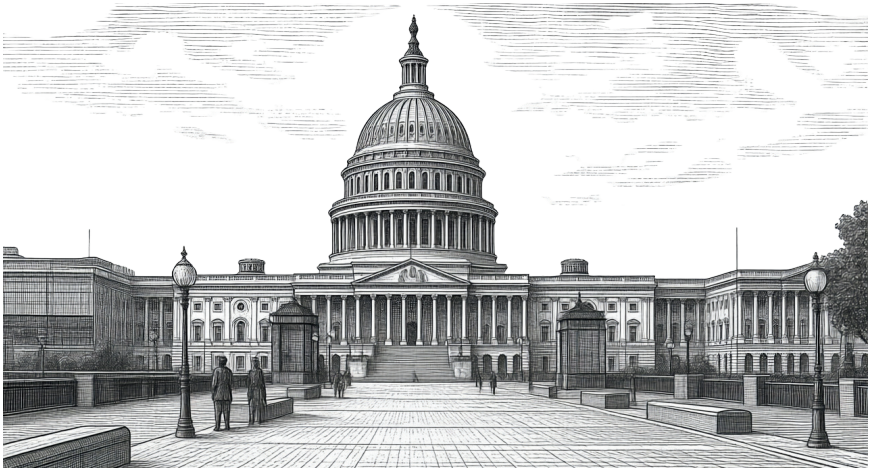
> While it is valid to debate the scope of foreign aid, Christians should not neglect the dire needs of fellow image bearers abroad.

Finally, it is important to consider the impact of humanitarian giving, both through private charity and government aid, on the moral imagination of a society. America has long been the most generous nation in the world, and that generosity has formative power both at the individual and

[16] U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, "Supporting Development: Rare Earth Processing Facility in Angola," accessed March 15, 2026.

societal level. Our national conversation should be able to balance the imperative of fiscal responsibility with the benefits that have accrued to our nation as the beacon on a hill we have long represented. These go beyond obvious practical advantages like the role of the dollar as the world's reserve currency or global freedom of navigation, and have the potential to inform the very character of a people. In Abraham Kuyper's address at the founding of the Free University in Amsterdam, he speaks of the impact of generosity, in this case upon those who were willing to financially support an independent educational institution, "Is not giving in itself a power; is not the ability to part with money a moral asset; who then will rightly value the moral capital that will accrue to our people through this costly Institution? Complaints have been made about lack of character, but what can be more helpful in forming character than such free initiative on the part of vigilant citizens?" The Bible time and time again admonishes the wealthy who store up temporal treasures while neglecting the call of openhanded generosity the Lord has given those who follow him, (Luke 12:16-21, James 5:1-6).

Taking into consideration the lack of a clear Scriptural framework for government in humanitarian assistance, it is valid for Christians to debate what scale and scope of aid prudence allows for, particularly when there are unmet domestic needs and a soon to be crippling national debt. However, Christian citizens should not allow that debate to lead them to neglect the dignity of our fellow image bearers abroad who are in dire need. Whether through encouraging individual charitable giving or through support for targeted government aid in places where it can make a difference, it is important for Christian policymakers to keep at the forefront Christ's mission "to proclaim good news to the poor… to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).



MILITARY INTERVENTION

Assessing Operation Southern Spear Through Christian Just War Traidition

John Bleed

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong....if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

- Romans 13:1-5

1. The Legal Problem with Operation Southern Sphere

In September 2025, the Trump administration launched Operation Southern Spear, a series of air strikes on known and suspected drug trafficking cartel groups in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean. These groups are designated as terrorist organizations with which the United States targets in a "non-

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international armed conflict." This campaign of over 21 kinetic strikes (to date) has killed over 150 people, none of whom have been identified or verified. This aggressive campaign and the preceding policy change to elevate drug trafficking as an act of war rather than a domestic crime raises serious ethical considerations for Christian policymakers.

Does the administration's use of military force to address drug smuggling - historically a domestic law enforcement issue - meet the standards of the Christian Just War Tradition? The strike campaign's shaky initial legal designation, poor intelligence verification methods, lackluster justification methods towards Congress, and deliberate 'double tap' on survivors from a September 2nd strike create substantial challenges for Christian policymakers to address. This paper will address these challenges by introducing the principles of the Christian Just War Tradition outlined by St. Augustine, summarize how the Just War Tradition has adapted over time to different legal worldviews, and then analyze the decisions and outcomes of Operation Southern Sphere through the lens of Just War Tradition.

Also related here is the deliberate obfuscation of Congressional war powers authority by the executive branch. While the lethal drone strikes that started on September 2 were permissible without formal congressional authorization, notifications to Congress within 48 hours are necessary when U.S. forces are engaging in "hostilities" or introducing "combat-equipped forces" into a country. This also starts a 60-day clock for the withdrawal of U.S. forces unless Congress enacts an AUMF or declares war. Previous presidential administrations have admitted that airstrikes meet the reporting thresholds of "hostilities" regardless of whether U.S. forces were in harm's way. For example, the Clinton administration notified Congress properly when conducting Tomahawk strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998, as did the first Trump administration in 2018 for its strikes on the Assad regime in Syria in retaliation for use of chemical weapons. Not so with the boat strike campaign.

2. An Overview of the Augustinian Just War Tradition

St. Augustine is the intellectual father of Christian Just War tradition, having acted as a bridge thinker between ancient philosophy and the Christian medieval worldview. Paul Miller, a Christian political theorist at Georgetown, emphasizes that Augustine is responsible for building out the Christian understanding of natural law and the idea that political sovereignty brought a sense of responsibility for the common good – something that had roots in the pagan traditions of Aristotle. In Augustine's mind, warfare was acceptable and noble not purely when it came to self-defense, but also for defending the innocent and punishing the wicked as God's arbiter on earth.[1] Miller argues that the Augustinian tradition innately understands just war as an act of love which has the power to create conditions of true peace and justice. Miller then goes on to outline the three key pillars of Augustinian Just War Tradition: *Jus Ad Bellum* (Justice Before War), *Jus In Bello* (Justice During War), and Jus Post Bellum (Justice After War). This paper will outline all three in order to build the framework for this paper's analysis of Operation Southern Sphere and whether the campaign meets their foundational principles.

The Augustinian tradition innately understands just war as an act of love which has the power to create conditions of true peace and justice.

First, Jus Ad Bellum (justice before war) argues that war must have a just cause such as self-defense, not for glory, conquest, or bloodlust. Miller notes that when justice of reconciliation, right relationships, and flourishing are violated, Augustine urges the state to step in and bring them to justice – a foundation not just for policing but also for international politics.[2] Wars under Jus Ad Bellum must likewise be fought under the right authority. In Augustine's *Questions on the Heptateuch*, *Book* VI, *Question* 10 *he puts the province of war*

[1] "Paul D. Miller, *Just War and Ordered Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 18–52.

[2] Miller, *Just War and Ordered Liberty*, 24.

on the state rather than the individual, arguing that "just wars are usually defined as those which avenge injuries, when a nation or state has to be punished for refusing to make amends for wrongs inflicted."[3] Wars under Jus Ad Bellum must be fought for the right intention, which is peace. In Letter 189 to Boniface, the Roman general, Augustine states that "peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace.... war is waged in order that peace may be obtained."[4]

Nation states under Jus Ad Bellum cannot use violence or military force for purposes other than re-establishing the conditions of peace. Vengeance, intimidation, and prestige do not qualify as acceptable reasons to draw the sword. These same principles were carried on in the medieval world by Thomas Aquinas, who argued in *Summa Theologiae*, Part II–II (Second Part of the Second Part), Question 40, "Of War," that "belligerents should have a rightful intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil."[5]

Miller also interprets Jus Ad Bellum as a requirement to meet prudential considerations before going to war. There must be a reasonable chance of success, it must be conducted as a last resort, and the use of force must have proportionality in end-stated objectives. Rebeccah Heinrichs notes that

> Proportionality… weighs the military effect that you seek to achieve against the unintended but known negative effects that will happen. You have to seek to avoid them. You want to minimize civilian casualties even as you conduct this military operation. But the good that you seek, both in terms of the military objective and in what you're trying to defend… both of those things. Is it proportionate? That's an important nuance that many people fail to grasp.[6]

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[3] Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, VI.10.

[4] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, bk. 19, chap. 7, accessed July 15, 2026.

[5] ST II-II Q. 40, a. 1.

[6] Rebeccah Heinrichs, "Rebeccah Heinrichs Christianity & National Security 2023," Providence, November 16, 2023.

This means that nation-states under just war doctrine cannot use violence or force for purposes of vengeance. All military action must be proportional to the state's desired military outcome. It should not be viewed in comparison to the enemy's use of force or their potential capabilities, but only in terms of what is required for the military objective.

Jus In Bello (Justice During War) sets out to lay guidelines on the rules that guide military conduct. These include proportionality in force (using means on lawful targets rather than civilians), discrimination (the state's use of violence must be for the purposes of justice, self-defense, protecting the innocent rather than vengeance), military necessity (no wanton use of violence for no clear military purpose), and distinction (combatants must only target lawful combatants rather than civilians or civilian areas). Just Post Bellum, per Miller, asks the question about the "day after." What end state are we pursuing? Miller argues that, for Augustine, the state must pursue order, justice, and conciliation as its top objectives to emerge from any military action or campaign.[7]

3. Analyzing Different Just War Traditions

It is worth addressing the fact that there is not one single just war theory in the history of orthodox Christianity or the Western political tradition. Paul Miller argues that three branches have emerged – Augustinian, Westphalian, and Liberal. All three branches are useful for scrutinizing Operation Southern Sphere, and some espouse a more explicitly Christian worldview than the others.[8] While Augustine's Just War Tradition has already been analyzed in Section Two, Miller also discusses a second model, known as the Westphalian model, born out of a period of bloodshed in the 16th and 17th centuries that cemented an alternate understanding of sovereignty than Augustine's. Rulers were now responsible for imposing their own religion, rather than religion impacting a ruler's interest calculus. This changed the reasons that governments used to

[7] Miller, *Just War and Ordered Liberty*, 24.
[8] Ibid., 24.

justify wars. They no longer went to war to impose substantive justice on God's behalf but to impose procedural justice like the enforcement of borders, controlling natural resources, imposing social contracts, enhancing prestige, or individual rights.[9] With Augustine a millennia past and the Enlightenment in full swing, Miller argues that natural law became less about protecting an order made by God and more about self-preservation. The right authority to use force was whatever the state needed it to be, so long as it advanced principles like self-preservation, prestige, and power.[10] One could be forgiven for mistaking this post-Reformation understanding of justice with the cold-hearted political realism of Macchiavelli.

This Westphalian power model is less amenable to a Christian worldview and is useful for understanding the Trump administration's defense of Operation Southern Sphere. Statements by administration officials suggest that use of force is the point of the operation – not the strategic objective of halting drugs coming into the country. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated point blank in October 2025 that "the Department of War is not going to degrade, or just simply arrest" drug trafficking boats coming to the country, and in a December speech, he indicated that "if you're working for a designated terrorist organization and you bring drugs to this country in a boat, we will find you and we will sink you."[11]

The third model, Liberalism, emerged following WWII. The postwar multilateral consensus recognized that the rules of war needed to be strengthened after so much indiscriminate violence. More restraint was needed, civilians needed better protection, and individual democratic values were paramount. Miller argues that liberal just war doctrine was essentially a rebottling of Augustinian concepts with no theological foundation. Westphalia had unlocked a new focus on individual human rights and government accountability to the people,

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] David Klepper, "WATCH: Hegseth Delivers Keynote Address at Reagan National Defense Forum," PBS NewsHour, December 6, 2025.

rather than natural law and divine justice. But post-war proponents of just war believed they needed to apply outside higher standards to mitigate the violent impulses of nation-states – hence the rise in multilateral institutions like the United Nations, NATO, and the early foundations of the European Union. These proponents have been horrified by Operation Southern Sphere, calling for investigations into war crimes under humanitarian law and focusing their attention on international norms rather than natural law.

> Liberal just war doctrine was essentially a rebottling of Augustinian concepts with no theological foundation

4. Assessing Operation Southern Spear Through Just War Tradition

The Trump administration's decision to launch kinetic military action against drug trafficking cartels in South America does not meet the standards of the Augustinian Just War Tradition because they violate, at minimum, one principle of jus ad bellum, two principles of jus in bello, and potentially risk violating a principle of jus post bellum as well. At the core of this argument is the September 2nd decision to conduct follow-up strikes on survivors from an initial drone strike, which violates the jus ad bellum principle stated by St. Augustine that the state's use of violence must be for the purposes of seeking justice (such as self-defense or protecting the vulnerable) rather than seeking vengeance. The Pentagon's rules of war, which are based on these principles, clearly state in Section 5.9 that persons who are in a state of *hors de combat* ("out of the fight") may not be made the subject of attack if they are shipwrecked or incapacitated due to maritime disaster: "persons who have been incapacitated by... shipwreck are in a helpless state, and it would be dishonorable and inhumane to make them the object of attack." (§5.9.4).[12] Rebeccah Heinrichs

[12] U.S. Department of Defense, Law of War Manual (Washington, DC: Office of General Counsel, Department of Defense, June 2015, updated December 2023), § 5.9.4.

likewise notes that jus in bello principles require that any military strike should be proportional to the desired military objective, not to the size of the opponent's force or out of a desire to intimidate disproportionately.[13] She argues that just war traditions understand the need for rulers to guard against mankind's natural impulses to use violence indiscriminately, and so use violence solely for the purpose of accomplishing state objectives. Attacking combatants who were out of the fight, even if by mistake, is a clear violation of the just war tradition.

The Trump administration also violated jus in bello in Operation Southern Sphere by publicly claiming that the United States could have interdicted these vessels and chose to launch military strikes against them anyway, violating the military necessity principle.[14] In a joint press conference with Mexican Foreign Secretary Juan Ramón de la Fuente in Mexico City on September 3, 2025, Secretary Marco Rubio stated

> The United States has long — for many, many years — established intelligence that allowed us to interdict and stop drug boats. And we did that. And it doesn't work. Interdiction doesn't work... So the same information and the same intelligence mechanisms with maybe a higher focus was used to determine that a drug boat was headed towards, eventually, the United States, and instead of interdicting it, on the President's orders, he blew it up. [15]

What this statement from Secretary Rubio showed was that the United States was no longer acting in self-defense, nor was it acting in military necessity. Since he acknowledged the U.S. government has a history of using non-military assets capable of addressing the immediate challenge of stropping drug cartel boats coming to the U.S., the argument that military force was necessary for this specific mission loses out.

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[13] Rebeccah Heinrichs, "*Rebeccah Heinrichs Christianity & National Security 2023*," *Providence*, *November 16, 2023.*

[14] *JIB/JAB – The Laws of War Podcast*, episode 41.

[15] U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Mexican Foreign Secretary Juan Ramón de la Fuente at a Joint Press Availability," September 2025.

Rubio's Westphalian logic does not justify a clear violation of Just War Tradition if the other proportional assets were available to use. One could even argue that the just war principle of jus ad bellum is also violated here, in which Augustine mandates that war is not for glory, conquest, or bloodlust of any sort.

As discussed in Section One, the faulty legal claim that the United States is in a "non-international armed conflict" with foreign drug trafficking organizations does not meet the military necessity principle of jus in bello, given that drug interdiction has for so long been a domestic law enforcement issue. JIB/JAB makes clear that the fundamental difference between Tren De Aragua and a terrorist group like Al Qaeda is their intent: Al Qaeda intended to destroy the United States and kill its civilians and uniformed servicemembers at home and aboard. But drug trafficking groups are fundamentally (with some notable exceptions) funded by revenue from narcotic sales in the U.S. market. Drug trafficking, as brutal as its consequences have been for American quality of life, can be likened more closely to gun violence – a form of tragedy that does not have intent is the addiction of the consumer, expanded markets. It is understandable why the Coast Guard, DEA, and domestic intelligence agencies have historically led on this issue.

A decision from the Trump administration to interdict and release survivors of an October 16th strike also undercuts the legal justification (and moral claim) that these survivors were terrorists. Even while arguing that these targeted strikes were necessary because the traffickers posed imminent threats to the homeland, the U.S. Navy arrested the survivors and repatriated them to Colombia rather than charging them with a crime. The JIB/JAB Laws of War podcast rightfully questions this decision, arguing that if they were really terrorists who posed imminent threats to U.S. civilians, the administration's decision not to prosecute remaining survivors from the strikes or even hold them in a military detainment center like Guantanamo Bay implies the Pentagon may have been trying to

avoid one of the few legal challenges to the strikes themselves – the requirement to give a *habeas* challenge to the detention of individuals involved.[16] If these individuals were not worth detaining, were they worth killing in the first place?

Lastly, Operation Southern Sphere's normative consequences have the potential to violate the just war tenant of jus post bellum – that the end goal of war must be to pursue order, justice, and a lasting peace.[17] By turning these drug boats into military threats rather than criminal threats, the U.S. government is sending the message worldwide that massive combat powers are justified for non-proportional objectives.[18] This campaign risks sending a signal that war powers are applicable to domestic security or to curtailing the individual rights of citizenry. Geoffrey Corn argues that "other governments dealing with problematic criminal threats might very well adopt the U.S. playbook, expanding "policing through combat" and asserting justification to extend combat operations into the territory of other states."[19] This in turn opens the door to more interstate conflict in areas already prone to violence along ethnic or sectarian lines (DRC, Rwanda, Myanmar, etc.). If more people suffer in the long run after this strike campaign, just post bellum would be violated.

If these individuals were not worth detaining, were they worth killing in the first place?

5. Conclusion

God gives earthly authorities clear permission to conduct lawful military activity that defends the vulnerable, eliminates sources of wrongdoing, and upholds principles of justice rather than vengeance. This paper argues that the Trump

[16] JIB/JAB – The Laws of War Podcast, episode 41.

[17] Miller, *Just War and Ordered Liberty*, 24.

[18] Geoffrey S. Corn, "Why U.S. Strikes Against Drug Boats Matter," War on the Rocks, October 17, 2025.

[19] Ibid.

administration's Operation Southern Sphere campaign of air strikes on suspected narco-terrorists in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific does not meet the standards of the Christian Just War tradition. While the strike campaign has clearly been influenced by the Westphalian just war political tradition, it rejects Augustinian and Liberal principles in five areas:

I. The Administration's double tap follow-up strike on survivors from an initial drone strike violates the just ad bellum requirement that the state's use of violence must be for the purposes of seeking justice rather than vengeance.

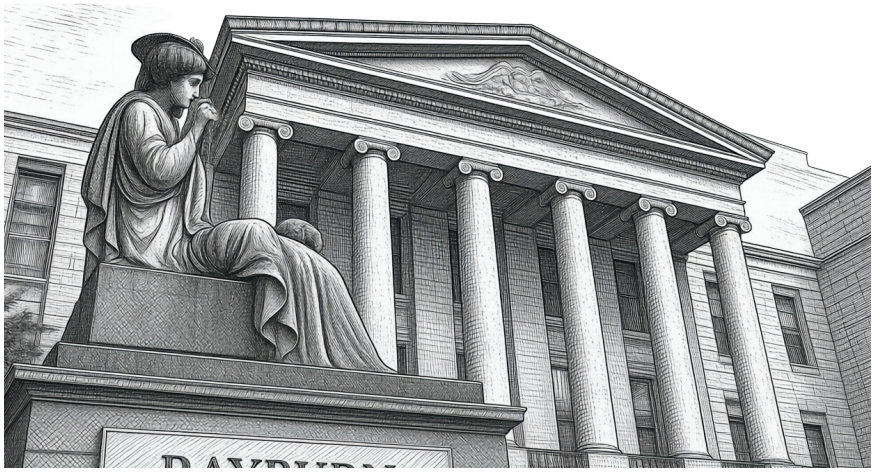
II. The Administration publicly claimed that the U.S. could have interdicted these vessels and chose to launch military strikes against them anyway meaning that the jus in bello principle of military necessity was violated.

III. The Administration's faulty legal claim that the United States is in a "non-international armed conflict" with foreign drug trafficking organizations does not match the military necessity principle of jus in bello, given that drug interdiction has for so long been a domestic law enforcement issue.

IV. The Administration's decision to release survivors of an October 16th strike without charging them with a crime, also undercutting the proportionality principle of jus in bello.

V. The strikes set a dangerous normative precedent for bad actors elsewhere around the world, violating jus post bellum rules for establishing order and justice.

While the Christian policymaker can take confidence that God grants earthly governments the authority to conduct lawful military activity, it is fundamentally for purposes that defend the vulnerable, eliminate sources of wrongdoing, uphold principles of justice rather than vengeance, and move towards the ultimate goal of peace. This Administration's OSS campaign falls short of these standards.



WAR ON TERROR

Just War: How Scripture Shapes Conceptions of War and Peace

Hayden Upchurch

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1. Introduction

We live in a broken world. We are broken by sin individually and collectively. As Christians, we know this brokenness is not final. In no way does the pain and agony of sin on this earth have an eternal grip on us. But in the midst of this hope that we experience through Christ, we interact daily with the pains and evil currently present on earth. We know these pains will not subside until the Lord returns, so we must face them head-on. One of the most painful phenomena humans encounter is warfare. It is the largest, most destructive form of human conflict and can span from small-scale conflict between local tribes to world-threatening campaigns between nuclear powers. War is a reality we all face.

Despite the pain of war, is it always a zero-sum game that ends negatively? Are there ways to conduct war that are just? Does Scripture point us to how we conduct ourselves before, during, and after war? These are questions that many Christians wrestle with today, and they are the same questions Augustine wrestled with in the 4th century when he developed the beginnings of what would later be known as Just War Theory. While Augustine's full theology of war spans many texts, this essay focuses on a single text, his *Letter to Faustus*, as an illuminating example of scriptural reasoning about warfare. What we can see in America's current foreign policy is that, as Augustine remarks, war is permissible when undertaken to protect an innocent party from an evil party, through means necessary only to stop that perpetration, and only when the final goal of the war is peace.[1]

In this paper, I will address the following: how the themes of the *Imago Dei* and the Fall explain why war exists, why the principles of the Just War Theory remain applicable today, which key Scriptures inform our view of war, and finally, an example of how the principles presented in scripture applied to a decision of the United States government to go to war in defense of our nation. War, if justified, may offer a way to treat people as image-bearers by protecting them from aggressors.

2. Made in the Image of God and the Fall: Why War Happens

Two main themes throughout the arc of scripture show why violence, conflict, and war exist in our world today: the *imago dei* and the Fall. Genesis 1:26-27 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The idea of humanity being made in the image of God is critical to understanding the sanctity of life. God did not create humanity only to be the dominant

[1] Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, XXII.

species on earth; He created us to reflect His character. When humanity was created, God looked at what he had made and said, “it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). The bestowing of the *imago* onto humanity demonstrates his love for humanity. The Creator’s work is perfect. We were created to reflect the character and love of the Creator who made us, yet we would fail in our purpose.

As the serpent tested Eve’s obedience to the Lord’s commands and deceived her into eating the forbidden fruit, along with Adam following, sin entered the world. Genesis 3:7 says “the eyes of both of them” were opened to their nakedness–to their disobedience. Cast from the garden, Adam and Eve’s family experiences immense strife as their son Cain kills his brother Abel in Genesis 4:8 out of jealousy and anger. This murder is our first glimpse into the origins of the war we see today. Just as one man killed his brother out of jealousy and anger, so too do nations and non-state actors. These actions are taken because they do not recognize the inherent worth of people bestowed by their Creator. They neglect the principle of the *imago dei*. What are we to do in this situation? Do we stand by and watch, or do we take action?

3. Principles of Just War Theory

In order to understand just war reasoning, consider the following remarks from Augustine in his *Letter to Faustus*:

> What is the evil of war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is merely cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling. The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some

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[2] Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, trans., Richard Stothert, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887XXII. Ch 74.

> lawful authorities, good men undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act, in this way.[2]

Morever,

> A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their military duties in behalf of the peace and safety of the community. When war is undertaken in obedience to God, who would rebuke, or humble, or crush the pride of man, it must be allowed to be righteous war; for even the wars which arise from human passion cannot harm the eternal well-being of God, nor even the saints.[3]

In his *Letter to Faustus*, Augustine supports this reasoning of just war with several moral principles. First, war must be taken when it is in obedience to God to demolish the pride of man: "When war is undertaken in obedience to God, who would rebuke, or humble, or crush the pride of man, it must be allowed to be righteous war...."[4] What we see from this text is that a war can only be justified when it is in obedience to God and addresses a fundamental flaw in the human spirit, such as pride. Now, although this is seldom the sole reason for a conflict, when a decision is made to go to war, the leader must understand that it cannot solely be for their gain, but it must punish a wrong. This first principle can also be seen as defending the indefensible, and, by doing so, it crushes the opponent consumed with the pride of man.

Second, the only legitimate goal of war is peace. "A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and

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[3] Ibid

[4] Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, XXII. Chapter 75.

on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind."[5] Although this may seem like a simple principle, it is difficult to keep at the front of mind throughout a war. Wars are long and often drawn out. A war conducted in a just manner must continuously seek peace and take every opportunity to secure it. This does not mean entering peacetime that will clearly. This does not mean entering peacetime that will clearly return to conflict. It means to earnestly seek a peaceful end at every step of the conflict. This is difficult to evaluate due to the nature of the principle. The principle is based on self-reflection by decision-makers and therefore is unlikely to be properly evaluated by the public. Despite the difficulty of evaluation, the principle is strong as it ensures that peace is the ultimate goal, not strife.

Lastly, when war is conducted unjustly and corrupted by the same evils it seeks to address, it will be ineffective and should be considered unjust. "The real evils in war are love of violence revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment."[6] Although wars are inherently violent and reflect the sins of our world, the corruption of a force seeking peace will culminate in the opposite of the initial intended result. This principle poses difficulties when confronting the realities of violence and the enemy on the battlefield, but it must be held at a macro level. The leaders of a war must not perpetrate the same acts they intend to stop.

The leaders of a war must not perpetrate the same acts they intend to stop.

4. Key Scriptures to Consider when Analyzing a Just War

Scripture must always be the starting point of practical reasoning, and Augustine's perspective on when war is justified

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., XXII, 74.

as seen by his response to Faustus, uses Scripture as its basis and framework. Romans 13:1-4 says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." In this verse, we see the sovereignty of Christ. God is the ultimate authority as the sovereign leader over all the earth, so human leaders cannot truly hold authority without God's establishment. The passage then goes on to say "the authorities that exist have been established by God." Although this can be difficult for us to reconcile given the evil leaders we have seen throughout history, it is still true. Despite how it feels, the truth remains. That passage continues:

> Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:2-4)

In this passage, Paul shows that those in authority are called to do what is right. Leaders are called to serve the people, not to be served. This is where tyrants go wrong. Their power is wielded to serve themselves. In verse four we see that Paul warns those who do wrong. These wrongdoers are reminded that rulers "do not bear the sword for no reason." This is where we apply the reasoning modeled by Augustine in his *Letter to Faustus*. It is in this moment that a clear wrong, as defined by Scripture, can be addressed through force. God has given rulers the means to apply force. This Scripture even states that rulers are God's servants to bring "punishment on the wrongdoer." This sounds like too much power for one person to hold, but the distinction we must make is that it is not humans who determine what is right and wrong; it is God.

Scripture offers us a moral code to follow, and the decision of when to move forward with an act of war must be made by recognizing true evil, properly addressing it, and seeking peace as the ultimate end. In 1 Peter 2, we see this call on authority to follow God's authorities on earth who have been sent by him: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." Scripture places a high call on rulers and authorities because they have been given the "sword": the power to wage war, the power to defend life through the taking of it. God does not condone evil. Instead, he calls leaders to pursue peace and good, which is why these passages do not rest on human power, but on the power of God.

5. Case Study: Applying Just War Theory to the War on Terror

In recent history, the War on Terror clearly exemplifies why a country would wage war on an enemy due to an existential threat and evil (a just cause), yet also face immense difficulty in carrying out its mission while upholding moral standards. In the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on 9/11, the United States waged war on terror in Afghanistan, the hub of Al-Qaeda, and this war would spread throughout the Middle East and to the rest of the world. This war continues today as the United States combats terror groups in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Somalia, Western Africa, and other places across the globe.

The 2001 Authorization of the Use of Military Force, passed by the United States Congress, gave the US military the power to "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he [The President of the United States] determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."[7] This was the start of what many would consider a just war. The principles of why

[7] "Authorization for Use of Military Force," Pub. L. 107-40, 115 Stat. 224, 2001.

and how it was waged largely reflect those we see in Scripture and in Augustine's perspectives of justified war.

First, as previously stated, war must be undertaken only when it is in obedience to God to redress the pride of man. War can also be waged in defense of an indefensible group. Belligerent groups like Al-Qaeda and its affiliates represent the epitome of human pride. Their contempt for the West and "lust of power" led them to commit acts of terror in the name of religious struggle. The United States wages war against terror to rebuff this pride and defend those made vulnerable by their attacks.

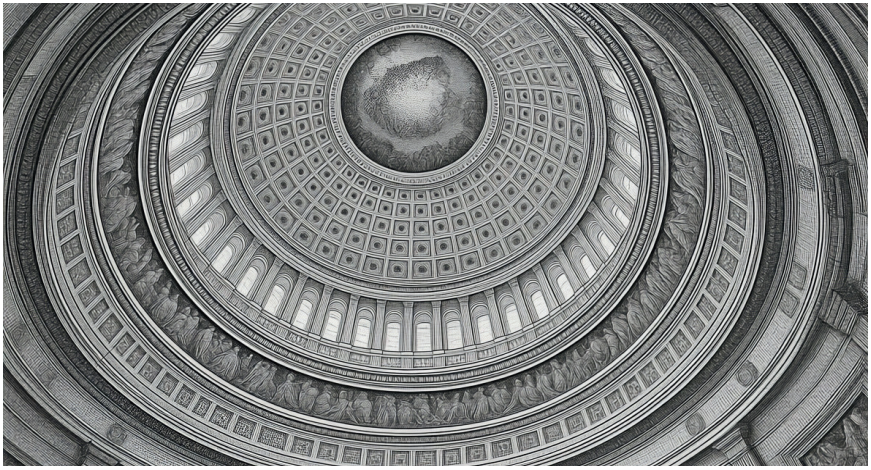
Secondly, wars must seek the final result of peace. Eradication of terror and the installation of peace is the goal of a War on Terror. The only way to achieve peace in this circumstance is through war; no negotiation with the perpetrators is possible. The United States is still fighting the war on terror and affiliates of Al-Qaeda are still active throughout the world.

Lastly, when war is conducted unjustly and corrupted by the same evils it seeks to address, it will be ineffective and should be considered unjust. Throughout the War on Terror, the United States faced (and continues to face) evil acts displaying the full corruption of the heart. The U.S. uses force to address these evils and mitigate them, but that does not mean the United States is faultless. There have been times when the military's actions have been improper or indiscriminate, and do not demonstrate adequate adherence to just war principles. This is when we have to face the realities of a sinful world, trying to uphold a fully just cause–it is impossible. But that does not mean that all other actions are worthless. It means that we must seek to hold that standard.

6. Conclusion

War is complex. A decision to go to war should be based on the distinction between good and evil. The difficulty America faces

is that we are flawed. Rulers are sinful. We as a country cannot make a perfectly just decision because we cannot be without flaws. But the United States should not seek to enter into war with our adversaries. We should do so when it is necessary. We must consider why we see it as a just action. These principles of Just War have been heavily present in US reasoning regarding conflict, and these principles are largely based on Scripture. Despite our flaws, when policymakers base their policy on moral principles, they are basing it on scriptural truths because God is the ultimate source of moral reasoning.



INFERTILITY

Thinking Biblically About Infertility

Katherine Huiskes

1. Outline of the Problem

Many married couples have a strong desire for children but struggle with infertility. They often turn to artificial reproductive methods, like in vitro fertilization (IVF), if unable to conceive naturally. This technology has made it possible for many couples to achieve their dream of conceiving a child of one's own progeny. In 2023, approximately 95,000 babies were born using IVF, representing roughly two percent of total births nationally. Public opinion is likewise favorable toward Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART): seven in ten Americans supporting use of IVF to achieve pregnancy.

The second Trump administration has made coverage of IVF a policy priority. On October 16, 2025, President Trump announced an executive order that permits employers to offer standalone benefit packages to employees to cover IVF and other fertility treatments. The order also includes an

agreement with a drug manufacturer to lower the cost of fertility medications.[1] Fertility medications are also one of the drugs available at a discounted price through Trump Rx.

Christian denominations currently vary significantly in how they think about IVF; there is no one, single ethical framework. However, denominations can and should develop an ethical framework for their congregants to assess ARTs. While many Christians are beginning to reckon with the ethical implications of IVF and are abstaining from its use, many nevertheless view it as a miracle technology that has enabled many couples to conceive children who were otherwise unable to do so naturally.

Guidance on whether or not couples should use IVF for themselves is something denominations are clearly more equipped to provide than the federal government. But, since IVF is considered a medical procedure coverable by health insurance, and since the federal government regulates and operates health insurance plans, the federal government does have a role to play. This paper will therefore examine current federal approaches to IFV coverage and how Christians should think about policy related to IVF, and infertility broadly, through the frameworks of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation.

2. Worldview

IVF presents certain challenges for Christian moral reasoning because its end, the creation of new life, is lauded and mandated throughout Scripture. Genesis 1:28 directs Adam to "be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it." New life is also sanctioned and directed by God. Over and over again, God shows his glory and satisfies the desires of hurting couples by providing them a child. The birth of Isaac is an example (Gen. 21). God delights to help families in this way and everywhere affirms the desire for children.

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[1] Jennifer L. Colvin and Sheri L. Giger, "State Laws Aim to Reverse Baby Bust and Cut IVF Costs," The National Law Review, December 9, 2025.

Yet, throughout the whole story of Scripture, God judges his people when they attempt to circumvent him in the pursuit of gifts, even good gifts. God promises Abram that his descendents will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, despite Abram and his wife Sarah's advanced years. Abram and Sarah rejoice in this promise, and Abram's faith in God is "credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). In the next chapter, though, Sarah attempts to take matters into her own hand. She complains that "the Lord has kept me from having children" and suggests her husband "go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her" (Genesis 16: 1-2). God's mercy is on display as Ishmael is, ultimately, blessed despite Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith, but God also does not bless Abraham's actions. The story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael helps to illustrate how procreation outside God's plan of procreation within marriage leads God's people away from full dependence on him. It also shows the depths to which sin has permeated even something as God-ordained as the creation of new life, and how the Fall affected procreation.

The ability to bear children is uniquely given to women. Like all aspects of the created order, this ability was altered by the Fall. As Emma Waters argues,

> When sin entered the world, Eve and future women bore the punishment for sin in the pain of childbirth. Yet this "pain in childbirth" refers not only to the physical pain of labor. It includes the uncertainty, fear, and death that will unnaturally go with each aspect of childbearing, from the desire to have children (or its rejection), to conception, pregnancy, labor, and even the care for one's children outside the womb."[2]

Waters goes on to say that, given the centrality of fertility to God's command to bear fruit and multiply, "to experience infertility is not a sin in and of itself, but it is the consequence of sin entering the world."

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[2] Emma Waters, "Protestant Denominations Need Stronger Leadership on Assisted Reproductive Technology," The Heritage Foundation, December 9, 2025.

Because, therefore, infertility is a product of the Fall, policy solutions by themselves will never entirely reverse this problem. We must await the coming Redemption, in which God will make all sad things untrue and gloriously unite His people to Himself. We are faced in the interim with many partial, less-than-perfect solutions. The most discussed and utilized solution to infertility is IVF.

A range of viewpoints toward artificial reproductive technologies are represented in the American church today. More theologically liberal denominations, like the Episcopal Church, emphasize the role of personal judgment in making decisions on IVF, and certainly view the use of IVF as permissible. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), by contrast, has developed the most comprehensive guidance on reproductive technology. The LCMS rejects the use of IVF for Christians because it separates procreation from marriage.

Emma Waters again suggests that "by distinguishing between procreation and reproduction, the [LCMS] papers emphasize the temptation of reproductive technology to present children as a project, or an act of the will, rather than as a gift that is received in marriage."[3]

It is clear that much more theologically rigorous analysis is needed for pastors to effectively shepherd their flock on this issue. While the desire to bring solutions for infertility is good, Christians should not just unthinkingly embrace artificial reproductive technology, given its troubling ethical implications. For most issues debated in the public square, proponents of both sides are arguing that their actions are good and will provide for human flourishing. The task Christians must face in the public square is to determine if the alleviation of infertility is Good if pursued by improper means.

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[3] Emma Waters, "Protestant Denominations Need Stronger Leadership on Assisted Reproductive Technology" (June 24, 2024). https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/commentary/protestant-denominations-need-stronger-leadership-assisted

There are other means of bringing redemption to infertile women besides IVF. Restorative Reproductive Medicine, or RRM, is a field of medicine that attempts to treat the underlying issues in both men and women that may contribute to infertility. These methods seek to restore the natural body, not to circumvent it, and thus should be given serious consideration by infertile couples who are considering IVF.

Since infertility is a consequence of the Fall, policy solutions should be ordered toward restoration and redemption. In his book, *Creation Regained*, Al Wolters writes,

> Salvation in Jesus Christ, conceived in the broad creational sense, means a restoration of culture and society in their present stage of development. That restoration will not necessarily oppose literacy or urbanization or the internal combustion engine, although these historical developments have led to their own distortions or evils. Instead, the coming of the kingdom of God demands that they be made answerable to their creational structure, and that they be subjected to the ordinances of the Creator. [4]

IVF must be used in a way that is answerable to our created structure and subjected to the ordinances of the Creator. With that framework in mind, we will now examine how current federal approaches to IVF might fit into a biblical framework.

3. Different Approaches to Solving the Policy Problem

Policymakers from both the Republican and Democratic parties have introduced legislation in an attempt to make IVF more affordable. A single round of IVF, that may or may not lead to the birth of a child, typically costs between $5,000 and $30,000. The exact nature of the policy varies–some bills, such as H.R. 1427, would establish a refundable tax credit for coupleswho pursue IVF, while other bills, like the Right to IVF Act, require Medicare, Medicaid, and commercial insurers to

[4] Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Erdman's Publishing, 2005).

cover fertility treatments. This approach is nominally rooted in the biblical idea of justice as fairness. By breaking down barriers and lowering the cost of IVF, more people would be able to have access to it.

Another policy approach, as detailed by the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, would require the government to set up ethical guardrails for the use of IVF. The ERLC urges the federal government to clarify definitionally that every embryo is a child and to create rules to accredit, certify, and monitor IVF facilities.[5] It also urges the government to ensure women and families are informed of the risks and alternatives to IVF; require facilities to meet standards ensuring frozen embryos are treated with care; limiting IVF procedures to only fertilize one egg; and encouraging providers to tell women that IVF is not a fertility solution and does not address underlying fertility concerns; and prevent the disposal of an embryo due to genetic testing results or sex selection, recognizing that both are forms of discrimination. The ERLC also does not believe federal tax dollars should be used for IVF and would support robust religious freedom guarantees.

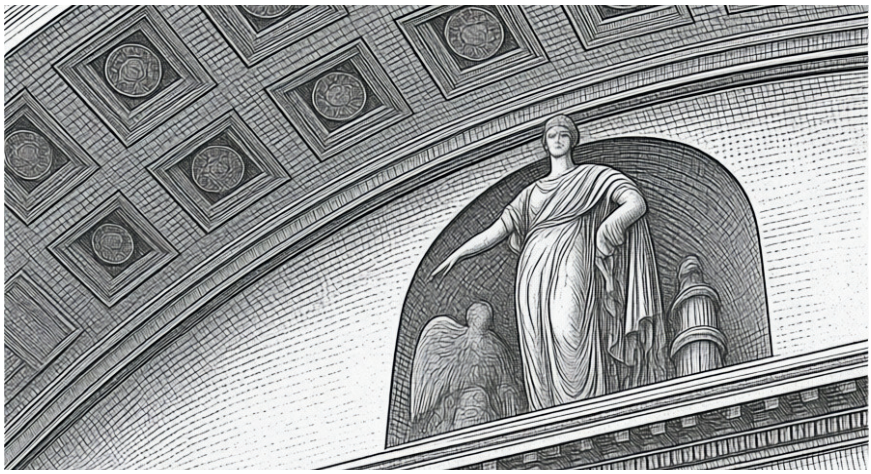
Outside of policy narrowly tailored toward IVF, there are also policy options that seek to promote reproductive restorative medicine. Another bill proposed in the Senate to address this problem is the Reproductive Empowerment and Support through Optimal Restoration (RESTORE) Act. Introduced by Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS) and cosponsored by three other Republicans, this bill addresses reproductive health conditions that often con health conditions, and direct HHS tribute to infertility and painful medical cycles, including endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), uterine fibroids, blocked fallopian tubes, and thyroid conditions. Among its provisions, the bill would direct HHS to develop educational tools for women seeking information about

[5] Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, "IVF Policy One-Pager," December 2024.

Federal policy should provide restoration and healing to women, and not allow life to be discarded.

reproductive health conditions and RRM, provide training opportunities for medical professionals to care through proper testing, diagnosis, and treatment of reproductive conditions. This bill also directs HHS to update the diagnostic and procedural codes related to infertility so that insurance companies would be able to cover RRM.

Federal actions related to IVF should be directed toward policy that provides restoration and healing to women, and does not allow life to be discarded. Since creation is ultimately directed toward restoration, but stymied by the fall, it would be right for Christian policymakers to support and pursue policy to this end.



PORNOGRAPHY

Liberty and Human Dignity: A Christian Realist Approach to Pornography Policy

Laura Sanders

Although it is seldom addressed with sustained seriousness in public discourse, Americans encounter sexually explicit material online with notable frequency. Sexual content, particularly pornography, has become normalized within contemporary culture. Exposure often begins at an increasingly young age, as children can encounter explicit material through internet platforms, social media, and mobile technology. It manifests in a wide range of forms across diverse digital platforms, contributing to a level of pervasiveness unprecedented in prior generations. According to the Institute for Family Studies, six in ten Americans have watched pornography at some point in their lives and one in four have watched it in the last month.[1] What distinguishes the present context is not merely the volume of such material, but its near

[1] "How Prevalent Is Pornography?" Institute for Family Studies. (May 2022).

universal accessibility and relative anonymity, conditions that significantly amplify both its reach and its social impact.

The effects of consuming pornography and sexually explicit material are neither singular nor exclusively personal. Whether noticed or not, they can ripple outward, affecting individuals and communities on both small and large scales. For individuals, habitual consumption, even of seemingly benign sexual content in films, can produce a range of unforeseen negative consequences. Many, predominantly men, are first exposed at a very young age and can quickly develop addictive patterns. Consuming sexual content, which presents a shadow of real intimacy, triggers dopamine and activates neural pathways in ways similar to addictive substances, making it highly addictive and difficult to stop.[2] Additionally, frequent viewing of pornography is linked to loneliness, insecurity, and high levels of self-dissatisfaction.[3]

Moreover, the dramatized and often inauthentic portrayal of erotic activity can distort perceptions of sexuality, shaping unrealistic expectations and impairing the quality of real-life relationships. Over time, pornography also undermines genuine human connection, drawing individuals further into isolation and loneliness. Its effects are thus both psychological and relational, influencing not only how people view themselves and others, but also how they participate in the social fabric of family and community.

Pornography can inhibit the formation of healthy relationships and often damages marriages – the very fabric of society and bedrock of healthy families.

Pornography consumption is also linked to the objectification of persons and, in some cases, to increased acceptance of

[2] Lesley Wirth, "The Brains of Porn Addicts (According to Neuroscientists), MentalHealth.com (January 17, 2025).

[3] Institute for Family Studies, "How Prevalent Is Pornography?," (May 2022).

sexual aggression and violence.[4] These findings are deeply concerning, because what we repeatedly consume inevitably shapes how we see others. At the same time, many countries, including the United States, are facing a serious decline in birth rates. While this trend has multiple causes, it is difficult to ignore the ways pornography can contribute to loneliness, distort expectations, undermine intimacy, and erode marital trust. It can inhibit the formation of healthy relationships and often damages marriages – the very fabric of society and bedrock of healthy families.

Even more alarming is the close connection between pornography and human trafficking. From the standpoint of industry and production, numerous cases have been reported involving coercion and the exploitation of minors. Analysis of data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline has identified pornography as one of the most commonly reported forms of sex trafficking.[5] This makes clear that the issue is not simply about private moral choices; it is also about systemic injustice and the exploitation of human beings.

Pornography is not simply about private moral choices; it is also about systemic injustice and the exploitation of human beings. Lasting renewal requires moral formation and redemptive transformation that extend beyond the reach of law.

This paper argues that pornography is not merely a private moral failing but a broader social practice that undermines human dignity, distorts the meaning of sexuality, and contributes to structures of exploitation. Drawing on a theological account of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, and

[4] Meagan J. Brem et al., "Problematic Pornography Use and Physical and Sexual Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Men in Batterer Intervention Programs," Journal of Interpersonal Violence 36, nos. 11–12 (June 2021): NP6085–NP6105.

[5] Polaris Project, Polaris Analysis of 2021 Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline (January 1, 2021).

informed by the insights of Christian realism, I contend that while the government cannot eradicate vice or regenerate the human heart, it bears a legitimate responsibility to restrain exploitation, protect the vulnerable through prudent legal measures, and aim to cultivate virtue. At the same time, lasting renewal requires moral formation and redemptive transformation that extend beyond the reach of law.

1. Theological Foundations

We have outlined several problems arising from the widespread consumption of pornography in our culture. But why is it especially harmful to the human person and how should we respond to it? A sound theology, working in harmony with the foundational principles of our government, helps illuminate why we should oppose this type of unhealthy sexual activity as the norm in our society.

2. Creation

A preeminent tenet illuminated throughout the Bible and echoed in America's founding documents is that all people are created with dignity and in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 declares, "God created mankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Because every human being is made in God's image, each person possesses inherent and inviolable dignity. The United States Declaration of Independence affirms this same truth, proclaiming that "all men are created equal." Whether or not societies consistently live up to these principles does not diminish their truth. Humans have the responsibility of upholding their own dignity as well as their neighbors.

Scripture also teaches that God created sex and ordained it for the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (Gen. 1:27).[6] Both theology and biology point to sex as sacred

[6] See also Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5; Hebrews 13:4 .

and powerful. Biologically, sexual union is uniquely ordered toward procreation, the formation of deep pair-bonding through hormonal processes such as the release of oxytocin and vasopressin, and the continuation of family life through the complementary design of male and female bodies. This profound capacity to create life and forge enduring bonds underscores the weight and significance of sexuality. In this vision, sexuality is not incidental but integral to God's intentional design for creation.

3. The Fall

The fall of humanity, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil, ushered sin into the world and began to distort everything. Sexuality, though created good, was not exempt from this corruption. Throughout the Old Testament, various forms of sexual immorality appear as signs of humanity's disordered desires and estrangement from God's design. Even the etymology of the term pornography reflects this distortion. The word derives from the ancient Greek *pornoi* (plural of *pornē*), rooted in the verb *pernēmi*, meaning "to sell," and historically associated with prostitution, particularly the exploitation of enslaved women. From its origins, the concept carries connotations of transactional sexuality.

In this light, pornography represents not merely private indulgence but a fundamental violation of human dignity. By commercializing sexual expression and severing it from covenantal commitment, it stands in direct opposition to the biblical vision of sex as a gift ordered toward unity, fidelity, and life. It objectifies persons, reducing individuals made in the image of God to instruments of consumption defined solely by their bodies and sexual utility. History consistently demonstrates that when human beings are treated as objects rather than persons, injustice and exploitation follow. Thus, both the production and consumption of pornography reflect the disordered effects of the Fall, undermining the created order and inflicting harm on all who are involved.

4. Redemption

In the New Testament, Jesus, the Son of God, reaffirms the male–female union of marriage and goes even further than the commandment against adultery by calling for internal purity. In Matthew 5:27–28, he declares, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." This standard reaches beyond outward behavior to the condition of the heart itself. Who is able to keep such a command? Elsewhere Jesus reminds us, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The hope of redemption rests in the promise that Christ will one day return to restore all things. He will make what is broken new and bring ultimate justice. In that coming kingdom, exploitation, perversion, and sin will be no more; pain and wrongdoing will pass away. Yet even now, we are not left without help. We have an advocate in the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us in our weakness and works renewal within us. The Spirit of God brings freedom and transformation in the present, not only in the age to come. Many have been delivered from addiction to pornography, and many who once participated in the industry have left it behind to pursue restored and meaningful lives. God's goodness makes real healing possible even on this side of heaven. And still, the question remains: what will society look like when the consequences of sexual perversion and commodification of bodies come to full effect? As artificial intelligence continues to proliferate across industries, governments must proactively establish regulatory frameworks or risk its expansion, alongside virtual reality, into the domain of pornography.

5. The City of Man and the Role of Government

Between these two states of the "already" and "not yet," the government bears a responsibility to promote justice and restrain evil. This task becomes especially challenging in an environment that no longer shares a common understanding of

what is good or evil, just or unjust. Yet even amid moral disagreement, the principles of natural law provide a basis for recognizing certain things as contrary to human dignity and social flourishing. From this perspective, the normalization of pornography presents not merely a private concern but a practice that carries tangible consequences for individuals and communities alike.

> Between the "already" and "not yet," the government bears a responsibility to promote justice and restrain evil.

There are different approaches to addressing the problem of pornography, each reflecting distinct assumptions about the proper role of civil society and the state. Four prominent models emerge along a spectrum from minimal to extensive government intervention: the total ban approach, the regulatory approach, the harm-eduction approach, and the libertarian approach. The first approach would enact a total ban on pornography, criminalizing its production, distribution, and possession. Supporters argue that such a policy would significantly reduce avenues for exploitation and human trafficking. Because culture shapes law as law, in turn, shapes culture, banning pornography could contribute to its denormalization and discourage participation and consumption. However, this approach faces serious challenges. It would likely encounter constitutional objections grounded in free speech protections, particularly in light of Supreme Court decisions such as *Miller v. California*, which established the modern test for obscenity.[6] Additionally, critics contend that a total ban would be difficult to enforce given the vast and borderless nature of the internet, and that prohibition could drive the industry further underground into black markets, potentially increasing associated harms.

The second approach would not impose an outright ban but would instead significantly restrict access, especially for

[6] *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (U.S. Supreme Court June 21, 1973).

minors. In recent years, several states have passed laws requiring age verification for users attempting to access pornographic websites. While age verification systems are not flawless, proponents argue that they offer an important layer of protection for children and adolescents, who are among the most vulnerable to exploitation and addiction. This regulatory model would impose stricter requirements and greater accountability on online platforms without criminalizing adult consumption outright.

A third approach emphasizes social harm reduction rather than sweeping legal reform. This model focuses on education about the addictive potential and psychological effects of pornography, as well as its impact on relationships and family life. Local governments, nonprofit organizations, and churches could promote counseling services, fund rehabilitation programs, and provide resources for individuals seeking to leave the industry or overcome compulsive behaviors. By addressing both supply and demand, particularly through education, strengthening families, and promoting mental health, this strategy seeks long-term cultural change rather than primarily legal solutions.

Finally, the least interventionist, or libertarian approach prioritizes individual freedom and limited government involvement. From this perspective, the state should not regulate private sexual behavior among consenting adults, even if such choices carry personal risks. Advocates argue that responsibility lies primarily with the individual, not the government, and that social or community-based responses are preferable to legal restrictions. This view often looks beyond state action to address concerns about pornography through personal responsibility, parental oversight, and voluntary community standards.

6. A Christian Response

While each of these approaches contains constructive insights, none offers an adequate solution on its own. A thoughtful

response to complex social problems requires both a sound understanding of the proper role of government and a sober assessment of human nature. Christian realism insists that any political vision detached from an honest account of humanity's fallen condition will either drift into naïve optimism or collapse into cynicism.

As articulated most notably by Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian realism recognizes that no policy will usher in perfection, for sin distorts both personal motives and social structures. Yet it also affirms that meaningful, though partial, justice is possible within history. Sin and evil will not be eradicated in this age, but government bears a legitimate and necessary responsibility to restrain injustice, curb exploitation, and preserve a measure of order. In this framework, political authority is neither salvific nor irrelevant; it is a limited but vital instrument for promoting proximate justice in a fallen world. Furthermore, while the United States Constitution safeguards many essential liberties, it presupposes a moral framework within the people it governs. As John Adams famously observed, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."[7] Constitutional freedom depends upon citizens capable of self-restraint and virtue; it cannot endure where appetites are unchecked and moral limits are rejected. This principle bears directly on the question of pornography. If liberty is understood merely as the absence of restraint, then any regulation of sexual expression appears oppressive.

The unchecked normalization of pornography does not expand liberty but threatens to erode the moral foundations upon which ordered liberty depends.

But if liberty is rightly understood as the freedom to pursue what is good and conducive to human flourishing, then

[7] "From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798," Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102.

a society must ask whether certain practices undermine the very moral conditions that sustain freedom itself. When desire is untethered from virtue, freedom gradually collapses into bondage to impulse. In that sense, the unchecked normalization of pornography does not expand liberty but threatens to erode the moral foundations upon which ordered liberty. Ultimately, ordered liberty aims to promote both the highest personal good and the common good.

From the perspective of Christian realism, any meaningful response must begin by acknowledging both the persistence of sin and the necessity of ordered restraint. The government has a non-negotiable role in curbing exploitation and protecting the innocent, particularly minors. Because Christian realism rejects utopian assumptions about human perfectibility, it affirms the state's responsibility to restrain evil where it manifests most grievously. This includes vigorous enforcement against child pornography and trafficking, the prosecution of exploiters, and robust support for victims. Protecting the vulnerable is not merely a policy preference but a moral obligation rooted in the recognition of human dignity.

At the same time, prudence calls for reasonable regulations that limit opportunities for harm without presuming that law alone can eradicate vice. Measures such as age-verification requirements and anti-exploitation statutes represent legitimate exercises of public authority aimed at reducing access and deterring abuse. Laws cannot regenerate the human heart, but they can shape social norms over time and set moral boundaries that signal what a community will and will not tolerate. In this way, legal structures function as both restraint and teacher, forming habits and expectations even as they curb destructive behavior.

Yet Christian realism insists that external restraint is insufficient. Because the disorder at the root of exploitation is ultimately a disorder of desire, renewal must reach deeper than legislation. Investment in family stability, education, and intentional discipleship within the church is essential for

cultivating virtues such as chastity, self-control, and reverence for the human person. Communities that encourage accountability and offer pastoral care create spaces where struggles can be confronted honestly rather than hidden.

Pornography presents a profound challenge not only to individual morality but to social order and human dignity. While no legal framework can eradicate lust or restore the human heart, political communities are not absolved of responsibility. Christian realism rejects both utopian faith in law and cynical resignation to vice. Instead, it affirms that government has a limited yet vital role in restraining exploitation, protecting the vulnerable, and shaping moral boundaries that promote human flourishing. At the same time, the deeper renewal required to heal disordered desire lies beyond the competence of the state. It belongs to families, churches, and communities committed to cultivating virtue and extending redemptive grace. In holding together just restraint and transformative hope, a Christian political vision neither despairs of reform nor mistakes it for salvation.



TRUTH IN STORIES

Building a Biblical Communications Narrative on Capitol Hill

Peyton Holliday

And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests which bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day.
– Joshua 4:9

Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.
– Proverbs 22:28

The Bible is full of reminders about what the Lord has done through his people. The history of God's people has been an object of study for thousands of years and the Bible is one of the oldest history books in the world. History is the narratives of our past and communicates the world around us. It is how we make sense of our own worlds. Each narrative, especially in Scripture, is laid out by an arc of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. It is the historical logic of all communications, irrespective of language.

There are many ways to communicate a narrative and tell the world a story. Narrative plays a role in policies and how they are communicated and how history itself is told. In this policy memo I will overview the value of history and narrative, using Scripture as a foundation for narrative composition, and touch upon how narratives function within modern methods of communication, including how to handle communication mistakes and being proactive with communication when needed. This all ties together in how communicators can take the arc of biblical narrative and apply the power of storytelling to their day-to-day work.

1. Value of History and Narrative

History is continuous. Each day history is happening right before our eyes as every present moment slips by. It would be instructive to consider two recent and very different ways of understanding history. Peter Marshall's *The Light and the Glory* and Nicole Hannah-Jones' *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* stand in stark contrast with one another. Marshall seeks to tell the story of American History from a purely Christian perspective that portrays the nation's Founders as perfect heralds of freedom and religion. In contrast, Hannah-Jones seeks to tell the story of American History from a purely oppressed angle that leaves little room for the Founders to have done any good at all. Both books misrepresent historical events and therefore impair historical understanding of our nation's story.

Examining both books from a biblical perspective, we may draw a lesson about Scripture and the historical development of nations. Sean McDowell and Dennis Prager both noted in their Old Testament research that, "there are a lot of embarrassing details about the Jews that we wouldn't expect to see if they were trying to fabricate a story, so we have good reason to believe that they were reporting real history. A similar line of evidence is often used in support of the Gospels, which are packed full of embarrassing details about the disciples."[1] If we wanted a truly Biblical perspective of history,

then both Peter Marshall and Hannah-Jones should have acknowledged evidence and included details that might not have fit their respective narratives. George Orwell in 1984 reminds us that, "'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.'"[2] In that case we must do as Wolstan Dixey states in his book *The Trade of Authorship*,

> Facts, facts, facts; there is nothing but facts. The writer's first business is to get at these facts exactly —get the meat out of them— and then, by the most direct method, to transmit them to his readers. That is the whole substructure of literature; the groundwork —the anatomy.[3]

2. Scripture as a Foundation for Narrative

Scripture itself lays a great foundation for how to narrate history in a way that discloses the facts and that highlights both the good and the bad of the subject matter. Looking at the story of David, for example, he is depicted as a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14). Despite his exalted status, Scripture also offers an unflinching narration of David's downfall with Bathsheba. This is a great example of how to tell a historical story that affirms both the redemptive story of how God used David while also including David's own failures and how that affected Israel's immediate future. God tells David,

> Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun. (2 Sam 12:10-12)

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[1] Sean McDowell, "Sean McDowell on the Old Testament & Dennis Prager," Summit Ministries, August 2, 2018.

[2] George Orwell, 1984 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949) 34-35.

[3] Wolstan Dixey, *The Trade of Authorship* (New York: The Author, 1889).

Christian theologian Carl Trueman in his book *Histories and Fallacies* states that "the typical, the conventional, the normal requires no elaborate explanation: it is exactly what is to be expected. It is the strange, the peculiar, the unexpected, the unconventional that needs to be explicated."[4] The founding of America is one plot point in the wider history of Western civilization, one which emphasizes freedom and a desire for self-governance. The founding represents a kind of deviation from the historical norm.

On a related point, Trueman further states that "to undertake the task of history, means that the present must engage with the past, and in doing so, there is always a danger that anachronistic ideas from the present will creep into the analysis in ways that are unhelpful and that ultimately run counter to the evidence."[5] So, we have to remember that "if history could be told in all of its complexity and detail it would provide us with something as chaotic and baffling as life itself; but because it can be condensed there is nothing that cannot be made to seem simple, and the chaos acquires form by virtue of what we chose to omit."[6] All of this gives shape to the power of history and narrative in communication strategy.

An issue today is the ubiquity of powerful communication tools that elevate people who have little real knowledge of what they communicate. History is being rewritten and leaving vulnerable people unsure of whom to trust. Conspiracy theories are rampant. Suspicion and cynicism are ubiquitous. It therefore matters in the extreme that every effort is devoted to offering accurate, credible historical accounts, and do so with clarity and conviction.

Communicators of faith ought to study the biblical narrative from primary and secondary sources and learn how events around the world shape our styles and narratives. Through a

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[4] Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 125.
[5] Ibid., 113.
[6] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931), 97.

biblical study of redemptive history, communicators can better understand the policy decisions of today. Scripture says, "remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee."[7] The narrative arc of Scripture highlights the critical details that lend themselves to self-understanding and to substantive communication. From the act of Creation in the book of Genesis to the law of Leviticus, Scripture shows us the wider narrative God wants us to know. For modern day communicators creating a narrative, Scripture is the best example to follow.

The narrative arc of Scripture highlights the critical details that lend themselves to self-understanding and to substantive communication.

3. Narratives in the Modern Communications Sphere

Creating a narrative in the modern world is easy. All one has to have is an idea, communicate it, and let the pieces fall where they may. The communication doesn't even have to be well done. Sometimes the best communication styles are the most real, raw, and informative. People crave the real world. Looking at Scripture, we are all hoping for the real, raw experience of the Garden of Eden. We long for an unbroken relationship with God. The only way we can find that is through Christ. When communicating ideas and policy, sometimes the best way to communicate is to be real. Show the people the value of real ideas that are not inflated by flashy work that will never actually pass. As we all seek to find our hope in Christ, communicating in a real way shows people the truth.

Another great example in Scripture is with the Fall. Adam and Eve listened to Satan and listening to him led them both astray and to the fall of mankind for the rest of time. When communicating, it is easy to see what others are saying or

[7] Deut 32:7.

recommending and decide that what others are doing is best. Unity is important on both sides of the aisle, but truth is more important than unity. Following the crowd can be advantageous, but it just as often leads us astray. The wisdom of crowds cannot compare to the wisdom of God.

The wisdom of crowds cannot compare to the wisdom of God.

Social media has developed incredible capacity for leading people astray with narratives shared one person to another person until the truth is completely obscured. Evil is using social media to conflate the truth and lead people astray. It is important to know the truth and follow the truth and refuse to push narratives that are false or will lead others astray. Between the Creation and Fall in Scripture is a period of waiting. Waiting to communicate is sometimes the best way to handle a situation. We don't have to get the information out there as fast as possible.

Looking at the 400 years of history between the Old Testament and the New Testament, where God seems silent, is perhaps illustrative. There are times when it is best that communicators stay silent until they know all the details of a situation. Jumping to conclusions when everyone else is putting out a statement doesn't mean that the conclusion is accurate. With social media, videos, and information being at our finger tips – sometimes within minutes of an event happening – it is easy to join the rising narrative on either side of the discussion. This gives people opportunities to pick a side and trust that what they see and the narrative they want is true. But, as the 400 years of history in between the Old Testament and the New Testament show us, sometimes silence is best. Sometimes waiting until the narrative plays out and the truth is won is the best way to show the narrative arc.

While communicating a consistent narrative is the key to political survival in this world, mistakes nevertheless occur.

Words are uttered that should not have, or something important is left unsaid that should have been said. In these circumstances, history will always look back and will either redeem that, or fail you forever. Success and certainty are not guaranteed. Yet, no matter who writes the narrative, there will nevertheless be elements pointing to the truth – even if partial or incomplete. The fact that mistakes can be made doesn't detract from the necessity of communication with excellence.

4. Communication Mistakes

When communication errors happen, it is important to remember how people in Scripture handled mistakes. We have Saul who never repented and God revoking the kingdom away from him and his family. David who sought repentance and God using him to bring Christ into the world. These two narratives communicate powerful stories of redemption. Tying together–Creation, Fall, the time of waiting, and Redemption–grant communicators added clarity for their own stories and communications. Communicating policies from office to office, or from Capitol Hill to the American people, takes strategy and grit. Some policies stand the test of time, while others are forgotten. The way they are communicated often determines their longevity. To solve the issue of truthful narrative and to communicate policies effectively, I suggest we ought to use Scripture as our guide. The narratives and overall redemptive arc help communicators see beyond the social media post and petty urgencies into the deeper story of salvation. We are all making history each and every day. Those working in policies on Capitol Hill are shaping the future for the next generation, and there the policy debates are ultimately what is important. In order to win the policy debates, we have to communicate well. We have to look beyond what is in front of us to the longer narrative. Years down the road, it is the narrative of the policy that will shape our country. No matter the policy formed on Capitol Hill and communicated by members of Congress, it is paramount that we remember the power of story. Story may play a more decisive role than the policy itself.

5. Taking Action with Communication

Communication staff should take action on Capitol Hill to shape their narratives for the long term. No longer should we fall into the traps of immediate reaction on social media. We should wait and understand before we jump to conclusions. There will be moments requiring immediate action, of course, due to the nature of politics. But in those moments, if we pause to breathe before jumping in, we will likely save ourselves a fall and maybe even a need to redeem and rework what was said.

Not everything will be done perfectly, by any means, but this is laying out the power of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Some historians will look fondly and possibly write a narrative that only highlights the good. Other historians will observe that we never once did anything good. Yet the true facts of history are what will stand the test of time. The words buried in the narratives and chronicled in the archives are what will endure into the future. The press releases, the social media posts, and the reactions may or may not last; time will tell. That bigger narrative, the story of salvation history, is what any sound communication story aims toward. Our stories should, in a way, respect the Story of all Stories that God himself has written us into.

With the rise of modern forms of communication, Scripture is the best way to look at the bigger narrative. Instead of reaction communication, we have an opportunity to drive a narrative home through remembering that history will always be there. History is the story of the world that God created for us to remember. As communication professionals, this is our time to communicate policy well so that it stands the test of time.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have sought to give a wide overview on how communicators can use narrative to tell the story of Capitol Hill. With the rise of modern technology and social media, sound communication narratives are more important than ever. We must look to remember that each narrative carries a conclusion for people to take away. Are we seeking to tell the narrative in a way that brings glory to God? The Scripture lays out for us that, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32)



CIVIL DISCOURSE

AGAINST SUCH THERE IS NO LAW: LOVE, PEACE, AND SELF-CONTROL IN A DIVIDED COUNTRY

Noah Jackson

For this reflection paper, I interviewed a variety of leaders across a range of sectors, including government, universities, churches, nonprofits, and think tanks, to ask why this country's discourse has descended so rapidly into divisiveness, vitriol, and cruelty. My goal is to identify the root of our antagonisms and measure the possibility of recovering civility, regardless of ideology. Their candour offers a path forward, marked by a gracious and intentional commitment to peace within the chaos of conflicting visions for this nation. These conclusions from individuals across the political spectrum do not amount to a call for unanimity that dilutes spiritual clarity and deep conviction for truth. Rather, they are an admonition to reconcile disrupted families, a divided nation, and hearts indifferent to our fellow neighbor. Through meaningful conversations and written responses, I was encouraged by the

posture of respect and earnest desire for renewal in our country.

These interviews serve as the basis of my conclusion that meaningful steps toward ameliorating our corrupted discourse, which laws and regulations alone cannot adequately address, demands a countercultural honoring of one another that is stronger than contempt, sacrificial respect that seeks mutual understanding, and humility to redress our pride. Law alone cannot deliver these reforms of human character in a divided country. Love, peace, and self-control can, however, and as the Apostle Paul said, "against such there is no law." (Gal. 5:23)

1. The Problem: Why unity?

All human beings are created in the Image of God (Gen. 1:27). In Genesis 1:26-27, the Bible records how God formed humanity with a special value, worth, and attention different from that of previous created beings. His design gave human beings a standard of dignity that others can neither give nor take away. It is inherent and intentional. It was very good. Disobedience in the Garden of Eden resulted in severance and sin, establishing the need of redemption from this newfound separation (Gen. 3:1-13). The brokenness of human nature and history is revealed in laws enacted and enforced alongside actions of evil that seek to denigrate those who bear the image of God.

Jesus came to save the world and in his ministry advanced the truth of his Kingdom. While loving and serving those who many would call unworthy and "the least of these," he saw, understood, and cared for them, admonishing those who follow Him to do the same (Matt. 25:31-46). It is not enough to only love those who love you, for "what then distinguishes you from anyone else?" (Matt. 5:46-48). It is the challenge and command of Christians to love both enemies and neighbors, and to "pray for those who persecute you," to prove themselves to be of the Father. To do so reveals commitment to His promise and obedience to his words.

Jesus, in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Two men passed him by, while a third had pity. This man, a Samaritan, bandaged the wounded man and took him on his own donkey to a nearby inn where he nursed him to health, paying for his stay and additional expenses. This Samaritan, who had no responsibility for the man's well-being,

was filled with mercy and acted as a neighbor to the man who fell at the hands of the robbers. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his final speech delivered the day before his assassination, speculated about the thoughts of the two men who passed the half-dead man.[1.] What if the robbers are still around? Is it possible that the man on the ground is faking this situation to lure me into a trap? And therefore, their conclusion was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But the merciful one reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"[2] This act of compassion represented "a kind of dangerous unselfishness," King added.[3] This type of love, which is represented in the principles of Jesus' commands, broke down barriers that divided the men in the parable: circumstances, ethnicity, and religion. In this act, those differences were laid aside to minister to the wounded man's immediate need. The Samaritan saw him not as an enemy, but as a neighbor. As King says elsewhere, "it is love that will save our world and our civilization."[4]

2. How did we get here?

"We have never been without division, and I would be concerned if we did not have robust disagreement," remarks Michael Wear, founder and President of the Center for Christianity and Public Life. He observes the ever-present friction of political disagreement, while highlighting the spirit of debate that is alive in this country. To be sure, whenever policy is concerned, tensions will run deep and disagreements will be substantive.

The presence of disagreement is not necessarily the issue, posit Dr. Robert P. George and Dr. Cornel West. The two men are distinguished professors who have been close friends, despite their political disagreements, for years. In mutual search for truth, they are brilliantly gracious, understanding,

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[1] King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Speech, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968. American Rhetoric.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

and respectful to each other. "We treat each other like human beings," they added. But if disagreement itself is not an issue, what is it that prevents us from overcoming such stark polarization? The key, as proposed by these gentlemen, is to treat one's political enemy as an image bearer, even in the most passionate disagreements.

The key is to treat one's political enemy as an image bearer, even in the most passionate disagreements.

3. How has social media and the news that we consume played a role in our division?

"Social media is a reflection of the fire raging in the human heart; this blaze is not new. We have always been divided. There was never a golden age of public discourse. The issues being revealed in online debates, and the human impulses on display, predate social media," said a veteran of government affairs who used to work on Capitol Hill. His statement echoes the biblical truth of the original sin nature that resides within the human, convicting the heart of the individual rather than an external source or platform. As one pastor told me, "the problem is the human heart; social media is not the root cause but the accelerator. It further entrenches people in their own ideology." These ideas highlight a deeper source of responsibility for online dysfunction while seemingly exonerating another. Does that mean that social media platforms are free of blame for the chaos they cause?

"Social media and the modern news industry reward speed and outrage, and that can train us to assume the worst about people who we disagree with politically," said Utah Governor Spencer Cox." Here, we see dual responsibility on the part of the individual and the responsibility of platforms for their tools that fan the division. Various respondents described how social media algorithms, an abundance of news platforms, and the twenty-four-hour cycle can feed content that silos users into echo chambers of ideas they only agree with, giving different

and sometimes conflicting information to evaluate and incentivize entertainment over reporting. This represents a paradoxical position for social media engagement although vast amounts of information exist, platform algorithms compartmentalize us according to attentional preferences. As a result, tribalism is everywhere bolstered and incentivized. As a community college admissions counselor that I spoke with remarked: "On social media, we see the things we only want to see. To get another perspective, you have to seek it out." Utah governor Spencer Cox remarked similarly:

> These platforms are engineered to reward outrage and division because that's what keeps people hooked. That's not accidental; it's a business model. Social media companies need to own the damage their algorithms cause. At the same time, each of us still has a responsibility to choose what we amplify and how we treat one another. A healthier public square will require accountability from the platforms, and a little more restraint from all of us.

4. A New Way Forward: Where do we go from here?

As eager participants who exercise the right to speak freely in this country, passionate and valuable conversations are held in the competition for the strongest ideas to be implemented. Based on convictions, circumstances, and experiences, it is evident that Americans will not always draw the same conclusions about policy. How we respond to those differences is what matters.

"This is our moment; it is not a unique moment, but a moment to be unique," one federal affairs director told me, concerning the need for Christians to engage in civic discourse that honors the *Imago Dei*. If these actions are not being demonstrated in the public square, shouldn't Christians in the culture lead? The command to love requires us to serve humbly and pray earnestly, but that does not excuse us from sharing the truth that has changed our lives. "If we have a

biblical worldview, truth and love are not in tension. God's law perfectly upholds the law of love," he added.

Because we have been forgiven much, in kindness and compassion, we are compelled to forgive others (Eph. 4:32). This shift begins with the words used to characterize the image bearer we disagree with, no matter their side of the aisle. It supposes an understanding of what it means to listen when it is inconvenient and to serve when we get nothing in return. When Christians begin promoting unity with those they know best and within their immediate spheres of influence, they begin the work to remove the vocabulary that silos opponents and degrades political rivals: pejoratives, straw-men arguments, and titles that dehumanize them to a level where their murder is deemed just. All of the bitterness, wrath, and anger must be rooted out, with no unwholesome speech characterizing our interactions. In this truth and conviction from Jesus, who modeled it perfectly, we must remove malice from us and forgive because we have been forgiven.[5]

5. Prayer

"Our prayers should be for: political courage for those who make courage necessary, to vote, and leaders that set a different example and hold people accountable," said CCPL's Wear. For the groups around us, including ourselves, there is value in seeking greater standards. To pray with and for another person alters our relationship to that person. It turns out we cannot hate those we pray for; prayer has the effect of dissolving contempt and replacing it with benevolence. We may pray for our leaders, the decisions they make, to act justly, to promote peace, and to serve humbly. Prayer for our families —to love patiently, to forgive repeatedly, and to support earnestly. And prayer for ourselves—to sacrifice daily, to share willingly, and to honor joyfully. Prayer is the most powerful political activity at our disposal.

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[5] See Eph. 4:22-32 (NASB).

6. Conclusion: Is there a policy or legislative solution to the issue of division that we see?

"I don't know what law you can pass to make them decent," said a former Member of Congress who worked in the Justice system on the Hill, with a focus on health care." "You can't legislate this," adds another former Member. Bluntly stated, these thoughts underscore the insufficiency of legislation to restrain or reform the bitterness of our public discourse, much less the deeper corruptions of the heart. The inadequacy of the law in relation to governing speech paints a sobering portrait. However, the weight of the responsibility to do good and to honor our neighbor cannot be understated, regardless of status in the highest perch of leadership or those they serve. A pastor I spoke to reinforced this idea: "No matter the profession, there is no way to excuse yourself from gentleness and kindness." We must uphold the value, worth, and dignity of our political "enemies" who are fellow humans created in the image of God, honoring them in our policy conclusions and discussions and revering their Creator by how we see them. For Christians, that is a command and one that directly opposes the impulse to repay evil for evil and insult for insult (1 Peter 3:9).

Those we disagree with are not enemies to be destroyed or collateral to fall, but immortal souls that we should treat, in light of their extraordinary status, with the "charity of real and costly love."[6] Disagreement can be frustrating and damaging to our patience and self-regard, but the love we choose to demonstrate is glorifying to the Creator. We must not be known by the whims of rage, but the fruits of peace, gentleness, and kindness (Gal. 5:23). In the training and taming of our own tongue, we must recognize our personal responsibility to act in love while expecting accountability from the tools that platform our voice.

Our greatest moments of unity as a country reside in times of observed humanity, when party and grievance are sidelined

[6] C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

to connect on matters that weave together our shared dignity, hope, and circumstances. These situations bridge the divide that aggression and malice extend. They are moments of sacrifice and forgiveness in our country. “The unanimous declaration” America’s founders pleaded in 1776 reverberates through American history, a bold proclamation relevant to all, and pertinent in the year of this country’s two hundred and fiftieth anniversary: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”[7] The foundation on which this statement is based is the standard of the inseparable and inherent value of those around us, and the responsibility of our actions to emulate this conviction.

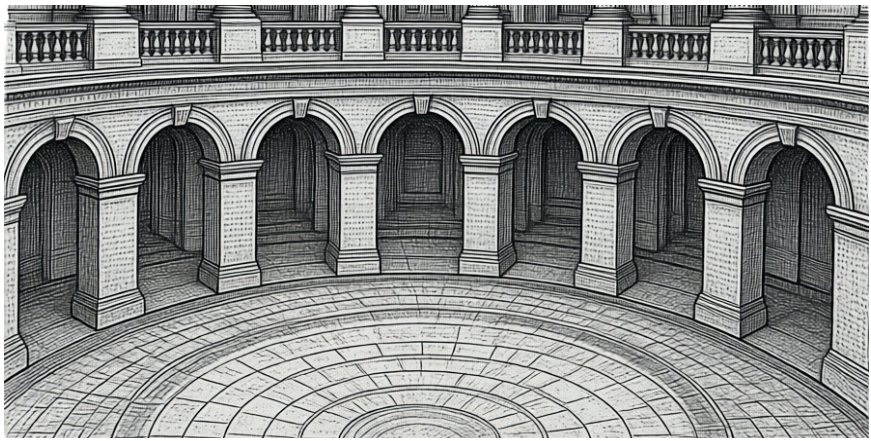
There is hope that perseveres amid perilous and divided times. The potential for civility and solution to division may lie deeper than civics education, primary structure reforms, and advertising incentives, though these and similar initiatives may contribute to soothing our process. What we wrestle with is a deeper diagnosis of hatred, discord, and rage that has sown deep animosity and contempt for those on the other side of our beliefs. In the tempest of division, we accept thoughts that prompt callous disregard for the human in front of us, and substitute that with language that ushers in the most heinous attacks against our fellow neighbors. This is the hostility, dissension, and anger that the Apostle Paul warns about in his letter to the Galatians.[8] The behavior that is antithetical to these impulses is found in the work of love, peace, and self-control, in which there is no law against demonstrating to our fellow man.[9] In this contrast of behavior, it is clear which actions will foster stability, respect, and understanding in our discourse. This conclusion should not just guide the way we speak, but also the policy that flows from this realization.

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[7] National Archives and Records Administration, “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” last reviewed February 25, 2026.

[8] Gal. 5:16-21 (NASB).

[9] Gal. 5:22-26 (NASB).



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