

**OTHER BOOKS BY MARVIN OLASKY**

ON FIGHTING POVERTY

*Compassionate Conservatism:*

*What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America*

*Renewing American Compassion:*

*How Compassion for the Needy Can Turn Ordinary Citizens into Heroes*

*The Tragedy of American Compassion*

*Patterns of Corporate Philanthropy*

*More Than Kindness* (with Susan Olasky)

ON AMERICAN HISTORY

*The American Leadership Tradition:*

*Moral Vision from Washington to Clinton*

*Fighting for Liberty and Virtue:*

*Political and Cultural Wars in Eighteenth-Century America*

*Philanthropically Correct: The Story of the Council on Foundations*

*Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America*

*Corporate Public Relations: A New Historical Perspective*

ON JOURNALISM

*Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism*

*Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism*

*The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988*

*Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media*

*Whirled Views* (with Joel Belz)

STANDING  
FOR CHRIST  
IN A  
MODERN BABYLON

Marvin Olasky

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A DIVISION OF  
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon*

Copyright © 2003 by Marvin Olasky

Published by Crossway Books  
a division of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Scripture verses marked ESV are taken from the *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® is marked NIV. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society.

Cover design: UDG / DesignWorks, Sisters, Oregon

First printing 2003

Printed in the United States of America

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Olasky, Marvin N.

Standing for Christ in a modern Babylon / Marvin Olasky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58134-474-0 (tpb. : alk. paper)

1. Christianity and culture—United States. 2. Religion and the press—United States. 3. United States—Moral conditions. I. Title.

BR517.O43 2003

261'.0973—dc21

2002154720

---

ML	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05	04	03			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

# INTRODUCTION

The modern battle to preserve civilization and recognize its religious source began on September 11, 2001. When the second terrorist airplane attacked the World Trade Center, ABC's Diane Sawyer was speechless for a moment. Then she uttered a soft, "Oh, my God."

As the first of the twin towers collapsed, pastoral staff members at Trinity Church Wall Street were leading prayers and hymns. Dust penetrated Trinity's office tower and filled the lobby as congregants evacuated children from the basement pre-school, and then fled screaming onto Broadway. The church could not stay separate from the sins of the world.

As excavation crews worked at the Manhattan death site, mourners and passers-by stuck prayers on fences and walls. "Lord Jesus Christ," read one, "have mercy on us. Make haste to help us. Comfort us. Rescue us. And save us. Do your will in our lives." President George W. Bush quoted from Psalm 23 and emphasized prayer in his speeches to the nation. For several months the United States was in a foxhole, and atheistic assumptions were under fire.

A year later, though, other catastrophic terrorist attacks had not occurred; so many Americans filed away larger questions, and many journalists returned to snide attacks on those who offered answers. Meanwhile, many conservative Christians maintained a posture of just saying no to modern and postmodern craziness, instead of engaging American culture and developing alternatives.

That great divide could be especially tragic given what happened in the rest of the world during 2002 as America returned, perhaps temporarily, to pre-September 11 normality. One example: In mid-November, 2002, Nigerian Muslim anger over a newspaper article about the Miss World beauty pageant touched off riots that left 220 persons dead and over 1,000 seriously injured, along with numerous Christian churches burned to the ground.

How bad was it? *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Davan Maharaj reported that “Thousands of Muslim youths armed with knives and machetes [were] burning cars and assaulting bystanders they suspected were Christian. Rioters pulled a local journalist off a motorcycle and told him he would be killed unless he could recite verses from Islam’s holy book, the Quran. The crowd released him unharmed when they realized he was Muslim.”

The article in the Nigerian newspaper *ThisDay* speculated that Muhammad, instead of reacting like the contemporary opponents of the beauty pageants, “would have probably chosen a wife” from among the contestants. Given the tinder box that Islamic extremists have made of northern Nigeria, the comment was dumb—but it was also a reasonable speculation, for stories about Muhammad’s life that have semi-sacred status within Islam show the religion’s founder appreciating and sometimes appropriating to himself the beauties of his time.

Book eight, numbers 3325 and 3328, of the sayings and deeds collected by the esteemed ninth-century editor Abul Husain Muslim bin al-Hajjaj al-Nisapuri records how Muhammad heard that a young woman was so beautiful that a disciple said, “she is worthy of you only.” Muhammad had her brought to him and was so enraptured that he “granted her emancipation and married her.”

*ThisDay* could have footnoted its story with these and other references—but that would have increased the tensions. Nigeria’s Islamic extremists don’t want anyone to raise questions about how Muhammad actually lived, because that might hurt their effort to set

up an autocratic Islamic regime. Some countries under Christian influence were like that centuries ago, but they eventually adopted the view John Milton expressed in the 1640s in his *Areopagetica*. Milton wrote, “Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field . . . let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter.”

Milton’s prescription is still suspect in much of the world. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo criticized *ThisDay* and said murderous riots could happen in his country “any time irresponsible journalism is committed against Islam.” That’s what is so sad: This is not a one-time occurrence but something to be expected “any time.” The enemies of journalistic freedom used to have their capital in Moscow; now it’s Mecca. Hardcore Islam has now replaced communism as the world’s most potent hater of press liberty.

Christians, confident of God’s providence, should defend Milton’s view—but sometimes we don’t. My concern about missed opportunities engendered this book, which briefly reports and analyzes where American culture now stands, with an emphasis on the chasm between secular liberal journalists and conservative Christians. This book deals with how Christians should act and talk within a culture that’s both liberal and libertine. It shows how Christians need to exercise discernment in proposing addition, not subtraction: Unable to eliminate wrongful choices, we need to add godly ones.

This book also shows how Christians can respond to typical press attacks in a way that can not only win points but point journalists to Him. Some people who would like to stand for Christ become irate, even despairing, but the Bible shows how believers have been a harassed minority before, and under much more difficult circumstances than those we now face. The last chapter of 2 Chronicles tells the 2,600-year-old saga: The Babylonians “burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels” (2 Chron. 36:19 ESV).

Israelites had lived in a land where every aspect of life was to point them to the holiness of the one God who reigned above all. Suddenly, they found themselves exiled to Babylon. They found there a land of many gods where almost anything was allowed as long as it did not interfere with obeying and paying tribute to the king. Some Israelites probably sequestered themselves as much as they could from Babylonian civilization. The Old Testament tells of Daniel and a few other young men enrolling in a three-year course in Babylon designed to leave them with an M.B.A.—Master of Babylonian Arts.

Daniel, after graduation, came to prominence when God gave him the grace to comprehend and interpret a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. Providentially, Daniel had gained the understanding of Babylonian culture that he needed to communicate powerfully the essence of the dream. He told the king of a great image with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of clay. All of these aspects had meanings that Daniel laid out, but the climax of the dream and interpretation came when a stone cut from a mountain by no human hand broke the statue into pieces, and that stone then “became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan. 2:35 ESV).

Daniel, knowing how Babylonians saw mountains either as gods or the abode of gods, then explained that the powerful stone came from not a mere mountain god but from “. . . the God of heaven [who] will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (v. 44 ESV). Nebuchadnezzar realized that Daniel’s knowledge of the dream could have come about only through a god’s doing. He also gained a vision of the mightiness of this God and told Daniel, “Truly your God is God of gods and Lord of kings . . .” (v. 47 ESV).

Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel ruler over the central part of the Babylonian empire, and the Israelite in succeeding decades was in and out of the Babylonian court. He spoke forthrightly to Nebuchadnezzar by telling his patron that he would become insane for seven years.

Daniel was forgotten by a second king but brought back just in time to predict the kingdom's imminent fall. Daniel did not go looking for trouble, but trouble came looking for him: Praying in his own home, he ended up thrown to the lions. God then delivered Daniel and so impressed a third king, Darius, that the monarch recognized "the God of Daniel" as "the living God, enduring forever" (Dan. 6:26 ESV).

Daniel, faithful to biblical understanding but comprehending Babylon, is a role model for Christians who want to work in the dominant culture of America but not be of it. Daniel's life was not easy—at least twice it almost ended prematurely—and he spent his entire career among people of different beliefs. But he stood for God decade after decade, and we can do the same. He had to be bilingual and bicultural, and so should we be.

We know that not only from the example of Daniel, but also from God's command. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'" (29:4-7 ESV). In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, "Babylon" is the symbol of everything wicked, but that's not how Jeremiah refers to it. In his day Babylonia was a mighty civilization that generally tolerated many minority religions, including worship of the true God. Many Babylonians were good neighbors, trading gardening tips.

Today biblical Christians should see fellow citizens in America not as enemies but as needy people. This book can help Christians rooted in one culture to communicate with neighbors in another. It is designed to help Christians stand up resolutely against press attacks and to see them as opportunities to communicate the truth about false religions and about Christianity. It is secondarily intended to help us look in the mirror and see ourselves as secular liberal journalists often see us. Our goal should be to minimize unnecessary

press criticism while maximizing a Christian witness that should lead to even more criticism—but the right kind.

The first chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding “choice” as a god-word in America, and proposes that Christians, instead of looking for ways to escape our liberty theme park, follow the advice of Booker T. Washington: “Throw down your bucket where you are.” It examines the meanings of freedom and liberty and their historical connection to family and love. It proposes a pro-life strategy of doubling the choices women have and emphasizes the importance of positioning Christianity as pro-choice (including giving unborn children a chance), diverse, pragmatic, skeptical, patient, optimistic, and content—but never passive.

The second chapter suggests that we should listen to the critiques secularists offer because some may be like those Shimei hurled at King David 3,000 years ago. David would not let his soldiers kill the dirt-thrower because he just might be a helpful messenger. Non-biblical restrictions on conduct, along with anti-biblical racial bias, have hurt the church’s witness, and we should admit those failings and others. The chapter lays out a “rapids test” that can help us be strict constructionists regarding Scripture. Then comes a critique of the attacks leveled at Christians since September 11, 2001, by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other publications, and an assessment of whether these attacks are the result of ignorance, malice, or Christophobia.

Chapter 3 examines the ignorance that many secularists have about Christianity’s societal impact. Sneering scorn needs to be fought with recognition of emotion but also a recital of facts about the worldwide spread of Christianity, the role of Christians in American history and politics over the past two centuries, and the long-lived Christian interaction with government. Journalists need to hear the stories of well-known athletes like Kurt Warner and John Smoltz and little-known compassionate crusaders in poor areas of major cities. We should avoid covering up Christian failings but should also show

that those who are needy at home and abroad will lose a major source of help if reporters further marginalize Christians.

Chapter 4 shows how the search for greener grass elsewhere has led some journalists to praise Eastern religions and several ideologies that spoke of freedom but gave us gulags—and how journalists, fearful of seeming anti-Muslim, are playing a role in a new bait-and-switch game. The chapter notes that many Muslims are good neighbors in the United States, but that for over 1,300 years Islamic rule has dropped non-Muslims into “dhimmitude,” a state in many ways worse than servitude. Press inaccuracy about Christianity is matched by inaccurate depictions of Islam that currently pervade American media and may lead us to fatal distraction.

Chapter 5 outlines points of contact with secularists that will help Christians meet our prime obligation: not defending ourselves against attack but proclaiming boldly and winsomely the gospel of grace. Although we are not to be quarrelsome, and we should turn the other cheek concerning personal offenses, we must be ready to debate when basic biblical principles are at stake. When people whisper, “Did God really say . . .” as the serpent insinuated in Eden, we need to say, “Yes, He did.” When people want us to go with the flow, to meet “halfway,” we need to stand our ground whenever it is good ground, high ground, God’s ground.

That will cost us, but the willingness to forgo applause from society’s trendsetters distinguishes tough Christians from the Mr. Pliables of the world. We can be confident that our focus is biblical when we answer correctly the party game question: If you could have any dinner guest you wanted, whom would you invite? Lots of guests would be entertaining. Some would offer instruction. But only one would change not just some things but everything in the lives of those at the dinner table. If the resurrected Jesus came for a fish fry, showing His punctured palms and wounded side, that would make all the difference for guests with eyes to see and ears to hear Him.

Christians who understand their societies and become God’s

instruments can make a huge difference for individuals and whole cultures. As this book shows, we can fight pornography not with talk of eradicating filth but with a call to preserve individual rights, including the right not to have porn shoved into our e-mail or popping up as we web-surf. We can defend the Boy Scout ban on homosexual scoutmasters as a recognition of consumer choice and the rights of the poor: How many single moms, enrolling their sons in the Boy Scouts so they will have male role models, want them to be mentored by gay men?

This book is about how to talk with our neighbors in this modern Babylon about such issues and others, both domestic and international. If we think living in Babylon is too hard, we can remember the experience of Daniel and many others. We can also come to understand that the question about which dinner guest to invite is in one sense irrelevant. Jesus doesn't wait for invitations. Whenever He chooses to come, He crashes the party. That can always give us hope.

## LIVING IN THE LIBERTY THEME PARK

Christians often fall into traps. The perpetrators and venues change: In 1990, Mapplethorpe in Cincinnati; in 1999, Ofili in Brooklyn; in 2002, the University of North Carolina. The common denominator: Religious protesters, attacking profane artistic presentations and biased academic endeavors, walked into a journalistic snare.

The repeated ploy of the cultural left is to put forth a “work of art” calculated to outrage conservative evangelicals and traditional Catholics, who respond as if on cue by demanding that the outrage be removed. Typical incitement: The October 2, 1999, opening of an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that featured a dung-and-pornography-bedecked painting of “The Holy Virgin Mary.” Typical reaction: a demonstration by 200 Catholic League supporters. Associated Press coverage: “One grim-faced man brandished a sign that read, ‘Hitler Was Right When He Got Rid of Degenerate Art.’”

A different theme could have emerged from this face-off. Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York and two years from gaining broad respect during the weeks after the 9/11 attacks, asked why taxpayers should subsidize the profane tastes of a few. But the *New York Times* played down that question and played up the “Hitler Was Right” sign. Its front-page story juxtaposed the record number of attendees at the opening (9,200) with the arrival of a “busload of women” from a

Catholic church who described themselves as “soldiers of Mary . . . come to her defense.”

The *Times* reporter on October 3 did quote one protester saying, “The issue is the funding,” but that statement was overshadowed by a full paragraph about how a man with a loudspeaker kept reciting the rosary. The reporter was careful to note that the protester “did this for hours, so much so that some people leaving the exhibition mockingly parroted the prayer as they headed for their cars.” Articles in other newspapers that week criticized that one religious group for purportedly trying to impose its morals on the general populace.

That is something no one can stare down these days in our laid-back culture. The result was obvious as soon as pundits successfully categorized the battle as liberty versus repression. Readers could cheer a victory for artistic freedom and the liberty of individuals to choose to go to a controversial exhibit. Readers could boo religious bigots and their attempt to take away choices from individuals.

Nearly three years later, when the University of North Carolina required incoming freshmen to read portions of the Quran (embedded in a favorable commentary, with portions that justify killing opponents omitted), a Christian group demanded that the book be removed from reading lists. That action was logical according to the First Amendment. Government officials are not supposed to give official preference to one religion over another, but foolish according to today’s last amendment: Journalists get the last word.

It would have been far better to ask not that a book be removed, but that portions of the Bible be added to the reading list. In our touchy society less cannot be more; it is better ethically to give rather than receive, but it is essential politically to add rather than subtract. Whenever media powers frame the issue as “repression” or “censorship,” Christians and conservatives lose. We can whine about dumbness and unfairness, but we need a new strategy, one based on the understanding that modern America and ancient Israel are two very different places.

Ancient Israel, to use today's parlance, was a holiness theme park. The laws laid down by Moses set up Israel to be a holy people separated from others and dedicated to God. The land itself was a theme park with everything—geography, economics, laws, customs—stressing holiness. In the end, of course, the insufficiency of all those aids to reverence showed man's desperate need for Christ.

The United States, though, is a theme park devoted to liberty. We are the envy of much of the world because of the freedom we have to speak, write, worship, and work. We are free to build businesses and to travel. We are also free to consume pornography, practice adultery and homosexuality, and act in other ways that threaten life and the pursuit of long-term happiness, because a lesson regularly taught in the eighteenth century has now largely been forgotten: Liberty without virtue becomes license, and licentiousness leads to anarchy.

#### THE HISTORICAL MEANING OF FREEDOM AND LIBERTY

Journalists I've talked with sometimes think of God as a cruel dictator, but that shows a misunderstanding of both human nature and the meaning of freedom. To grasp this we need to go on a brief etymological excursion, tracing the word *freedom* to its German origins. Today, watching beer commercials in America or Germany, we might suspect that freedom means to be unencumbered by family, completely at liberty to satisfy any desires at any time with anyone. But the word *free* in Old High German, as Gregory Beabout of Saint Louis University has noted, stems from the Indo-European *prijos* (dear, beloved) and is related to the Sanskrit *priyas* (dear) and *priya* (wife, daughter).

The word *free* is also connected to the Old English *frigu* (love); Germans and Celts used it to mean neither controlled from outside the household nor enslaved, but benevolent toward and intimate with those inside. In Danish, *frie* means "to make an offer of marriage," which should be done both through free choice and love. The etymology explains why the goddess Frigg was the Old Norse equiv-

alent of Venus, the goddess of love in Roman mythology. Perhaps Fridays (the name derived from Frigg) are for lovers—and marriage is an act of freedom that allows us to gain the roots that we need to keep from being blown around by ideological winds.

In the movie *Braveheart*, when William Wallace (played by Mel Gibson) under torture near the end yells “Freedom” and envisions his murdered wife, he is thinking as a Celt would have. Despite their typical depiction in most other contemporary American movies, families are places of freedom. Instead of being driven by loneliness to spend the evening with strangers, free people are devoted to each other and feel at ease in familial company. Husbands and wives can only fully enjoy the freedom of marital bonds when they exercise self-restraint in regard to others who could readily become objects of lust.

Civilization is passed on in part when children who want to be free learn that self-restraint is the key to true liberty. Because we fall far short of how we should act, parents often do not succeed in teaching that to children. Teenagers (and sometimes parents as well) readily spot the flaws in parental tutelage. But if parents abdicate, children may never learn what real freedom is, and they’ll accept the new mythology that it means not having character but being one.

Let’s turn for a moment now to liberty. We don’t have to delve back a millennium—only to the eighteenth century when the term was often used in years leading up to the American Revolution. For Christians such as Connecticut minister Levi Hart, natural man was a captive of sin, and “the whole plan of Redemption is comprised in procuring, preaching, and bestowing liberty to the captives.”\* Liberty means the opportunity to do what we ought to do, not the liberty to do what we might desire at the moment. If we constantly indulge ourselves, we are slaves of our wants.

---

\*For more on eighteenth-century thought, see my book *Fighting for Liberty and Virtue* (Crossway, 1995).

The expression “life, liberty, and the pursuit of property” (or “happiness,” as the Declaration of Independence put it) involves not three goals thrown together but a plan whereby one leads to the next. When God gives us life, He also gives us liberty to choose an occupation to follow, or (if we are constrained as well as supported by the existence of a family business) a way to pursue it. If we choose wisely, we will engage in activity that most likely leads to both property and happiness. Political philosopher Michael Novak has pointed out that in the Anglo-American tradition the goal has been liberty under law, not liberty from law.

To come at it one other way: The 1904 version of “America the Beautiful” proclaims, “Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” Liberty, self-control, and the external control of law all work together to keep us from being enslaved by our temporary desires. Two centuries ago, the antonym to “liberty” that sprang to people’s lips was not “slavery” but “license.” A free person stood in the middle of a spectrum, not tugged by one mob to embrace libertinism or by another mob to hug dictatorship and political slavery.

#### TODAY’S HYSTERICAL MEANING

Are we free today? In one sense, beyond a doubt. My grandparents, immigrants to America, grew up with no means to have professional entertainment within their home. My parents grew up with radio. I grew up with three or four television stations. My students have grown up with cable and too many stations to count, along with remote controls that allow for instant changes. They have grown up with portable CD players for personal music wherever they go. They have never known a time without legal and frequent abortion. In short, they have lived their whole lives in a pro-choice environment, whether the choice concerns TV shows or a woman’s pregnancy.

Many students I have had are the children of divorce or of single parenting, and so they don’t have familial constancy in their lives. The upbringing of most has been postmodern, with no clear sense of right

and wrong. Most want liberty and desperately want it NOW, without waiting one more second for it. The most tuned-in advertising slogan of recent decades, whether relating to hamburgers or to life and death, is “Have it your way.” The choice can be wise or foolish, reasoned or arbitrary, but our goal is to sing in a parody of Sinatra, “I did it (bought it, fought it, worked it, quirked it) my way.”

A generation ago Bob Dylan sang that the answer was “blowin’ in the wind.” Many Americans found at the end of that gust not liberty but license: Have it your way, a different way every day of the year. Our liberty now is the liberty of leaves. Christians can point out that a truly free person is not blown around by breezes. We should also note the dangers of licentious liberty. But this is where God has providentially placed us, and we need to learn how to live in these curious surroundings.

Why? Why not preach hellfire on the streets? Why not conspire to set up a theocratic government, if that were possible? Why not demand to have it the Christian way because if we are fervent enough won’t God bless us? No. God does not bless breast-beating when He has commanded us to stand our ground and be patient. And every time God’s people found themselves to be a minority outside the holy land, that’s exactly what God commanded.

That was certainly the case in Babylon, a most ungodly country. As Jeremiah wrote, the exiled Israelites were to build houses, plant gardens, and remember that they were now part of Babylonia: “In its welfare you will find your welfare.” God did not order attacks on idol-laden temples. He also did not tell the Israelites to lose their distinctives and melt into the surrounding community; assemblies of believers then and now must aspire to high standards. Daniel offered his advice to Babylonian rulers and did not walk off in a huff when some ignored it. Later, the book of Esther tells how Mordecai, realizing that the king of Persia’s proclamation was irreversible, looked for a counterweight in Persian law and custom.

The New Testament exhibits the same pattern of standing firm

on rights and proclaiming the gospel at every opportunity, but not calling for insurrection or giving up. Almost 2,000 years ago, when surrounded by paganism, the apostle Paul demanded not revolution but his rights as a Roman citizen. And so we must learn to live in the liberty theme park, even as we seek to teach other inhabitants that all of us find true liberty only in Christ. Merely complaining about the false understanding of freedom will do little good. Only as we show in both word and deed what a true understanding of liberty looks like, will we help to transform a culture.

#### THROWING DOWN OUR BUCKETS

We need to understand that saying, “Thou shalt do X because God says so,” leads to blank stares or incredulous glances. Moral absolutes resonate poorly among people who desire absolute freedom and have never heard G.K. Chesterton’s wise reminder: “The point of having an open mind, like having an open mouth, is to close it on something solid.” We should understand that in the American liberty theme park, we cannot eliminate the negative; so our realistic option is to emphasize the positive.

Booker T. Washington used to tell the story of a storm-tossed trans-Atlantic ship that had run out of drinking water as it approached the mouth of the Amazon River. The captain signaled to a passing boat his desperate need for water, only to receive this message: “Throw down your bucket where you are.” A sailor lowered a bucket into what was still the Atlantic Ocean and pulled it back up; the flow of the Amazon was so strong that several miles out to sea the water was fresh. And so we should throw down our buckets, seeing how we can expand homeschooling, give school vouchers a fighting chance, offer addicts faith-based anti-addiction programs along with conventional ones, and teach intelligent design alongside evolution.

The Brooklyn museum demonstrators, instead of playing into the choice versus repression formula, would have been more effective by emphasizing that \$7 million given to a perverse clique means

that less money is available for art education in schools or for more diverse exhibits elsewhere. They could have pointed out that government funding means less choice, not more, because it enables a small group of museum directors and their allies to decide what others will be able to see. The protesters had many options once they understood that anything that seems to remove choice is doomed to defeat.

Those who proclaim America the new Israel are also likely to lose. Around two decades ago, desperate to stem the tide of licentiousness, some Christians talked as if God had promised that the United States would be a Christian nation. Groups such as the Moral Majority promised that a full-court press would force secularists to turn over the ball. But there was no moral majority, sometimes not even within churches. Christian attempts to fight divorce on demand lost credibility as it became clear that many church members were divorcing as church leaders stood by.

Because the Bible teaches us that there is only one way to heaven, some Christians who become politically active equate politics (and their particular brand of it) as *the* only right way to bring about change. But God calls all of us to different tasks. Those who believe in the Bible are a minority, and Christians need to emphasize minority rights. Some Christians still say that we are letting God down if we don't buy their particular strategy of how to gain political dominance. Since God accomplishes His purposes regardless of where the votes lie, we should stop assuming—lest we doubt His power—that one of His purposes is to turn the United States into the United Christendom.

We are called to very high standards in our own lives and churches. We are called, through God's grace, to teach and disciple, explaining to a needy world a better way to live. We can be confident that God's way is the better way because God created the world and knows what works best for His creatures to live happily in it. For that reason, many politically correct activities are pragmatically incorrect.

Cruising homosexuals have a low life expectancy, even when AIDS is factored out. Abortion kills children and also psychologically and sometimes physically injures their mothers. Divorce leaves not only children but ex-partners in misery. We should note the consequences and try to lead secularists to living water, while remembering that we cannot make them drink.

Let's look for the silver (or at least rhinestone) linings in the dark clouds of postmodernism. We used to have to fight monolithic modernism, but now the monolith is pulled down, and choice is god. Since the major political rule in our liberty theme park is that he who talks of expanding choices normally wins, let's use that attitude to help Bible-based ideas gain a foothold. Let's be more postmodern than the postmodernists in many areas of public life. Are school administrators, under pressure, now saying that parents may choose among all public schools in a district? Fine, let them choose among all schools through the provision of vouchers or tax credits.

#### FIGHTING ABORTION IN THE LIBERTY THEME PARK

Abortion is a case in point of the difference that understanding Babylon can make. Let's start with the pro-life side, much of which is based in biblical belief and has a straightforward understanding. The Bible says you shall not murder. The Bible also clearly refers to preborn human life as human life. Ergo, we shall not murder those not yet born. Since we have laws against murder even in our liberty theme park, we should have laws against abortion.

The other side has two positions. One is that unborn human life is not really human life (but that has become less credible as wonderful photographs of unborn children have become widely available). The other is utilitarian: To go through with a pregnancy will ruin the life prospects of the mother.

To claim that unborn human life is not truly human life has become particularly hard to maintain among pregnant women who—hooked up to ultrasound machines that safely bounce sound

waves off their unborn children—see sonograms of their children on a TV monitor. Dozens of crisis pregnancy centers have found that when a woman thinking about abortion sees a sonogram of her unborn child, the image frequently creates a bond that gives a troubled woman new courage to carry out the pregnancy. When the men involved see the sonogram, many also change their minds about abortion. As the Dallas Pregnancy Resource Center concluded, “Offering a pamphlet displaying fetal development promotes truth, but offering a sonogram displaying the beating heart of a woman’s own child displays personal reality.”

Today’s ultrasound machines yield clearer pictures than those of a generation ago. Yet even those images helped Dr. Bernard Nathanson, after performing some 60,000 abortions, to perceive an unborn child’s silent scream and join the pro-life side. The quality of sonograms has also improved enormously since the CBS morning news in 1998 featured a mother telling an interviewer how “when I had the ultrasound and actually saw the baby—that was when I bought into the idea that this was my child.” As expensive as high-quality ultrasound machines are, they are the best way to make sure that adults cannot maintain a childlike naïveté about the effects of their actions. Since “personal reality” trumps all else in the liberty theme park, the pro-life movement would do well to make universal provision of sonograms a top priority.

It’s vital as well to learn from history. Nineteenth-century pro-life leaders appreciated the usefulness of laws protecting unborn children but did not depend on them. Instead of complaining incessantly about the lack of enforcement of laws, they concentrated on ways to help women avoid abortion. These men and women emphasized abstinence, set up refuges for pregnant women, and helped them place babies for adoption. Their goals were pragmatic: Get abortionists off the streets and into either jail or a decent occupation. States frequently gave women immunity from all prosecution in exchange for testimony. Even prostitutes, who made up a majority of

most abortionists' clients, were not jailed for abortions they had because legislatures wanted their help in nailing the abortionists. The goal of legislation was not to punish women but to contain the evil empire of the abortionists and to signal its illegitimacy.

Legislation was education, and nineteenth-century journalists also helped. In 1890, the *New York Times* described one abortionist, a Dr. McGonegal, as having "the appearance of a vulture. . . . His sharp eyes glitter from either side of his beaked nose, and cunning and greed are written all over his face." The *Times* in those days called abortion "the evil of the age" and sent reporters undercover into abortionist businesses to describe vividly the killing fields. Today's leading reporters (especially at the *Times*) have a different sensibility. Condemn the abortionist who provides choice? No way. But perhaps entrepreneurial journalists at other publications will find a way.

Those who value life have tried and failed for three decades to turn around or counter the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. With political and legal action stalled, an alternative approach begins with understanding the plight of the young women surprised by pregnancy. They now are likely to see abortion as the taking of human life, but to view it as sadly justifiable homicide, self-defense against tiny intruders who will ruin their lives—no more education, no career, no more boyfriends—unless the babies' lives are snuffed out. If these women don't abort, their crisis pregnancies will be followed by crisis infancies and crisis childhoods and crisis adolescence. They fear that they'll be doing it by themselves, with no husbands, no backup.

From their perspective, they can reluctantly choose legal homicide, or they can suffer the life imprisonment of single parenthood. Sadly, our society has minimized a third choice, adoption. That's the altruistic choice—a secure life for a child, often a gift to a childless couple—but teenagers generally ask not what they can do for others. We need to do more to encourage adoption in every way, but we haven't concentrated on that sufficiently because we have empha-

sized attempts to reduce the two choices, abortion or parenting, to one choice, a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion.

Such an amendment is what all who are committed to life and true liberty hope for, but in our new Babylon, with choice as a god-word, the pro-life movement needs to be even more pro-choice than so-called pro-choicers. Christians need to campaign to double the choice, going from two—reluctant homicide or life imprisonment—to four, adding adoption and emphasizing marriage when appropriate and possible. With two main choices over the past quarter-century, about 50 percent of unmarried pregnancies have ended in abortion. With four choices, that figure could be reduced to 25 percent, saving hundreds of thousands of lives in the process. At that point it will be culturally and politically possible to remove the choice that eliminates the opportunity for preborn babies to one day grow up and make their own choices.

#### SIX MEDIA MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Christians are citizens of the United States and also citizens of God's kingdom. With that dual citizenship, some have the tendency to assume too much about what we can accomplish societally in our American Babylon. Some pile up strict rules as if conformity to outside pressure is the ladder to heaven. Most Christians, though, follow God's instructions by praying for America's welfare and by building families, homes, and businesses. Most understand that the Bible emphasizes a relationship with God, not a set of rules.

Coming to Christianity from the outside, I can still be as exasperated as some secular journalists by the actions of some Christians. While editing *World* during the past decade, though, I've seen that biblical Christians generally are well-prepared to use liberty theme park analysis. That's because six conventional press descriptions of Christians are simply not true for most.

1. *Anti-choice*. Going beyond abortion, we ourselves are used to choice. We like our dozens or hundreds of digital TV choices, music

choices, sports choices, food choices. We are pro-choice in not only shopping for goods but also shopping for schools. We want private schools to be an option for everyone, not just for the rich. We want theories of intelligent design to be taught alongside theories of evolution. We are pro-choice concerning social services; so we want addicts, alcoholics, and others to be offered faith-based programs along with conventional liberal ones. We don't want the poor or anyone to become dependent on government for biweekly bread because when we are dependent, we can no longer make free choices.

2. *Stuck on morality-legislating panaceas.* Christians are actually less likely than others to fixate on particular bills because we believe that triumph will come only when Christ returns. We know that sin cannot be wiped out because it is within everyone; we just don't want sin to gain governmental backing. We're not suckers for government-surplus stain removers that in practice grind the evil deeper into the social fabric. We believe that God instituted government for the prosecution of wrongdoers, not the promotion of evil. We are not trying to gain power to force change on millions from the top down because (among other reasons) we know that does not work. We do not believe that by societal restructuring we can liberate the natural "goodness" of man because we don't believe that natural goodness exists.

3. *Opposed to the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom.* No, we want the First Amendment to be a protection for the free expression of religious beliefs as it was intended to be. James Madison, its author, assured members of Congress that its purpose was to keep federal officials from placing on a pedestal one particular sect "to which they would compel others to conform." We believe that Congress should stay out of religious matters. We believe that Christians should not fear competition from other religions; we merely insist on a level playing field.

4. *Opposed to diversity.* No, we so truly believe in the importance of diversity that we do not want it to be only skin deep. God created

all kinds of people, all made in His image; so as we learn about and appreciate others, we also appreciate God. Churches have often failed in such reaching out, but things are improving. We also hope for improvements in media, academic, and governmental circles. We would like to see in the press fair treatment of a diversity of views, not just a stultifying extension of politically correct secular liberalism. We would like to reduce discrimination against Christians at colleges and universities. We would like to see welfare programs that honor religious diversity replace governmental one-size-fits-all approaches.

5. *Gullible followers of potential dictators.* No, we are less likely than others to bow down to any human authority. We obey a higher authority. We are taught not to put our trust in princes. We are political skeptics in relation to Washington orthodoxy. We are strict constructionists concerning both the Bible and the Constitution. We read the Bible to learn what God says, not what thoroughly modern millennialists wish He would say. We read the Constitution to see what the nation agreed to in 1787 and what the nation has changed in it through the amendment process. We know that more centralized power brings more reason for bribery and bribes (or large payments for “access”). We don’t want judges to legislate for us.

6. *Pessimistic.* Actually, we’re long-term optimists because we know that Christ will return someday, and many of us are short-term optimists as well. We believe in the dreams that our grandparents had. We love being in a country where we can freely worship and work, building families, churches, and businesses. In recent years we have seen the downfall of the Soviet empire, the containment of the welfare empire, and the advent of a faith-based initiative. Most of us believe, with all the disappointments, that the involvement of Christians and conservatives in politics over the past two decades has made a big difference in containing abortion, defending Christian and home schooling, and stiffening our backs in the face of terrorism.

## PATIENCE IN AN IMPATIENT SOCIETY

Another quality found among those with a biblical focus is also vital for Christians living in Babylon—patience. Since secular liberals typically portray Christians as impatiently and unhappily hurling epithets at opponents, this word needs some definition. We are not called to procrastinate concerning sin in our own lives, families, and churches. We try to hold political leaders to their promises—and perhaps, through that tendency, teach candidates not to over-promise. Just as Christians in the Lord’s Prayer ask God not to lead us into temptation, we try not to establish concentrations of political power that lead almost every office-holder into temptation. We recognize that history is full of examples of insurrectionists who, when they gained power, become imitators of what they overthrew. Russians in the 1970s joked about Leonid Brezhnev showing off his big homes and abundant possessions to his impressed mother, who then asked a worried question, “But what if the Communists come?”

A parallel question could be addressed to a few of the fire-breathing first-term congressmen from 1995 who have now adopted the ways of Washington and over-compromised: “But what if the Republican Revolution arrives?” Sure, it’s disappointing that some leaders and followers breathed fire when fashionable and once in office made new alliances with the smoke detector industry. What impresses many Christians, though, is not that the go-along get-alongs exist, but that many principled conservatives have stood fast.

It has been that way throughout American history. What surprises me, looking back, is that nineteenth-century leaders like Andrew Jackson and Grover Cleveland stood up against centralizing pressures. When they ran for reelection, they had to fight the tendency of some of their followers to be frustrated because their main White House successes lay not so much in pushing a new agenda as in stopping bad things from happening.

It’s not surprising that conservatives haven’t won the ballgame. It’s surprising that after a century of political centralization, we still

have a ballgame. After all, throughout the century we've seen decades of liberalism (the 1910s, 1930s, and 1960s in particular) followed by periods not of roll-back conservatism but of consolidation. Presidents such as Calvin Coolidge in the 1920s and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s were willing to stand athwart history and say no. Both times, however, weak successors were unable to stay the course, and the next decade witnessed new expansions of governmental power.

It's not surprising that changing a political culture is very hard and that a century-long movement takes more than a few years to reverse. Of course some congressmen who come to Washington committed to decentralization fall into the old pattern of thinking that if they favor a particular human need or desire, they should vote to spend tax money on it. Bible-centered Christians, however, do not see that as reason to give up.

I've personally seen progress in the war of ideas. In 1989 talk in Washington about the crucial role of churches in fighting poverty and crime was seen as a brave but way-out prophecy. But a decade later *Newsweek* had a cover headline that proclaimed, "God vs. Gangs. What's the Hottest Idea in Crime Fighting? The Power of Religion." In 1992 the prospects for attaining serious welfare reform seemed almost nil. Now the welfare changes of 1996 have led to the fewest number of welfare cases since the 1960s. Politicians of many stripes emphasize effective compassion, at least rhetorically, rather than mere material distribution.

In 1995, when my then-ten-year-old son Daniel told a group of liberal political dignitaries that he was being educated in homeschool, many had never heard of that notion; several asked, "Charm school?" Now even establishment publications such as *Education Week* and *Newsweek* are giving homeschoolers respectful attention.

A change in dominant ideas eventually leads to political change, but the transition takes time. Most Christians, in my experience, are willing to be patient. A few Christians, discouraged, slap on bumper stickers like this one: "Don't vote; it will just encourage them." But

most suggest to our fellow theme park residents, “Vote for the good ones. It’ll encourage them.”

The number of religious readers who think our society is sinking fast has been sufficient to make books such as the *Left Behind* series huge bestsellers. Yet even those popular futuristic novels have an optimistic aspect. The good guys fight back and often succeed. Christians who don’t expect imminent upheaval are even more optimistic that many Americans will either maintain or gain belief in Christ. True, the religious currents that ran fast after 9/11 slowed down once many were no longer pushed to prayer by the feeling of being preyed upon. Still, it’s likely that in the uncertain world of the next decade most Americans will once again find themselves clinging to a rock, either the true one—Christ—or an imagined one.

Christians also realize that whether or not terrorists mind their manners, one grim reaping will advance: Baby boomers are aging. By the sheer demographic numbers they have yanked press chains for a third of a century, from college protests in the 1960s and diet books in the 1980s to Viagra in the 1990s—all becoming big news. Interest in religion generally increases as people age. We may also note greater interest in the impact of religion on life as we see how different religions lead some of our new neighbors to act in dramatically different ways. The number of Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in America has increased sixfold during the past thirty years, which means that religions once exotic in America are now next door to us. All this increases public interest about how faiths affect people’s lives.

Overall, these factors lead to movement away from what Richard John Neuhaus called “the naked public square,” naked in its lack of religious discussion. We’ve learned over the past four decades that attempts to avoid mentioning religion in public places do not yield neutrality; they leave us naked. We have lived in a society, unusual in the history of the world, where many intellectual leaders boasted of nakedness. Most people in most places at most times have worn religious clothes, and as many Americans face pressure—perhaps from

terrorists but certainly from the terror of growing old—that is likely to be the case again.

None of these trends guarantee a greater number of adherents to Christianity, but they suggest opportunities for those who are bold and honest. Christians know that sin cannot be eradicated in this life, only contained. A religion that says the best people do not sin leads to pride and closed mouths. Christianity's understanding that all of us sin and that all sins are covered by Christ's sacrifice leads to self-criticism and the willingness to change. Christians know that people can change anytime, for God changes millions from the inside out, transforming hearts and minds in a way that leads to a rethinking of how to live.

#### MAINTAINING LIBERTY AND FIGHTING DETERMINISM

Fatalism, the idea that some people are destined for trouble and that it's useless to take action to fight the descent, opposes the Christian concept that attitudes and lives can change. A staple of Greek and Roman belief, fatalism still figures prominently in Hinduism (“karma”), Islam (“kismet”), and many tribal religions, but it's also evident in many media presentations today. We are stuck in a rut.

The difference between fatalism and the Christian concept of providence is illustrated by a story about one of Stonewall Jackson's aides, Presbyterian minister Robert L. Dabney. One day in 1862 Dabney preached a sermon on God's “special providence,” noting that in a recent battle “Every shot and shell and bullet was directed by the God of battles.” Not much later Dabney found himself under fire and took cover behind a large gatepost. A nearby officer kidded him: “If the God of battles directs every shot, why do you want to put a gate-post between you and a special providence?” Dabney replied, “Just here the gate-post is the special providence.”

Fatalism versus providence: The contrast is clear even in sports where victories depend on players stepping up rather than fatalistically going through the motions. Johnny Oates, a former Texas

Rangers manager who lost his life through cancer but did not lose his faith, put this well in a spring-training conversation we had a decade ago. He said, “We play aggressively; I never want any Christian to be passive and start saying, ‘It’s God’s will.’ Our goal is to do everything in our power that’s not morally wrong or illegal to win a ballgame. Second, if we lose, I tell the players, ‘Go look at yourself in the mirror. If you did everything you could, go home and get a good night’s rest. If not, remember what you did wrong; then go home and rest.’”

That proper understanding of providence allows for individual initiative, because never-give-up individual action feeds into the ordained outcome. It suggests prudent risk-taking, not a clinging to what is current for fear of any change. It leads brave people to take action when children are about to die either physically or psychologically. Only when we’ve done all we can and failed do we know that a death was ordained.

Ted Yamamori, former head of the Christian relief agency Food for the Hungry, once described an African woman who was mourning the death of her child. The youngster was sick but still alive; yet the mother was convinced that fate decreed her child’s death. Yamamori changed fate by getting the child medicine that restored him to health. We in the liberty theme park have similar opportunities to save children shuttled from foster home to foster home until they lose any sense of continuity and trust. Almost miraculously, a home with patient, compassionate parents can often bring them back from the brink of emotional death. A fatalist might say that such troubled children are fated to a life of misery, but two parents can become their protecting gateposts and change these children’s lives.

A good example of how this principle works out in practice now comes from the little town of Clio, Michigan, just north of the city of Flint. Clio is home for thirty-year-old Jerod Montague, born with cerebral palsy, and his parents. Jerod is cheerful but cannot walk, talk, or go to the bathroom by himself. His parents, in their fifties, have cared for Jerod for three decades; Jim Montague uses his liberty to

head a company that manufactures precision parts for everything from locks and latches to washing machines. He has also used profits from the Montague Tool & Manufacturing Company to develop a way to help not only his son but the children of others. Mr. and Mrs. Montague are building a \$2 million home next to their own home that will have room for Jerod, along with eight others who have cerebral palsy, plus living quarters for house parents and nursing help.

The Montagues have devoted themselves to each other and to their son, and now they are using their freedom to expand their circle of benevolence. Their goal is to make parents feel at ease, in accordance with the mission statement they provide: “We believe God doesn’t make mistakes. . . . It is a high calling to provide quality care to those physically and mentally challenged in such a way that would be pleasing and honoring to our Heavenly Father and bring emotional and spiritual healing to those who brought them into this world.” No one told the Montagues to build a home for those with cerebral palsy. They did it on their own, using profits they had been able to retain from their business. They wanted to do it because they read the Bible and decided to put into practice its teaching about loving our neighbors’ sons as our own sons. With freedom, they built ties that bind people in love.

Today, some sophisticated ideologues contend that individuals cannot change lives, but masses of individuals can. Marxism emphasizes class identity: Bourgeoisie (the middle class) and proletarians (the working class) can never see eye to eye because their eyes see fundamentally different things. Providentially, that notion of class consciousness (“It’s a proletarian thing you wouldn’t understand”) has been discredited all over the world, not only by the failure of socialistic practice but by observation of individual beliefs. Attitudes vary widely among workers, as they do among people of any particular race. Marxists try to account for such variance by saying that some workers identify with their bourgeois oppressors (“false consciousness”), but that game grew old.

The new game in university towns is neo-Marxism, which emphasizes, instead of class identity, markers such as race, sex, and sexual preference. The theory is twisted predestinarian: People think as they do because they are x, y, or z, since a specific consciousness goes with belonging to a particular group. The rhetorical advantages of neo-Marxism are numerous. Adherents can maintain traditional left-wing values by thundering as their Marxist fathers did about oppressed groups of people. Marxist diatribes can be recycled. Just substitute “people of color” for the working class, “angry white males” for the bourgeoisie, and “homophobes” for any other old-time villains.

Ludicrous? Yes, as Karl Marx wrote in one essay comparing the mid-nineteenth-century Napoleon III with the original Napoleon, what emerged the first time as tragedy may come back later as farce. But farces can be serious. For example, “critical race theory,” the view that there are competing and irreconcilable racial views of reality, played a key role in O. J. Simpson’s criminal trial. Lawyers successfully swayed a jury to ignore evidence and acquit a man who suddenly became not a murderer in their eyes but the victim of a racist police force. The jury in that case ignored important facts, but University of Virginia Professor Alex M. Johnson Jr. claimed that the “voice of color . . . rejects narrow evidentiary concepts of relevance and credibility.”

Neo-Marxists contend that blood is thicker than truth, and people don’t have the liberty to change. Such determinism works well within the emphasis on group identity that is central to multiculturalism: Its devotees want the liberty theme park to give special rates for group tours. Because neo-Marxism is inconsistent with the theme park’s emphasis on individual liberty, Christians who take the lead in opposing this ideology often find support from other Americans. The Crips and the Bloods are infamous in the annals of gang warfare, and the twenty-first century may see a gang-like battle of scholarly Bloods (who emphasize thought linked to race, ethnicity, and gender) versus Scrips (who read Scripture and recognize

that ideas, not collectivities, are paramount). Christians who show courage can win this contest because neo-Marxists, like their Marxist predecessors, are fighting the current of liberty that runs strongly in all our theme park rivers.

#### CONTENTMENT AMID DISTRESS

If Christians talk back to the Babylonians while following Jeremiah's instructions to build homes and tend gardens, will that prevent trouble? Not if we are faithful to God. Daniel and his friends minded their own business as they followed their callings as governmental advisors, but Daniel was thrown into a lion's den and his friends into a blazing furnace. Living in the liberty theme park does not mean becoming dainty and docile, rewriting the Bible so that Moses follows the crowd and worships the golden calf, David plays his harp for Goliath, and Elijah becomes associate pastor at the church of Baal.

The dramatic nature of Christ's claims means that life as a Christian in Babylon is not boring. Christ's statement, "I am the way," means that other ways are not, and that does not sit well with some. Christianity cannot be the live-and-let-live religion that goes down easily in a theologically laid-back society because Christians know that the reality apart from God is live-and-let-die. Christ's claims inevitably force a reaction, either believing or hostile, just as He said they would.

Christians, of course, face pressures to appease the Babylonians. A forthright Christian student taking a test or writing a term paper for an adversarial professor has to count the cost. He may be graded down for taking a stand for Christ. A Christian humanities or social sciences professor writing an article has to count the cost. If he is "a fool for Christ," his colleagues might consider him simply a fool. A Christian talking to her non-Christian parent has to count the cost. If she talks about Jesus, her mom will think her weird. In a secular liberal culture, we often get along better with neighbors and relatives, in the short term, if we do not in any way seem threatening.

Living in the liberty theme park does not mean being personally obnoxious. Whether we are presenting the gospel or a Bible-based political position, we should search out points of contact, fighting hard but fighting smart. We should learn about our Babylonian culture, as Daniel did about his. But whether or not we are stand-up Christians or stand-up comics depends on whose applause we covet and how desperately we desire to become members of certain clubs.

Garrison Keillor several years back contrasted Minneapolis, which he said wanted to be hip, with its twin city St. Paul, apparently content to be square. Mr. Keillor wrote that “Minneapolis, not St. Paul, is a mecca for performance artists, people who can’t sing or dance or write or act but who can crawl through a pile of truck tires wearing a shower curtain. . . . Minneapolitans lean forward and watch them, perspiring, afraid that some subtlety may escape them. St. Paulites look at each other and say, ‘Whose idea was this?’”

The original St. Paul gave a hip performance for a while in Acts 17, impressing the elite of Athens. But then—inexplicably by worldly standards—he blew it by talking about the resurrection of the dead. Several Athenians did come to believe, but Paul gave up his opportunity to win broad Areopagus acclaim. Every Christian intellectual, every Christian journalist, every Christian in the liberty theme park faces that same temptation: to become (within the Keillor framework) a Minneapolitan.

If we stand, will we be content, when we could be going on a variety of rides in our liberty theme park? After all, theme parks are not always the happiest places on earth. Adults and children may bake on hot pavement after paying steep prices for thrills that last a few minutes and standing in lines that last far longer. Meanwhile, VIPs go to the head of the line or are even rich enough to build their own roller coasters. Some rides end in disaster and mangled bodies. Sometimes we ourselves, or our children, crash.

Joachim Neander’s children were the victims of a fatal crash over three centuries ago. He wrote a hymn still sung today, “Praise to the

Lord,” that includes the line, “How oft in grief hath not He brought thee relief, spreading His wings to o’er shade thee.” Christian, the hero of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, regularly had grief followed by relief, and that often seems to be what God ordains. As Christians we learn that if we expect life to go smoothly, we will spend much of it discontented, and we won’t come to understand God’s mercy.

It’s hard to accept that the road to contentment runs through misery. Christ came to earth not only to die but also to live amid rejection. His horribly painful death on Good Friday took several hours. It was terrible physically, spiritually, and psychologically, but think also of the rejection that occurred during the night before the crucifixion and all the rejections that occurred prior to Good Friday—rejections by family, by community, by local religious leaders, by national religious leaders. Those also were painful. Much of the Bible is about the painful rejection of prophets and even of God’s grace.

So, for that matter, is much of human history. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, the great sixteenth-century journalistic/historical account, reports the persecution of Christians through the ages. Paul Johnson’s book *Modern Times*, a history of the twentieth century, implicitly shows the rejection of God during that time. Friedrich Nietzsche a century ago, and Ted Turner more recently, snarled that Christianity is a religion for losers. Christians who understand that the last will be first know that those two snarlers were wrong, but Christianity is certainly a religion that understands the reality of rejection.

Christianity is also a religion of contentment amid distress. Here’s one of the last pieces of advice in a great book penned by Jeremiah Burroughs during the 1640s, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*: “Make a good interpretation of God’s ways toward you.” Burroughs taught that those who have some trouble or fail a test should think that God perhaps has provided a trial to build character. Perhaps hearts were inordinately set on a selfish goal. Perhaps success would have created opportunities to fall into sin. Perhaps God was preparing the afflicted for some great work or setting the stage for

some great grace. Burroughs offers each whiner a challenge: If you put all the miseries of the world in one huge heap and divided them up equally among everyone on the globe, would you have fewer?

Advertising messages within our liberty theme park suggest thousands of times a day that any misery we feel is due to our external environment and that buying a change in that environment will give us contentment. But Christianity emphasizes the internal state. If we think we are discontent because we don't have enough goods, we should realize that taking in air does not satisfy the stomach, and taking in things does not satisfy the soul. Burroughs provides the solution to discontent: "not in bringing anything from outside to make my condition more comfortable, but in purging out something that is within." Today we might say instead of buying a more prestigious car, purge covetousness by taking delight in what God already has bestowed on us. Instead of checking out Internet pornography, purge lust by enjoying rightful pleasures.

That is a message today's Babylonians need to hear and to see Christians practice. Here's what the apostle Paul wrote at the beginning of chapter 12 in his letter to the Romans: ". . . I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (vv. 1-3 NIV).