

# ⊕ Revisions

Vol. VIII, Issue 1

Fall 2013

*A Journal of Christian Perspective*



## *Christians in Politics*

A Christian Call to Politics

Is God a Republican?

Second Chances

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## *The Mission of Revisions*

Revisions is an ecumenical journal dedicated to re-visioning the whole of life from a Christian perspective, focusing on issues of pressing importance to the pluralistic university community.

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# Editor's Foreword

If you keep up with national politics, you may recall when Joe Biden was questioned on his views on abortion during the 2012 vice-presidential debate. Though raised a Catholic, he calmly explained that while he accepted the Church's doctrine that life began at conception, he did not believe he had the right to impose his religious beliefs on anyone else. At the other end of the spectrum are the members of the Westboro Baptist Church who clearly feel no qualms in protesting the funerals of war veterans to declare God's judgment on America's support of homosexuality.

Because of the combination of America's puritanical background and its adamant assertion of the separation of church and state, which is written into the Constitution itself, it can be very difficult to determine exactly how much political activism Christians are called to, especially since political beliefs and religious beliefs are often interdependent. What does it mean to be a "politically active" Christian? Can it be a Christian who engages in politics just like any non-Christian and sets his beliefs aside when entering the political arena? Does it have to be one who actively lobbies to cement his morals in concrete legislation? Nearly every American president has called himself a "Christian", yet their policies have varied widely across the political spectrum. Is it possible for a Christian to participate in politics without compromising his or her values?

In this issue, our writers wrestle with these questions and attempt to draw out a clearer delineation of the extent to which a Christian should participate in politics. Both Richard Chang's and Natalie Hejduk's articles address the need for earnest political activism. "A Christian Call to Politics" focuses in particular on why Christian political activism is so necessary. In "The Christian Dilemma", Ben Koons complicates the picture by analyzing the role of a Christian in a political office and how he may be torn in opposing directions by his religious duties and his political ones. Jessica Zou chooses to focus more specifically on the role a Christian should play in the criminal justice system, advocating a system of forgiveness and "Second Chances" rather than pure retributive punishment.

Of course, our writers are not claiming to have addressed every concern Christians may have regarding their political involvement. Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, may disagree with views that have been presented in this issue. If you think Christians should stay out of politics or that a rehabilitation-focused criminal-justice system would be too lenient, please write to us. We would love to hear your thoughts. Our hope is to see Christianity foster as much discussion as politics.

— Jessica Zou '16 & Natalie Hejduk '16, Co-Presidents, 2013–2014

# A Christian Call to Politics

*By Richard Chang '17*

Every generation faces different challenges, and in every generation, there are political leaders who use their positions to address those issues or worsen them.

Today we face a number of serious political issues and conflicts. The recent Syrian war has killed 100,000 individuals, of whom 11,000 were children. The instability and turmoil in North Korea's reign of terror has drawn international attention as Kim Jong Un recently executed his uncle. International relations with these countries have been complex and unstable. Even in the US, many families are still struggling with the economic recession. Washington is often in gridlock, gun violence is still rampant, and Americans are looking for a new direction for their country.

As I turn on CNN and see the problems and injustices that occur around the world, I ask myself what Christians are called to do in the midst of these challenges. God calls us, his Church, to be his hands and feet. We are "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). But what does that mean practically? When someone is an ambassador for a country, he is sent by the country as an authorized representative to reflect the interest and image. The US Ambassador to China speaks not simply on behalf of his administration, but also on behalf of the US people and the President.

Considering the gravity of being an ambassador, how does being an "ambassador for Christ" change the way we live, our sense of purpose, and our attitude toward what we do?

God calls us all to be his ambassadors, yet he has an individual calling for each person. Although that calling is different for each of us, the purpose is the same: love God and love people. Some are called to be pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. Others are called to be doctors, researchers, and teachers. One calling is not necessarily more spiritual or more important than another. Each is unique according to God's plan for that individual's life. A specific Christian calling that is often overlooked but is still very important in engaging and changing society is politics.

Some Christians may be skeptical of involving themselves in politics. There are countless political leaders who have fallen due to corruption and moral failures, causing the institution to have a negative reputation. Because of this, however, there is an even greater need for godly political leaders who will be "ambassadors of Christ" in these significant positions. Jesus says that we are the "light of the world," and he calls us not to hide our light "under a bowl" but instead to "put it on its stand," so that it "gives light to everyone in the house" (Matt. 5:14-15). There's a need for

Christian politicians who will not be ashamed of their beliefs but instead let their light shine and advocate for truth and justice in the political arena.

The Bible is full of examples of individuals acting in such a way. We see throughout the Bible how God used his people in politics to influence government and society. One example is Daniel, when he was sent into exile in Babylon with the rest of the Jewish people. Although Daniel was in a foreign land that had a different religion and different values, he was still committed to the Lord. When he first arrived as a young man, he was taken to serve in the king's courts. At the court, in an act of devotion, Daniel resolved "not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (Daniel 1:8). As a result, God honored him and gave him "knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning" and he stood out among the King's servants (Daniel 1:17). When King Nebuchadnezzar asked Daniel to interpret his mysterious dream, by God's favor and power, Daniel did it, and the King responded by saying, "Surely your God, is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal the mystery" (Daniel 2:47). The King then placed Daniel "in a high position" and "made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men" (Daniel 2:48). Daniel's unswerving faithfulness to God caused even a pagan king to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and elevated him into a

position of political influence where he could be the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13) by reflecting God's truth and character to a foreign society.

We are like Daniel in many ways. We also live in a "foreign land," where at times we feel alone and struggle to stand firm in our beliefs in a society that is sometimes hostile towards our faith. God's people, however, are called to fix their eyes on Jesus and stand firm in their faith. This is especially important for those involved in politics. God honors this, and in doing this, we fulfill what Jesus called us to do: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

There are also countless examples of political leaders God used in history to change society. From analyzing their lives, we also gain insight on why and how God uses Christians in politics. In the eighteenth century, the slave trade was flourishing, and William Wilberforce, an English politician, led a movement to abolish the trade. Wilberforce was born into an affluent family and from a young age participated in politics. When he converted to Christianity, he was unsure whether God wanted him to continue on that path. He sought guidance from John Newton, author of the hymn "Amazing Grace", as to whether he should remain in public life. Newton encouraged him to remain in politics, and Wilberforce did so "with increased diligence and confidence". A Member of Parliament, Wilberforce worked for over thirty years to end the

slave trade. His conviction to end this injustice stemmed from his faith and his desire to spread God's justice and mercy in both private and public life. Wilberforce met much opposition in Parliament as time after time they voted down his bills. He knew, however, God's calling for his life was to use his public platform to be the "light and salt of the world" and to fight for those exploited in the slave trade.

Wilberforce spent many hours praying that his legislation to end the slave trade would one day pass Parliament. He met with a group of influential English leaders called the Clapham Sect that consisted of businessmen, economists, public servants, ministers, and scholars, and discussed with them how they were to implement their faith in the public life, particularly with regard to the issue of slavery. It was primarily with this community of friends that Wilberforce shared his struggles, discussed his faith, and received much guidance and encouragement. It is remarkable how a small group of persistent Christians can use their resources and influence to create such significant lasting change in a country. Finally, after decades of activism and praying, the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was passed and an injustice that stripped thousands of lives of their human dignity for hundreds of years was ended.

There's an urgent need for Wilberforces and Daniels in our generation. The Bible tells us that Christians have a significant civic responsibility: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the op-



pressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). By engaging in politics, Christians can implement policy and create law that will defend justice and protect the rights of the oppressed.

We must, however, be careful that we do not become too caught up in politics. While Christians should be civically engaged and educated, they ought not to view changing legislation and a country's political state as an end in itself. We must not forget the underlying spiritual problem for many of the social issues of the world. No matter how much we lobby, no matter how many laws we pass, no matter how much campaigning we do, all is in vain if we fail to seek God for his wisdom and power. After all, law can only do so much; it is only God who can change hearts. Furthermore, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12). This is why prayer is such an integral part of every Christian public servant's life. Even if we created a world where poverty is eradicated

and there was perfect justice, our work would still be incomplete if people are without the Gospel. What good is it for someone to have all the physical necessities of the world but not have the one true necessity, salvation found in Christ?

As Christ's hands and feet, we're called to be agents of restoration, reformation and revelation. Our world is a broken place, and out of the healing and comfort we received from Christ, we ought to extend that love and bring healing to the hurting. Out of our conviction for truth and our passion for justice, we ought to reform our society and governments by "speaking up and judging fairly; defending the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). And out of the abundant love Christ has for us, we ought to bring that joy and truth to others by sharing – through deed and word – the message of Jesus Christ. Christians in politics are called to all three parts in their public service.

Here in Princeton, our informal motto is "in the nation's service and in the service of all nations." It is very in line with Christian life. Additionally, Princeton has been associated with some of our nation's most influential Christian public servants, many of whom were our nation's founding fathers. One example is Benjamin Rush, class of 1760, a founding father and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He served as Surgeon General in the Continental Army and his religious beliefs deeply shaped his philosophical thought and public life. A leader in the

American Enlightenment, he believed that the founding of our nation was a work of God:

*"I do not believe that the Constitution was the offspring of inspiration, but I am as perfectly satisfied that the Union of the United States in its form and adoption is as much the work of a Divine Providence as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testament."*

His faith further influenced his views on politics and political theory:

*"The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican government."*

Rush's faith permeated all aspects of his public life.

As a new generation of Princetonians, we face issues no less complex and daunting than those of our forefathers. In our Pledge of Allegiance, we recite, "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all". Princeton's motto reads, "Under the name of God she flourishes." Living "under God" is a blessing, and my greatest hope is that Christians will take greater political and social initiative to create a country and world where "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

# The Christian Dilemma

*By Ben Koons '15*

A judge is assigned to a murder trial. He appears at his bench, and to his horror discovers that his own son is the defendant. He ought to recuse himself, but the town is small, he's the only judge: it's either him or no one. So the trial proceeds, and the evidence begins piling up against his son. The murder weapon has his fingerprints, the victim had an affair with his son's wife after which his son publicly swore to kill the man, several witnesses saw the son go into the victim's house before and after the murder, and two people even saw the murder transpire. All but one piece of evidence condemns the son: the judge's own testimony. In an unprecedented move, the judge takes the stand and testifies that his son was with him at home during the time of the murder. There are no other witnesses to this alibi, and indeed a couple witnesses are brought forward to testify that the judge had told them the day before that he would be willing to lie on the stand for his son's sake. Thus this little piece of evidence by a completely biased and untrustworthy witness can hardly dispel the certain guilt of the defendant. So now the judge must make his decision.<sup>1</sup> He knows he wasn't lying on the stand. He distinctly remembers being with his son at the time of the murder, and would be more willing to doubt his own name than doubt

whether he had been with his son that night. On the other hand, the courtroom evidence damns his son. Any other person in his position would immediately convict the defendant. The judge deliberates and then renders his judgment. He chooses justly. Does he acquit or convict?

## *I. Introduction*

This story is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian in a secular society, and the solution to this dilemma may resolve a whole series of dilemmas Christians in public positions face regularly. On the one hand, there are facts accessible to the public, shared public values, and the government law codes. On the other, there are revealed dogmas, Christian virtues, and the divine law. The former three are undoubtedly appropriate considerations for public officials, but can the Christian official consider the latter three?

According to St Thomas Aquinas in a very similar example, the judge ought to convict his son.<sup>2</sup> This has nothing to do with the defendant's being his son. That was an illustration of how difficult this choice can be and how great a good has to be sacrificed in order to act justly. Aquinas' position that the judge ought to convict may seem counterintuitive, since we generally think judges ought to conform their judgments to the

truth. Yet if the judge could judge on the basis of his private knowledge, then he could dispense with the court procedure in the first place and just acquit his son without demonstrating to anyone his innocence. *Prima facie* this seems questionably just, but I'll try to flesh out why that's so. The same consideration explains both why the judge cannot acquit the defendant because he's his son and why he cannot acquit because he knows his alibi is true. In both cases, the acquittal would be based on facts predicated of the private man, who happens also to be a judge. There are two facts – “is the father of the defendant” and “knows the defendant's alibi is true” – which do not pertain to the judge *qua* judge but only to the judge *qua* private citizen. Just as it would be wrong to acquit the defendant because of the first fact, it would be wrong to acquit based on the second fact. The very act of acquittal is itself a public action, which can only be performed by the rightful authority. What constitutes the rightful authority is difficult but there are definite cases of rightful authority such as a person elected unanimously by a community, appointed by God and his predecessor in power and equally definite cases where there is no rightful authority such as a vigilante in a community with a perfectly functional criminal justice system. Thus when the judge acts *qua* judge, he must only act *qua* facts predicated of himself as a judge. This bifurcation of the individual into a private and public person is inextricable from social morality.

For example, much corporate wrongdoing is an act whereby an individual mixes these two persons, and so nepotism is an individual giving out promotions *qua* business executive on the basis of facts *qua* family relative.

So now the framework is in place to consider the situation for a public official who also holds to the Christian faith. There are two options. Either Christianity and its revealed dogmas are beliefs that can only be predicated *qua* private person or else they can also be predicated *qua* public person. I will show how even under the former option, one can still justify the establishment of a state religion, but how it ultimately does limit a Christian's responsibility to legislate on the basis of faith. For convenience, I will call this option *œconism*. Unfortunately, I cannot go into the latter option in this article, but that position would entail that public officials could legislate on the basis of faith. This option will be called *agorism*.<sup>3</sup>

## *II. Œconism*

Let's grant that the *œconist* is correct and a Christian individual either cannot or ought not to act as a Christian *qua* his public office. It's still imaginable that there would be circumstances where the public official ought to act in certain ways that might be beneficial to the Christian faith not because he privately believes but for the sake of the common good. Thus, someone like Machiavelli despite his own agnosticism would

encourage a civil religion as a means of social cohesion and moral education. Yet these sorts of secular arguments for an established church cut both ways, and it's equally imaginable that a public official ought to encourage some non-Christian religion for the social good. There's actually a much more robust account in which it's justified for officials to consider policies in light of revealed truths.

Now obviously the sorts of revealed truths that can also be known rationally are acceptable bases of policymaking. To take a particular example from the Catholic Church, that the rational soul is the form of the body is a dogma defined at the Council of Vienna in 1311, but it is also a proposition demonstrated in turn by Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas. Insofar as it is rationally demonstrable, this proposition can be used by public officials for policy (and its application is broad). Yet other propositions that are generally considered purely revealed may also be used by public officials. For example, the divinity of Christ is a matter of faith. Yet presumably one could believe the proposition "Christ is divine" with 51% credence yet still lack the gift of faith (perhaps I consider the historical evidence of his resurrection compelling and think this would entail the truth of his claims of divinity). Belief in that proposition would not be any different from my belief that I'll wake up tomorrow on time, which also has 51% credence. Both are based on reason rather than any supernaturally-

infused gift like faith, and both lack 100% credence. In neither case would my belief in the proposition be faith-based, and so a public official could legislate on the basis of such propositions. Thus an official who lacks faith qua private person might nevertheless support a government resolution declaring Christ's divinity because he thinks it's probably true and a particularly important truth and that the government ought to affirm important truths. Now we begin to see why under a *œconist* framework, natural theology, and rational arguments for Christian truths are so important. Certainly if natural theology could make persuasive arguments for the existence of God as traditionally conceived by classical theism (omnipotent, omniscient, simple, eternal, impassive, etc.), then one could legislate based on these propositions. Yet even if these propositions failed to persuade any actual atheists, if a Christian could demonstrate to his own satisfaction that his purely rational arguments were sound and not based on revealed premises (although certainly not incompatible with revelation!), then he would be justified in legislating on the basis of these propositions.<sup>4</sup> He should hesitate to take such an action, since it might be disastrous for civil peace in many cases, but the legislation could only be, at worst, imprudent. So Christians committed to *œconism* ought to pour more effort into learning natural theology and rational cases for the traditional Christian dogmas, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the teach-

ing authority of the Church. Since the Christian knows so many of the right answers to questions by faith, it is easier for him to demonstrate these truths rationally since he doesn't have to worry about whether he might be wrong. Similarly, the judge, who knows his son's innocence by private experience "can more rigorously sift the evidence brought forward, and discover its weak points" than another judge would.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, I think the Christian ought to opt for agorism over this stronger form of œconism, but œconism still has some vigor as a political theory.<sup>5</sup>

### III. Conclusion

Let's imagine that agorism were misguided. This would be concerning to Christians, since we consider faith a virtue. It's unfortunate that we should be unable to use this virtue in our public lives explicitly. The only viable options, then, would be to become an œconist who pushes for the establishment of Christian offices or else allow the public sphere to remain unguided by the principles of faith. Of course, this latter option need not be outright secularism, but secularism can only be avoided in the case that a Christian commits to natural theology and rational arguments for Christian dogmas. This realignment of political theory away from statistical models of compromise in a pluralistic society towards the first principles of natural theology is a vital project for the Christian political theorist.

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1. This example transpires somewhere in Europe where guilt is determined by the judge instead of a jury.

2. *ST* II-II, Q. 67, Art. 2.

3. The two terms come from the ancient Greek words for "home" and "marketplace" respectively. The Latinized forms "privatism" and "publicism" are equivalent.

4. *ST* II-II, Q. 67, Art. 2

5. I consider the primacy of divine commands a decisive fact in favor of agorism. If God were to come to the judge right before his judgment and tell him to acquit his son, should he? The answer seems to be obviously yes. Aquinas describes this principle that "whatever is commanded by God is right" in the case of murder, adultery, and theft (*ST* I-II, Q. 94, Art. 5, ad 2). In these examples, his position is much more controversial, but it should make sense that if God is the source of all human authority, then he can deliver commands to private individuals, which allow them to act contrary to human laws. This is because essentially insofar as a person is commissioned by God directly, one has an equal or higher source of power to any human state. There can be no usurpation by a private individual when he executes a divine command. Thus agorism seems in decent shape, since a Christian can always appeal to divine commands given either through Scripture or the Church.

# The Problem with Passivity

*By Natalie Hejduk '16*

*If you aren't OK with murder, then don't murder anyone.*

Something tells me that this statement would not be a popular political position to take. Or maybe it would. I can hear it framed in an all-too-familiar tone: "How could you be so close-minded as to allow your worldview to influence your political stance on murder? You can't control me and tell me I can't murder anyone. Everyone should have the right to murder whomever they want."

This viewpoint in general is, in fact, quite popular today in politics. So many hot-button issues seem to be easily solved if everyone could just have the right to make whatever moral decisions they want. Instead of actively enforcing legislation for or against a topic, many people opt for a passive stance, where individualism reigns supreme. Above all, it is critically important that any type of religious worldview stay out of the political arena. Once morals get involved, a democracy becomes a theocracy, and political policy becomes guided by emotion instead of reason. Religion serves a destructive, constricting role, and society can progress only without the bonds of morals and doctrine.

*If you aren't OK with robbery, then don't rob anyone.*

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There seems, however, to be something wrong with being so passive about individual freedoms. The laws of a society serve to protect its citizens' rights, but they also serve to prevent and minimize wrong. We use police and courts to administer justice and evaluate crimes. There is a term for letting everyone make all their own choices – anarchy. The government has put restrictions on what we cannot do, and it encourages us to help others live according to its laws. Our society has declared that we must act out against what we think is wrong.

But how can you assert what is wrong without a worldview? Somehow the belief that killing and theft are wrong has snuck into the worldview-free zone of politics. The political sphere has implicitly agreed to some sort of moral code; otherwise, the government would cease to function. It has established that there are evils in the world (most people, I think, wouldn't be shocked to hear this), and what one views as evil, one should try to prevent. It holds to a worldview that wrongs should be actively fought against.

*If you aren't OK with slavery, then don't enslave anyone.*

History has shown how some of the most egregious crimes have perpetuated because the government avoided action. Our governmental

structure naturally resists change – consider the mere twenty-seven amendments to our Constitution in over two hundred years, or simply turn on the news and count all the laws not being passed. Only when a small but growing group of abolitionists spoke out did the issue of slavery get moved to the political limelight. Only when suffragists campaigned for equal representation did women gain the right to vote. The government’s biggest accomplishments have their origins in its citizens who have been active in opposing what they viewed as a moral wrong.

Now in a historical turn of events, the activists of yesterday have become the passivists of today. Championing nothing is in vogue. Now it’s best to let everybody make their own moral decisions – well, some of their own moral decisions. Only the moral decisions that the “non-worldview” doesn’t consider to be wrong. Be-

cause let’s face it: murder, theft, and slavery are still wrongs. Moral wrongs. The amoral worldview can’t seem to shake itself of morals. It’s only the more controversial issues that should be left alone, free of religion. Only some moral issues should be moral issues.

The passive worldview is really its own worldview in disguise, asserting “freedom” and “individualism” as euphemisms for “morally OK”. Above all, it tries to push religion out of politics, because its morals differ from religious morals. It’s not a new, progressive way of participating in government. It’s a cleverly framed argument for accepting a different moral code while pretending not to. It’s not a good excuse to subordinate your beliefs. It’s not a good excuse to be passive.

*If you aren’t OK with evil, then are you going to do something about it?*

Questions? Comments?

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or visit our website at

<http://manna.mycpanel.princeton.edu/revisions>.

# Is God a Republican?

By Kristen Kim '16

“The Bible is *explicit* in its espousal of communism, or at least a form of socialism. Remember Acts 2:44?”

The man on the left frowns when no one in the room responds. “You mean none of you have memorized the entire New Testament by heart? See, if we put more money into funding public education, then maybe we wouldn’t be so *unequal* in our knowledge—”

“It doesn’t matter what Acts 2:44 says,” the woman on the right interrupts. “Paul wrote it two thousand years ago. He’s rather dead right now, in case you didn’t know, and anyway, he was never an economist, was he? What are important are the social issues of *today*.”

Standing, she continues, “Abortion is a problem that is at the core of the moral corruption that is *rotting* our country. If we don’t do something right away—”

“And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.’ There. Now, I’ve never read a more beautiful description of the good that socialism can bring to a community. If our country was just a little more equal—”

“Equal! All socialism will accomplish is ensure that we’re all *equally* poor. Now, if we could

please move onto the more *constructive* topics, such as protecting traditional marriage—”

“You want a constructive topic? How about gun control?”

“Capital punishment!” the woman barks, opting to disregard completing sentences and ideas in favor of faster communication.

“Global warming!”

“States’ rights!”

“God is against states’ rights, you gun-toting, homophobic fascist!”

“That’s impossible. God is always on the side of *right*, which is my side, you drug-addled anarchist!”

“Abraham Lincoln, one of the greatest presidents of all time, once declared something really simple and yet really profound,” the man in the middle says. “Want to know what he said?”

Without waiting for an answer, the man in the middle quotes, “My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

The other two are quiet, momentarily thoughtful.

And then the woman on the right smiles, suddenly.

“He was a Republican,” she says smugly, and the man on the left puffs up indignantly.

“He was a Republican in a time when Republicans were Democrats!” the man on the left protests.

The man in the middle sighs.

“Don’t patronize us with that sigh,” the woman on the right says, sniffing and sitting down again. “I get your heavy-handed point, but what do you propose we do, then? Sit on our hands and wait until God sends down a new version of the Ten Commandments?”

The man on the left nods.

“How are we supposed to know what God’s side is?” he demands.

The man in the middle is contemplative.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” he admits, “but I do think that we should always start with the foundation of prayer. Prayer for wisdom and discernment, and follow that prayer with reading the Bible.”

“I’ve *memorized* parts of the Bible,” the man on the left declares, “and it tells me that socialism—”

“I don’t think what you were doing – or saying, even – was necessarily wrong. But instead of going to the Bible with the intention of hunting down passages that will support your current opinion, maybe you should read with an open mind. You know, see what God is really saying.”

“That’s nice and cute,” the woman on the right says, “but the Bible doesn’t have much to say about charter schools or healthcare reform. That’s where our interpretation has to come in.”

“Yes, of course,” the man in the middle agrees, “but what’s important is that you don’t tear apart verses, paraphrasing them to fit your viewpoints. God’s Word is holy; you have to treat it carefully, reverently, and read it closely.”

“But that’s hard,” the man on the left grumbles. “There’s like a billion verses in the Bible. I’m bound to find something I don’t like in there.”

“Yeah, I’m assuming that’s why most politicians don’t do it. It’s far easier to just close your eyes and ears and tell the opposing party that God hates them,” the man in the middle muses.

“Especially when the verses that I might possibly like are so ridiculously difficult to figure out,” the woman on the right says, a hint of a whine creeping into her voice.

The man on the left scoffs. “Hard to figure out? Perhaps you’re just *lacking* in biblical knowledge and doctrine.”

“It *is* hard, you pretentious, pseudo-intellectual communist,” the woman on the right insists. “Take Leviticus, for example – or, really, half of the Old Testament. There are *so* many laws. So many. And some of them prohibit things like, oh, I don’t know...”

The woman on the right flips through her Bible. “Ah, here we go. Take Leviticus 19:27, ‘Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.’ Most of us would kind of dismiss this verse as part of the culture back then and say that it doesn’t apply to us anymore.”

“Of course. A man can be clean-shaven and godly – a fact to which I can *personally* attest.”

The woman on the right sighs. “But then where do I draw the line? A chapter earlier is Leviticus 18:22, the verse that many members of my party use to support our stance on traditional marriage. If I say it doesn’t apply anymore, then my entire platform about traditional marriage is now without a biblical foundation. If I say that it still does apply, I just seem arbitrary.”

“If you weren’t such a *bigot*, you wouldn’t be facing this dilemma—”

“Maybe she is being a bit of a bigot,” the man in the middle agrees mildly, “but she’s bringing up an underlying issue that’s really important to consider.”

With a thoughtful hum, the man in the middle opens his own Bible.

“Well, let’s see. I do agree with you: there are a lot of laws in the Old Testament, and many of them seem somewhat unnecessary in modern times – almost like superfluous details and restrictions. And you know who else would probably agree with us?”

The man in the middle indicates a page.

“Jesus – at least to a certain degree. In Mark 3:5, he breaks a law by healing a man on the Sabbath. Luke 11:38, he doesn’t ceremonially wash his hands before he eats. Matthew 3:4, he defends his disciples when they are ‘unlawful’ by picking heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath. I could go on.

“But the main point, I think, is here, Matthew 23:23: ‘What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law – justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.’”

The man closes his Bible and pauses.

And then, slowly, pensively, continues, “... I see some politicians completely ignore the homeless and hungry, but still sit back smug and self-righteous just because earlier that day, they told a man that he was going to go to hell for being gay. *That* is hypocrisy, and that’s what I meant when I said that you shouldn’t just go hunting for Bible verses that conveniently support your opinion. If you do, you’re blind to the rest of the Bible – blind to what really matters.”

The other two are silent again, contemplative for a few moments longer than before.

“All right, all right. So maybe instead of trying to find a Bible verse that supports the legalization of marijuana – which has been really hard, anyway – I should be focusing my ideals first on the most important things that God definitely espouses. Like love, and... stuff.”

“Love and stuff are very important,” the man in the middle affirms, “and it’s not complicated or controversial to say that God is pro-love.”

“That’s corny,” the woman on the right complains. “And what about the details in the Bible

beyond basic love and compassion for others? Even if we put a greater emphasis on the more important things, we can't ignore the details forever. People will apply 'loving God and loving your neighbor' to the issue of, let's say, fiscal policy, in several very different ways."

"That's where praying for discernment – what I mentioned before – really comes in," the man in the middle says, chuckling. "It's not easy, of course. But once you have the essentials down pat, and really are searching to know God's will, I think he'll let you know, somehow. Seek and you will find, right?"

"So basically, read the Bible, make sure you're keeping God's most important commandments, and then pray that he guides you in wisdom and truth. Rather... *vague* instructions," the woman on the right remarks.

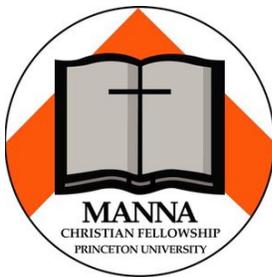
The man in the middle smiles and gives a slight shrug.

"It's all I have to offer. I'm not God, so I can't help you beyond that. I just know that while Abraham Lincoln may have been a Republican..."

The woman on the right smirks and the man on the left frowns.

"God is most definitely not. And neither is he a Democrat. What he is, however, is omniscient, omnipotent, and, you know, *God*. Not someone that can be stuffed into a category and slapped with a label. He's so much bigger than all of the petty partisan squabbles in which so many politicians invoke his name. His will is sometimes complicated – something that we really have to work towards discerning.

"And when you think you have discerned his will, I don't think it's exactly right to go around saying that God hates anyone that opposes your position. If there's one thing we've established for sure today, it's that God is love," the man in the middle says. "Even in the realm of politics."



Have questions about Christianity,  
the Gospel, or what it means to  
have a Gospel worldview?

Come to OPEN SMALL GROUP!  
Fridays, 6:15 PM in Campus Club Den

# Bombs Away

*By Michael Toy, GS*

*Like a raindrop from a cloud,  
A mechanical explosive raindrop  
From a mechanical human-made cloud,  
We are falling.*

*Above a quiet town we're told hides criminals of mass destruction,  
We turn our gaze down.*

*Searching the city for signs of life,  
Searching our souls for strength,  
We turn our gaze upward.*

*Hoping to hide the hollow fear in our hearts,  
We turn to hallowed promise of harrowed hell,  
And thus we fall.*

*Dropping from the sky.  
Descending upon our tranquil target.*

*A man, whose days add up to less than thirteen years,  
Whose losses have razed any claim to childhood,  
Gazes up.*

*Clear heavens above, whose light blue hues are kissed by amber rays of rising sun,  
Bring naught but fear into the brown-eyed gaze that scans the sky.  
To God he prays that heaven turn grey, for drones prey not when clouds skies stain.*

*His eyes rise up as we fall down;  
Our souls collide in clamor, confusion, and casualty.*

*Pray take a pause, O Brother, O bomb,  
And see the path we've taken.*

*Think: could it be our God's command  
We've blissfully forsaken?*

*Show love to them, your enemies,  
And bless the ones who mock you.*

*Instead of shrapnel, let us share  
The daily bread we're given.  
A brown-eyed man whose days have found an end  
Does not hear the voices crying out that politics are complicated.  
He does not see our polls on war or all the issues clearly stated.  
And as his soul ascends from earth,  
Let us consider this:  
What if we did away with bombs  
And chose to act in love?  
What would the world have seen in us  
If we had flown our planes  
O'er countries that had sought us harm,  
And gave to them our aid?  
We might look weak and cowardly,  
But would a coward dare  
To cast away all dynamite  
And drop down loaves of bread?*

In October of 2013 five members of Congress showed up to hear the testimony of a Pakistani family whose grandmother was killed in a drone strike. I have been haunted by the words of thirteen-year-old Zubair Rehman, “I no longer love blue skies. In fact, I now prefer grey skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are grey.” In researching the stories of the innocents who have been casualties of America’s “War on Terror”, I have found that the Christian voice I long to hear amidst the suffering and violence is the triumph of love.

The idea of dropping bread instead of bombs on our enemies in a prophetic act of love belongs to Stanley Hauerwas as detailed by Jonathan Tran.<sup>1</sup> This kind of response to an attack does not make sense politically, sociologically,

or within our sense of political justice. But the commands of Jesus to love our enemies, to walk the extra mile, and to bless those who persecute us defy our desire for revenge, retaliation, and our ideas of justice. Dropping bread on our enemies doesn’t make sense. But neither does a God who became human and died for His own creation. The horror and darkness of death is nothing new to this world. I pray that Christians find a way to share the love and light of Christ amidst this darkness.

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1. “The Audacity of Hope and the Violence of Peace: Obama, War, and Christianity” (Inaugural Ethics Lecture, Truett Seminary, Waco, TX, January 31, 2012).

# Second Chances

*By Jessica Zou, '16*

In October 2006, 32-year-old Charlie Roberts walked into an Amish schoolhouse and shot ten young girls, killing five of them. What makes this horrific incident stand out among all the ones that have taken place since – the Virginia Tech massacre, the Newtown shooting, and the Boston Marathon bombing, just to name a few – is the remarkable outpouring of forgiveness and kindness from the Amish community in response. Not only did several of the victims' families attend Roberts' funeral, but the first to greet Terri Roberts, Charlie's mother, at the ceremony were the mother and father of two little girls who had died in the shooting.

For many of us, this reaction to personal tragedy seems utterly incomprehensible. No one in their right mind could possibly attend the funeral of their children's murderer. Our society justifies anger and vengeance in the face of tragedy. We even glorify it. The Amish schoolhouse shooting captivated the media for months after the incident not because it followed the typical script of anger and despair but because it proclaimed a rarely told story of forgiveness and love.

If the Amish were so quick to forgive, why is the same idea so incomprehensible and foreign to us? We – the mothers, fathers, siblings, and friends of victims – demand just punishment

for convicted felons, payment for crimes. We demand retribution. We demand severe punishment to prevent criminals from committing the same crime in the future, seeking justice not only for the victims we know but also for all of the potential victims to come. These demands lay the foundation for the American criminal justice system. As the country with the highest rate of incarceration by far and with nearly two out of every three convicts returning to prison within three years, however, it seems that there may be some flaws in our system.

While the American criminal justice system claims to balance rehabilitation and punishment for inmates, the evidence points instead to a system that rests more heavily on the punitive model. You commit a crime, you go to prison, you serve your time, and you get out. If you're lucky, you might receive some education or technical skill training in prison, but with budget cuts, more likely than not you'll just sit around in your cell day in and day out. When you're released, you'll have a criminal conviction stuck to your record that will make it difficult to find jobs, apply for loans, or do anything to help you climb out of the hole you dug yourself into when you got arrested. There is no forgiveness in a system that labels you a convict for the rest of your life.

There is no forgiveness in a system that does not give you an opportunity to turn your life around. There is no forgiveness in a system where generation after generation of the same family joins the same gang in the same bad neighborhood and goes through prison like a rite of passage.

The criminal justice system does not believe that people change. That's why your criminal record follows you once you're released from prison. They want your potential employers to know in big letters: "THIS APPLICANT WAS ONCE CONVICTED. IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN." "HE MESSED UP A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO. HE MIGHT DO IT AGAIN." "SHE WAS IN PRISON LAST YEAR. SHE COULD GO BACK AGAIN." The system doesn't forgive and forget. Your past determines your future. Once a convict, always a convict.

Given what the criminal justice system tells us about crime and punishment, then, Christianity teaches incredible, unbelievable lessons. The Christian God doesn't ask for penance for past deeds. When you declare your faith in Jesus Christ, you thank him for taking all of your sins on his shoulders when he died on the cross. He suffered so you don't have to. When you declare your faith in Jesus Christ, he forgives you and wipes all of your history away. I guess, in legal terms, you could say that God expunges everything that shows up on a background check.

How then can a Christian advocate punishment that never ends and a criminal background

that never fades? Matthew 18:21-35 tells the story of a servant (to avoid pronoun confusion, let's just call him Steve) who begged his master to forgive him of a huge debt. When his master took pity on him and cancelled the debt, he rejoiced. As Steve walked into the street, however, he caught sight of another servant (let's call him Jim) who owed him some money – a mere hundredth of what Steve had owed his master – and demanded that he pay up. While Steve refused to forgive Jim and berated and cursed him, one of the master's men saw the situation and reported it back to him. In anger, the master summoned Steve and reinstated his debt, demanding that he be tortured until he is able to pay everything back.

This parable has often been used in Christian contexts to justify forgiving people who have personally done you a wrong. I, however, believe that the implications go much further than personal forgiveness and dictate the role Christians should play in the justice system. God offers second chances to those who desire them. Who are we to play God and deny that same redo button that we so freely received? When people honestly want to change and make something better of their lives, it doesn't make sense to continue to hold them responsible for a mistake they made decades ago. Our honest intentions to protect society by incarcerating criminals become harmful when we prevent the reformed from returning to school or getting a job. Perhaps by refusing

them a second chance, we force them into worse crimes that are even more detrimental to the community.

I'm not saying that we should do away with the prison system completely. There certainly are psychopathic murderers and sociopathic rapists who should be locked up and prevented from harming society. I just think that we should be less focused on making sure convicts pay for every bit of suffering they caused, and instead work to reform the current system that punishes you for the rest of your life for a stupid decision that you made years ago. In New York, with the lack of expungements and the adult criminal age set at sixteen, you can get in with the wrong crowd and screw up in high school and never be allowed to forget that mistake. That's definitely not grace and definitely not forgiveness. But tell me this: is that even justice?

When the Pharisees dragged the adulterous woman before Jesus and demanded that he stone her to death, he said, "Let any of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Slowly, one by one, the entire crowd left until only Jesus and the woman remained. When all were gone, he simply told her to go and sin no more. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher of the law, but he also believed that sometimes love and forgiveness were more important than strict legalism. He saw people as people, not as composites of their crimes. He saw her as a disgraced and ashamed woman, not as a filthy adulterer. He saw how fallen she

was and how she yearned for something more and gave her a second chance. If Christians are called to be like Jesus, shouldn't we do the same?

Tenth Avenue North, one of my favorite bands, sings:

*You are more than the choices  
that you've made.*

*You are more than the sum  
of your past mistakes.*

*You are more than the problems  
you create.*

*You've been remade.*

The Christian role in the criminal justice system should not be to advocate stricter drug possession laws or condemn those with past records. Those laws address the symptoms of excessive crime but not the root. Instead, Christians should facilitate rehabilitation programs, educational and vocational classes, mental health services in prison, and re-entry programs and career preparation after prison to address poverty and lack of education. Christians (or all people, really) should be showing people how to be remade instead of refusing to acknowledge that they will ever be different from what they are. Christians should live offering hope and second chances. Christians should stand at the foot of a murderer's grave and sincerely say, "Rest in peace."



