

# RELIGION & LIBERTY

May and June • 2004

A Publication of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty

Volume 14 • Number 3

## Culture, Law, and the Church: A Pastor's Perspective



**George O. Wood**, General Secretary of the Assemblies of God, was elected to his position in 1993. As general secretary, Dr. Wood is a member of the board of administration and the executive presbytery. The son of missionary parents to China and Tibet, Dr. Wood holds a doctoral degree in pastoral theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and a juris doctorate from Western State University College of Law in Fullerton, California. Prior to his current post, he was assistant superintendent of the Southern California District from 1988-93. He also pastored Newport-Mesa Christian Center in Costa Mesa, California, for 17 years. Dr. Wood is author of seven books which include, *A Psalm In My Heart Vol. I & II*, *Living Fully*, *The Successful Life*, and a college text on the *Book of Acts*. He also is an attorney and a member of the California State Bar.

*perintendent of the Southern California District from 1988-93. He also pastored Newport-Mesa Christian Center in Costa Mesa, California, for 17 years. Dr. Wood is author of seven books which include, A Psalm In My Heart Vol. I & II, Living Fully, The Successful Life, and a college text on the Book of Acts. He also is an attorney and a member of the California State Bar.*

**R&L:** *Would you tell us a little bit about how you became the General Secretary of the Assemblies of God?*

**Wood:** I'll give you a couple things that I think might have contributed. For several general councils, I wrote the spiritual life committee report. These reports had wonderful acceptance in the general council. Also, I serve on a number of different committees within the fellowship. So I have a long history of going to general council microphones as a delegate and engaging on a wide number of issues. I guess I had been up in front of people long enough through the years, people thought they knew me well enough to take a chance on me.

**R&L:** *And what do you do day-to-day as the General Secretary?*

**Wood:** First of all, no day is the same.

**R&L:** *I wouldn't think so.*

**Wood:** About forty percent of my time is travel. I'm always headed off to district councils, ministers' retreats, and, in excess of forty weekends a year, I'm preaching or teaching in churches on the weekend. The General Secretary is also the custodian of records, so my office handles all of the credentialing and discipline matters for ministers as well as recognition of churches. We have almost 33,000 credentialed ministers and 12,300 churches, approximately. As the person who oversees the credentialing and discipline process, that is a good share of my responsibility. In addition, I serve on somewhere between thirty and forty boards and committees. Some of those are the major policy boards of the general council.

**R&L:** *The major policy boards? What are they?*

**Wood:** There are several. There is a board of administration, which is the day-to-day operational board. There is the executive presbytery, which is equivalent to a board of directors.

**R&L:** *The major policy boards? What are they?*

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE** 🍷 **Article:** "Christianity and Liberty Defined" by Steven Gillen 🍷  
**Review Essays:** "Law, Naturally" by John W. Coleman and "Spending Spiritually" by Megan Maloney 🍷 **In the Liberal Tradition:** John Winthrop 🍷 **Column:** "Morality and Liability" by the Rev. Robert A. Sirico 🍷 **Plus Book News.**

*Always blaming others for what has happened to you shows a lack of character. If someone has truly been wronged that is one thing, but every single person who has fallen on some kind of hard times is not a hapless victim.*

They meet five times yearly for several days at a time. There is the general presbytery, which meets once a year. It's a group of about 250 people, roughly, from all of our representatives of fifty-nine district councils and various constituencies within the Assemblies of God.

**R&L:** *What happens at these meetings?*

**Wood:** There's always matters related to vision, and what we're doing to revitalize churches, plant churches, and provide effective ministry resources to our churches and to our ministers.

**R&L:** *So it sounds like you're pretty busy. How do you*

*manage your personal faith life with all the busyness of your career life?*

**Wood:** Well, one thing that helps is that my children are both grown. I wouldn't do this kind of a job if I had children at home. The travel and duties are too much. I could not successfully cope with that. I would be shorting out my family. What I do is I'll

work a number of weeks on end and then I'll take a number of days off. Our retreat place is in Southern California where my two grown children are. I do a lot of reading. I use travel time on airplanes for enjoyable reading which stokes my personal life. Of course, first thing in the morning, I always have personal devotions. I will also say, though, that I receive a lot of pleasure in working. My work is for me, in a way, a form of relaxation and renewal. I like to be engaged.

**R&L:** *What do you think are some of the biggest cultural problems out there?*

**Wood:** One of the biggest challenges today is the disintegration of the family unit. Just look at the effects of this disintegration in the church. There is always a shortage of volunteers for ministry in churches because of the busyness of the American lifestyle. Fifty years or so ago, that was never a problem. I also think the permissive culture in which we live is another serious problem. It increasingly expresses either hostile or antithetical values to the Gospel and virtuous living. The impact of alcohol, drugs, and pornography combined with this permissiveness is a recipe for disaster. So many people buy into this permissiveness, casting off moral constraint, and proceed to ruin their lives. I can't even tell you how many testimonies I have heard like that.

**R&L:** *Another thing that seems much more permissible today than it was fifty years ago is litigation. It can hardly be denied how often people are so willing to sue each other. What do think is behind all of this?*

**Wood:** I think this comes out of a victim mentality. It wasn't my fault; it was your fault. People need to assess their own responsibility for actions that have happened to them. Always blaming others for what has happened to you shows a lack of character. If someone has truly been wronged that is one thing, but every single person who has fallen on some kind of hard times is not a hapless victim.

**R&L:** *Please expand on that.*



**RELIGION & LIBERTY**  
*A publication of the Acton Institute for  
the Study of Religion and Liberty*  
Volume 14 • Number 3

Publisher: Rev. Robert A. Sirico  
Editor: Stephen J. Wolma, J.D.  
Contributing Editors:  
Eduardo J. Echeverria, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*  
Pierre Garello, *Université d'Aix-Marseille III*  
Megan Maloney, *Criminal Justice Ministry, Archdiocese of Detroit*  
Laura L. Nash, *Harvard Business School*  
Bishop Njoroge, *Kagado Diocese, Kenya*  
Rev. John Arthur Nunes, *St. Paul Lutheran Church*  
Scott B. Rae, *Talbot School of Theology*

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty was founded in 1990 to promote a free society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles. The Institute is supported by donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals and maintains a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

Letters and subscription requests should be directed to: *Religion & Liberty*; Acton Institute; 161 Ottawa Ave., N.W., Suite 301; Grand Rapids, MI 49503.

The views of the authors expressed in *Religion & Liberty* are not necessarily those of the Acton Institute.

© 2004 Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty.

**Wood:** Because of my legal training and background, I have a great appreciation for our legal system. Because we have civil redress of injury, we have the opportunity to police the market ourselves. Civil redress, for example, gets things like safe products and helps to prevent further injury. But like all good things, the court system can be abused. It's regretful that in many cases it is abused. There are many cases where plaintiffs sue for damages that are ludicrous. I think it would

be helpful to have a cap in some kinds of court actions on the amount of certain types of damages. Otherwise insurance premiums will just keep soaring and soaring for everybody.

**R&L:** *Has the church been swept up in all this?*

**Wood:** We have been marvelously free of that in the general council and the Assemblies of God. The general council, the

## John Winthrop (1588–1649)

*“Arbitrary Government is where a people have men set over them, without their choice or allowance ... God only hath this prerogative ... so as for man to usurp such authority, is tyranny, and impiety.”*

John Winthrop was born in Suffolk, England, and grew up at Groton Manor, his father's estate in the English countryside. Preparing to take his father's place as the lord of Groton Manor, Winthrop studied law. He wanted to obtain the expertise needed to handle landlord-tenant disputes, collect rents, and deal with government authorities.

Winthrop grew dissatisfied with the Anglican Church and the Monarchy. The level of worldliness and corruption in both institutions generally disturbed him, but most offensive to Winthrop was the Monarchy's appointment of incompetent or ungodly bishops and imposition of a liturgy that contained secular elements. Although Winthrop was convinced that the church needed to cast off this tyranny, he realized that they could not prevail in a head-on confrontation with the Monarchy and the established Anglican Church. The Massachusetts Bay Company presented Winthrop with an excellent opportunity to avoid this confrontation.

Unlike most charters, the Massachusetts Bay Company's charter did not require the direct supervision and involvement of the king's authorities. They were free to establish their own autonomous government. This meant that, in effect, they had legal authority to move to New England and build an independent and free society in which they could govern themselves according to the dictates of their conscience. But the Massachusetts Bay Company needed a leader. They needed a man of Christian faith and vision who could lead them to the New World and govern them once they arrived. They recognized John Winthrop as this man of ability, maturity, and faith. The Massachusetts Bay Company elected Winthrop as the governor of their colony in 1629, and they arrived in the New World in 1630.

Over the next ten years, twenty thousand settlers poured into Massachusetts. Winthrop governed them as if they were his own children. During one of the early winters, Winthrop sold Groton Manor to buy food and other necessities for the colonists who were starving and freezing to death. No one denies that the Massachusetts Colony survived in a large part because of the courage, faith, and sacrifice of their governor. To the contrary, historians marvel at Winthrop's kindness, wisdom, and leadership, and many agree that John Winthrop was one of the princes of the civilization in the United States of America.



*Illustrated by Vincent Harriger*

*Sources: “John Winthrop: First Governor of Massachusetts,” [http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/X0526\\_Bios-\\_John\\_Winthrop.html](http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/X0526_Bios-_John_Winthrop.html) ; Joseph Schafer, “John Winthrop,” <http://dylee.keel.econ.ship.edu/ubff/winthrop.htm>*

*You can have all the freedom you want, but if you take away virtue—that is, good, moral living—that freedom won't do you much good. The fabric of society begins to come undone one person at a time.*

parent corporation, has never been found liable and there have been very few lawsuits against our local churches.

**R&L:** *That is certainly not the experience of all denominations. What tips do you have for others?*

**Wood:** One of the reasons, I think, why we have been so immune is that we have been extremely proactive in taking steps to protect our laity against injury. As a church, we try to focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ, the present day work of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit. Hitting on those things with our preaching and discipleship, I think, creates a clientele of ministers and lay people who are less inclined to do things that injure other people and give rise to lawsuits. I think churches need to start there. Of course, churches need to take other precautions too. We have strongly recommended for years that our churches do a background check on all those who will be working with children or young adults. Effective January 1 of this year we've begun background criminal screenings, social security verification, and a sex offender registry screening and county courthouse screening for all those who are applying for ministerial credentials. Very few religious bodies have taken that kind of step.

**R&L:** *So you really see that educating people about the Christian virtues will have a positive impact on our society?*

**Wood:** Absolutely. If you're living the life that Jesus taught, you're not going to go around injuring people, nor are you going to go around doing negligent acts that harm people. You're going to be a loving, more careful, caring person. Your character results in your conduct. That's obvious. If you have a significant relationship with Jesus Christ that is reflected in how you live on a daily basis, the chances of you becoming involved in that which is displeasing to the Lord—the kind of behavior that results in legal action—is going to be significantly reduced.

**R&L:** *Certainly that's true for believers, but how does this*

*have an impact on the whole of society?*

**Wood:** The question is to what extent Christians should try to transform society through legal and political means versus the influence of example. I think that when the church goes overboard on trying to transform society through legal and political means, it risks being characterized as a

ensorial, finger pointing, accusatory, pharisaical group of people. This is certainly the caricature a lot of evangelical Christians have in the media. One of the difficulties that I think the American churches have related to culture is that they try to lecture to the culture, rather than follow the example of Jesus who loved and served. I don't think you can lecture the culture unless you've earned the right to do so, unless you've exhibited a caring love. I think we have to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ and earn the respect of the community. Then we can take credible positions that are helpful to preserve the virtue of the community.

**R&L:** *In a free society, like the United States, how important is it to preserve the virtue of the community.*

**Wood:** It is critical. You can have all the freedom you want, but if you take away virtue—that is, good, moral living—that freedom won't do you much good. The fabric of society begins to come undone one person at a time. And this is not just academic. It gets back to the cultural challenges I was talking about earlier. That is why the generally permissive attitude that is so prevalent is such a cultural challenge. It leaves people with no good reason to refrain from doing the things that will destroy their lives.

**R&L:** *What do you think about the place of the market within the community? There are a lot of clergy members out there who think that operating as an entrepreneur in a free market context is morally wrong. What are your thoughts on that?*

**Wood:** The early church initially tried a kind of socialistic experiment, but they did not follow through on it. It's clear when you read the New Testament that they had to abandon that practice. In fact, interestingly, the church in Jerusalem ended up in such poverty that Paul had to raise offerings from the missionary churches to supply their needs. I've often wondered what happened. Maybe they were so joyful in their newfound faith that they squandered their resources on a big party. Maybe, for whatever reason, they just didn't make adequate provisions for the future. Maybe it was because of


persecution that they lost their houses and had to be helped by the Gentile churches. I don't know. We know that the other churches in the New Testament did not practice the same communal effort that the Jerusalem church did.

**R&L:** *So whether a society is organized according to a free market economy is sort of neutral morally?*

**Wood:** I'm not sure that matters a whole lot.

**R&L:** *What does matter morally when it comes to wealth and business?*

**Wood:** It's not about what you have, but what you do with it. There is plenty of evidence within the New Testament that

the membership of local churches was comprised of all classes, everything from the poor to the wealthy. The wealthy class was told to be generous, but was not told to abandon their wealth. Remember the rich young ruler? The reason Jesus told him to give everything to the poor was because Jesus knew that the young ruler valued his riches too much. Zacchaeus was wealthy too, but Jesus never tells him to give everything away. I think that if executives in business are honest, ethical, hard working, they will probably prosper in their industry. That's fine as long as they make their income in an appropriate, lawful, and moral way. They will then be in a position to be able to turn around and share with those who have need on a voluntary basis. To me, that is the more Christian ideal. 

## Join us in the marketplace of ideas

**Markets&Morality** is a peer-reviewed, semiannual journal that provides a forum for vigorous discussion of seminal ideas in economics, theology, and moral philosophy. Join us in spirited debate and scholarly discussion as we explore areas of intersection among these disciplines.

Inside the journal, you'll find:

### Articles

Providing innovative articles in the fields of economics, theology, and moral philosophy.

### Controversy

Hosting controversy on a question of current significance.

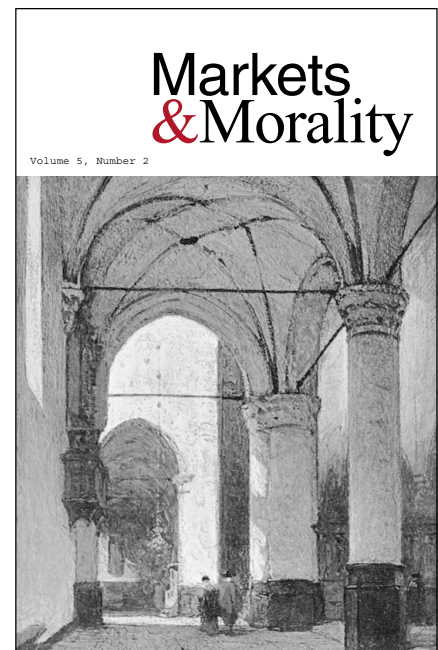
### Scholia

Reintroducing historical, never before translated texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to scholars around the globe.

### Book Reviews

Monitoring the latest interdisciplinary work in the areas of Ethics and Economics; Christian Social Thought; Philosophy, History, and Methodology of Economics.

**Individual Subscriptions** — \$25.00, 1 year (2 issues) • \$45.00, 2 year (4 issues). Visit our Web site for more information.



**Markets&Morality**

[www.marketsandmorality.com](http://www.marketsandmorality.com)

1.800.345.2286

# Christianity and Liberty Defined

By Steven Gillen

Numerous political scientists among modern American conservatives and libertarians have lamented the redefinition of the term “liberalism” away from its classical meaning, delimiting it to meaning a political philosophy emphasizing individual freedom and limited government. Many of these scholars who lament this change have correctly traced how neo-liberals have redefined liberalism by redefining liberty itself. Relatively few, however, have explained why many twentieth-century Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, have abandoned the classical-liberal view of freedom in favor of neo-liberal, Rawlsian notions of distributive justice or even more radical liberation theology. This article will explore the reasons for modern Christian hostility toward classical liberalism and will attempt to reconcile Christian and classical-liberal definitions of freedom.

In 1961, as an effort to resurrect the classical definition of liberalism, Austrian-British economist Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992) reasserted the classical-liberal definition of freedom in his *Constitution of Liberty*: “[Freedom] meant always the possibility of a person’s acting according to his own decisions and plans, in contrast to the position of one who was irrevocably subject to the will of another, who by arbitrary decision could coerce him to act or not to act in specific ways. The time-honoured phrase by which this freedom has often been described is therefore ‘independence of the arbitrary will of another.’”

Hayek’s definition of liberty was consistent not only with the classical-liberal writings of deists and atheists such as Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill but also those of devout Christians like Hugo Grotius and Alexis de Tocqueville. Nevertheless, many modern Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, are troubled mainly by four aspects of this definition of freedom.

First, Hayek’s definition is “negative” in that freedom can only be decreased but never increased since the condition of liberty relates only to the *absence* of fraud or force by individuals against one another, not the *presence* of charity among individuals toward one another, and disregards the ability, the “power,” of individuals to make the best of their liberty. As Hayek explained, “In this sense ‘freedom’ refers solely

to a relation of men to other men, and the only infringement on it is coercion by men.”

For many Christians the seeming selfishness and absence of social responsibility in Hayek’s definition of liberty too closely resembles the radical individualist and materialist philosophy of Ayn Rand (1905–1982), whose novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* promulgated an atheistic and egoistic form of capitalism rooted in a negative conception of liberty akin to Hayek’s. Rand’s conception of liberty was summarized by “Prometheus,” the protagonist of her novella *Anthem*, who proclaims, “There is nothing to take a man’s freedom away from him, save other men. To be free, a man must be free of his brothers. That is freedom. This and nothing else . . . each man will be free to exist for his own sake.”

While Rand’s “objectivist” movement was capturing the hearts and minds of so many anti-socialist conservatives and libertarians in America during the 1950s and 60s, many Christian intellectuals were drawn to the inspirational writings of Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Trappist monk, priest and civil rights activist who is often described as a “Catholic Thoreau.” In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton relates, “There is something in the very nature of my freedom that inclines me to love, to do good, to dedicate myself to others. I have an instinct that tells me that I am less free when I am living for myself alone . . . My freedom is not fully free when left to itself. It becomes so when it is brought into the right relation with the freedom of another.”

Although Merton was at least as fervent in his opposition to totalitarianism as Rand or Hayek, his notion of liberty seems incompatible with an atomistic—a strictly negative—form of freedom and appears to concur with T. H. Green’s contention that “the mere removal of compulsion, the mere enabling a man to do as he likes, is in itself no contribution to true freedom . . .” More profoundly, Merton appears to be endorsing Green’s definition of freedom as “a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, is something that we do or enjoy in common with others.”

The second aspect of Hayek’s classical-liberal definition of freedom that is troublesome to many Christians is its dis-

regard for the *object* or purpose of individual liberty. That is, is a person's liberty being used for good or evil? Typically, for libertarians this question is irrelevant unless an individual uses his/her liberty in a way that violates the natural rights—the life, liberty, or property—of another. Libertarians often regard so-called “victimless crimes,” such as substance abuse or prostitution, as neither good nor evil; or dismissively argue that freedom, as understood by classical liberals, includes the right to commit evil against oneself. Hayek himself argued that “the range of physical possibilities from which a person can choose at a given moment has no direct relevance to freedom.”

The writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1227–1274) would appear to be in harmony with Hayek and classical-liberal limitations on the state's ability to enforce moral laws. For example, Aquinas argued in *Summa Theologica* (I–II, q. 96) that “human law does not prohibit every vice from which virtuous men abstain, but only the graver vices from which the majority of men can abstain; and especially those vices damaging to others and which unless prohibited would make it impossible for human society to endure, such as murder, theft, etc., which are prohibited by human law.”

However, Hayek's *laissez-faire* attitude seems contrary to earlier Church philosophy typified by Saint Augustine (354–430), who in *On the Christian Conflict* held that “it is the greatest liberty to be unable to sin,” and modern Catholic writers such as Thomas Merton who, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, echoed Saint Augustine: “The mere ability to choose between good and evil is the lowest limit of freedom, and the only thing that is free about it is the fact that we can still choose good. To the extent that you are free to choose evil, you are not free. An evil choice destroys freedom.”

The third aspect of Hayek's notion of freedom that makes many Christians uneasy is its disregard for the outcome of liberty, particularly the economic outcome. For example, Hayek observed, “Above all, however, we must recognize that we may be free and yet miserable. Liberty does not mean all good things or the absence of all evils. It is true that to be free may mean freedom to starve, to make costly mistakes, or to run mortal risks.”

At face value, Hayek's liberty as “misery” and the “freedom to starve” seems uncharitable when compared with the

positive liberty of T. H. Green, the Oxford Hegelian philosopher (1836–1882) who proclaimed, “We mean by [freedom] a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them.” Although most Christian intellectuals may agree with classical liberals that negative freedom—the absence of coercion—is a necessary condition for virtue, particularly charity, Green's appeals for positive freedom capitalize upon Christians' discomfort with *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Typical of many anti-capitalist Christian inspirational writers in the years following T. H. Green was G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) who in *What's Wrong with the World* excoriated so-called robber-barons of industrial America and Europe: “I am well aware that the word ‘property’ has been defined in our time by the corruption of the great capitalists. One would think, to hear people talk, that the Rothchilds and the Rockefellers were on the side of property. But obviously they are the enemies of property because they are enemies of their own limitations. They do not want their own land; but other people's.”

*Hayek's definition of liberty was consistent not only with the classical-liberal writings of deists and atheists such as Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill but also those of devout Christians like Hugo Grotius and Alexis de Tocqueville.*



Friedrich von Hayek

Decades later, across the Atlantic, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used language very similar to Green's “positive freedom” to redefine freedom and liberalism in America. In speeches throughout the 1930s the president declared, “I am not for a return of that definition of liberty under which for many years a free people were being gradually regimented into the service of a privileged few” and called for a “second bill of rights” that included governmentally-guaranteed rights to remunerative jobs, decent homes, and adequate health care. Not surprisingly, FDR's neo-liberal justification of his “New Deal” expansion of the economic role of the federal government enormously appealed to the heavily poor Catholic base of his Democratic Party during the Great Depression and still dominates much of the “liberal” think-

ing with respect to liberty, rights, and the role of government in America today.

Finally, the fourth aspect of Hayek's understanding of freedom that would seem the most disconcerting to Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, is his separation of individual "freedom" from individual "free will," which is central to Hayek's semantic defense against socialism. As Hayek explained, "Another meaning of 'freedom' is that of 'inner' or 'metaphysical' ... freedom. It is perhaps more closely related to individual freedom and therefore more easily confounded with it .... To that extent, 'inner freedom' and 'freedom' in the sense of absence of coercion will together determine how much use a person can make of his knowledge of opportunities ...."

Definitions of freedom offered by many modern Christian writers would seem to oppose Hayek's fission of individual freedom and metaphysical, or spiritual, freedom. For example, in *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton contended that "we too easily assume that we *are* our real selves, and that our choices are really the ones we want to make when, in fact, our acts of free choice are ... largely dictated by psychological compulsions, flowing from our inordinate ideas of our own importance. Our choices are too often dictated by our false selves." Merton would likely reply to Hayek that an individual acting out of his/her psychological compulsions is unable to be "independent of the arbitrary will of another"—unable to be free even in the absence of coercion by others.

In fairness, Hayek coined his metonym, freedom as opposed to metaphysical freedom, as a semantic defense against deterministic materialist philosophies—by simply removing altogether the issue of individual autonomy from the definition of liberty. As Hayek noted, "Few beliefs have done more to discredit the ideal of freedom than the erroneous one that scientific determinism has destroyed the basis for individual responsibility ...." In other words, Hayek's separation of free will from freedom itself was aimed at preempting materialist arguments by many neo-liberal political theorists that deny individual free will altogether to justify unlimited government. In this regard most left-leaning Christians, would likely sympathize with Hayek.

Moreover, Hayek admitted that the redefinition of liberty as power, i.e., positive freedom, would enable and legitimize the transformation of liberalism into a kind of socialism and crafted his definition of freedom accordingly. As Hayek warned, "This confusion of liberty as power with liberty in its original meaning inevitably leads to the identification of liberty with wealth; and this makes it possible to exploit all

the appeal which the word 'liberty' carries in the support for a demand for the redistribution of wealth."

For most Christians, however, mere opposition to socialism is probably insufficient to justify a return to classical-liberal definitions of freedom. For example, even the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), a friend and politically-conservative ally of Winston Churchill, conceded in *Mere Christianity* that in a fully Christian society "we should feel that its economic life was very socialistic and, in that sense, 'advanced'," and that it would be "what we now call Leftist."

Must Christians then conclude that their spirituality is incompatible with classical liberalism's conceptions of individual freedom and limited government? No. The key to reconciling Christianity and classical liberalism by means of reconciling their definitions of freedom can be found in the Christian understanding of human nature. Most Christians believe that, as the result of the Fall of Man, the bodies and souls, i.e., the natural and spiritual selves, of human beings were, to a great extent, divorced from and set against one

*The key to reconciling Christianity and classical liberalism by means of reconciling their definitions of freedom can be found in the Christian understanding of human nature.*

another. From this dualistic perspective, it is logical to speak of two different kinds of freedom corresponding to the two types of human existence—natural freedom and spiritual freedom (akin to Hayek's "individual freedom" and "metaphysical freedom," respectively).

Had the Fall not happened, there would be a dichotomy between neither spiritual freedom and natural freedom nor positive freedom and negative freedom. In a perfect world, negative freedom would still mean, as Hayek maintained, and would be the necessary condition for positive freedom. But positive freedom would mean the power of individuals to surrender their self-love for the love of God and the promotion of the welfare of others and would be the material realization of spiritual freedom in the Christian sense. Perfect freedom then would be complete spiritual freedom manifested in the material world in the form of positive freedom and permitted by the complete condition of negative freedom.

However, from a Christian perspective, the Fall did happen and the fully Christian society described by C. S. Lewis



cannot exist outside a perfect world. Therefore, we must choose which definition of freedom, positive or negative, will underlie public policy in the City of Man, not the City of God. The issue most pertinent to this choice is not so much which definition of freedom, positive or negative, *ought* to be accepted as closer to the Christian ideal, but which definition in practice establishes the necessary though insufficient conditions for spiritual freedom that the state *can* uphold

*The issue most pertinent to this choice is not so much which definition of freedom ... ought to be accepted as closer to the Christian ideal, but which definition in practice establishes the necessary though insufficient conditions for spiritual freedom that the state can uphold in the material world.*

in the material world. Of the two definitions of freedom, only negative freedom establishes such practicable conditions since only freedom understood as the absence of coercion, the absence of fraud or force, can be proven by material standards and deterred or punished by material means.

Positive freedom, however desirable, often cannot be proven by material standards since in many cases the perception of the object of positive freedom, “doing good,” as well as the standard by which that object is considered worthwhile, varies from person to person according to the material desires, the “false self,” of each individual citizen and statesman. Furthermore, any material means provided by the state to guarantee the positive freedom of one individual invariably involve acts of coercion against another individual, a violation of “negative” or natural freedom, which usually undermines both individuals’ pursuit of spiritual freedom.

In this light, the classical-liberal definition of freedom seems to be more congruent with the Christian understanding of freedom. That is, when generations of Christian inspirational writers from Saint Augustine to Thomas Merton concluded that perfect spiritual freedom is the total inability to make an evil choice, they were not arguing that a state’s material restrictions on an individual’s natural freedom will in themselves increase that individual’s spiritual freedom. Contrariwise, even G. K. Chesterton warned in his anti-capitalist *Utopia of Usurers*, “I think it is not at all improbable that this Plutocracy, pretending to be a Bureaucracy, will be attempted or achieved ... its religion will be just charitable enough to pardon usurers; its penal system will be just cruel enough to

crush all the critics of usurers: the truth of it will be Slavery: and the title of it may quite possibly be Socialism.”

In short, anti-capitalism among post-industrial Christian apologists need not always mean anti-liberalism—opposition to private property and limited government. Indeed, Chesterton, a leading scholar of Saint Thomas Aquinas, concurred with the Thomist understanding that the protection of private property does not contravene natural law and that the state need not outlaw every vice but merely those serious vices that hurt others. When attempting to make converts of Christian intellectuals, classical liberals and libertarians would do well to forsake “victimless crimes” arguments and to emphasize the Aquinas tradition.

Ultimately, Christians who have abandoned the classical liberalism of Grotius and Tocqueville will return only when they are convinced that neo-liberalism’s promise of positive freedom, like spiritual freedom, is something that only God and not government can guarantee.

---

*Steven Gillen is an adjunct professor of Political Science at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland. Mr. Gillen previously was a Fulbright Fellow and a Boren Fellow at the Faculty of Law at the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Macedonia. He also served as a contracted consultant and adviser to the US government and several non-governmental agencies in former Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War and Refugee Crisis of 1998–1999. He holds masters degrees in Foreign Service and Security Studies from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University. Mr. Gillen is married. He resides in Arlington, Virginia and is an active member of the Knights of Columbus.*



# Law, Naturally

*A review essay by John W. Coleman*

In 1945 the initial formation of the United Nations promised a renaissance in “natural law.” Stating a “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person ...” the preamble to the UN charter outlined what appeared to be a basic conception of natural law and human dignity reaffirmed by the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Even as the expansion of historical knowledge revealed an unfathomed diversity in global cultures and customs, the West’s faith in a universal moral unity seemed firm.

This faith was fragile and soon to fade. The tides of ethical relativism and legal positivism arose to subsume half-hearted and incoherent conceptions of natural law, and replace them with nihilism and uncertainty. The Catholic Church stood unyielding in its reaffirmations of natural law stating in *Veritatis Splendor*, “Inasmuch as the natural law expresses the dignity of the human person and lays the foundation for his rights and duties, it is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all mankind” (par. 51). But a secular world remained and remains largely unmoved. Christian natural law often alienated those who lacked faith, and enlightenment theories predicated on a common “state of nature” were devastated by abuse, by modern anthropology, and by the expansion of historical thought. The very concept of a universal ethic, at times, seemed lost.

However, in *Natural Law and Human Dignity: Universal Ethics in an Historical World*, Professor Eberhard Schockenhoff attempts to reclaim this ethic arguing “a double concept of natural law and human dignity” with a “basis antecedent to all strategies of consensus and procedure” (ix). This work systematically evaluates the modern status of natural law theory, and argues for a reformulation inclusive of historical insight and targeted to a multicultural world. Constructing a Thomistic ethic rooted in “practical reason” Schockenhoff lays the foundation for a universal recognition of fundamental human liberty, subsequently constructing a separate, biblical ethic

for the fulfillment of the redeemed human being. And while his name may be unfamiliar to many American readers, the discussion that arises from his treatment of these topics is sure to please anyone with a serious interest in natural law theory.

First is an evaluation of the challenges facing traditional justifications of natural law theory. To many, these objections will be familiar, based on ambiguities and abuses within the theory’s history, but the discussion is sure to hold something of value for even the most hardened natural law scholar. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Schockenhoff readily concedes that the traditional Christian understanding of natural law has been tainted by inconsistency (consider the church’s shifting stance on organ donation or smallpox vaccination) and a departure from its Thomistic origins, but he similarly recognizes those external difficulties posed by historicity and the ethical relativism of modern anthropology. Citing thinkers from Wilhelm Dilthey and Leo Strauss to Ernst Troeltsch and Thomas Aquinas he notes the skepticism surrounding traditional justifications and the problems posed by the appearance of circular reasoning and Hume’s “naturalistic fallacy.”

Upon outlining these problems, Schockenhoff confronts the primary critics of this theory—ethical relativism and historicity. Again, these topics may seem familiar, but Schockenhoff’s insightful treatment of them is both brilliant and devastating. Turning a critical sword to relativism, he successfully reverses the accusation of naturalism (or the naturalistic fallacy) arguing that relativists incorrectly posit that the mere historic existence of a value implies that value “ought” exist, a fallacy first noted by Hume. He further argues the logical inconsistency of strict ethical relativism, and finally, asserts that a proper understanding of cultural relativism can even be subsumed within a correctly formulated theory of natural law.

His treatment of history is more sympathetic. Schockenhoff contends that proponents of natural law cannot view nature and history as mutually exclusive, but must

## Natural Law and Human Dignity: Universal Ethics in an Historical World

by Eberhard Schockenhoff

The Catholic University of America Press, 2003

330 pp. Paperback: \$24.95

“accept historicity as one of the essential characteristics of modern life in which the human person experiences his own nature as a finite being.” (130) Relying on the *telos* (end) of man rather than a conception of the state of nature, Schockenhoff sees history as “time as *formed, interpreted,* and also endured through *human action,*” (117) and like Ernst Troeltsch appears to believe in an “ultimate end which is now in the process of realization.” (103) As Schockenhoff notes, historicity is not necessarily destructive of natural law properly conceived, but rather “the intellectual challenge is to accept historicity as one of the essential characteristics of modern life, in which the human person experiences his own nature as a finite being.” (130) Historical situations may seem vastly different, but the essential characteristics of human nature are not destroyed by this diversity—only superficially concealed.

This treatment of historicity and relativism complete, Schockenhoff constructs his own natural law theory. He systematically presents a Thomistic conception of natural law founded on the *telos* of man, his natural order and reason, the autonomy of practical reason as distinct from theoretical (speculative) reason, and the fundamental importance of ethical self-determination—“a dignity rooted in freedom and reason.” (221) Schockenhoff rejects a neo-Thomistic interpretation that too closely binds theoretical and practical reason and denies the practical reason the flexibility and autonomy necessary to adapt to individual historical situations. His basic understanding of natural law is minimalist, a “reflection on the indispensable minimum conditions for human existence...that normative kernel of human dignity which the idea of inalienable human rights seeks to protect.” (186) And Schockenhoff’s exposition of a Thomistic understanding of *lex naturalis* is matched in brilliance only by the exemplification he employs to clarify these claims. Using concrete examples of “intrinsically evil” actions such as rape and murder (Thomas’ *malum ex genere*), he elaborates on the theoretical principles previously applied and illuminates his analysis in a captivating way.

Finally, upon constructing a viable theory of natural law protective of an essential kernel of human dignity, he provides a blueprint for the ultimate fulfillment of that dignity in “The universal claim of biblical ethics.” In classic form, Schockenhoff builds on the idea of the human person as the image of God and then makes an artful defense of the univer-

sal claims of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount. Even the Christian broadly uninterested in ethical relativism and Thomistic natural law will gain a wealth of insight from Schockenhoff’s discussion of these two essential biblical doctrines. Additionally, his assertion that this perfection of human dignity is separate from the essential protection of said dignity in the natural law is bound to find broad-based acceptance in a religiously and culturally diverse world. In his conclusion, “The distinction between law and morality,” he rejects legal positivism, asserting the necessity of natural law to the

*... Schockenhoff lays the foundation  
for a universal recognition of  
fundamental human liberty,  
subsequently constructing a separate,  
biblical ethic for the fulfillment of the  
redeemed human being.*

construction of true consensus and justice while maintaining a careful distinction between the two. This is genius for a scholar attempting to reach a secular audience while maintaining, in earnest, his faith. Rather than calling for a Christian state reliant on coercion, Schockenhoff urges Christians to serve as living examples of the anthropological success of the Gospel in providing for human

fulfillment. In echoes of Winthrop, he seems to see the Christian life informed by biblical principles as a “city on a hill,” persuasive in its success and visibility.

Ultimately, in *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, Eberhard Schockenhoff has added a refreshing and powerful voice to the dialogue on human rights, Christian morality, and universal ethics in an historical world. His analysis is thorough and thoughtful and his writing, while a bit complex, is accessible to the dedicated reader. A German, he cites thinkers with whom many Americans may be unfamiliar, and, indeed, his work is absent any mention of the Declaration of Independence, John Locke, or Thomas Jefferson; but this perspective may prove a greater help than hindrance to the reader searching for a fresh perspective on the natural law debate. Throughout the work, Schockenhoff manages to present his argumentation in an authoritative and persuasive manner, and, while he makes every effort to present an objective case acceptable even in secular circles, he never compromises his dedication to Christian faith or human liberty. On whole, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* proves an essential addition to the contemporary discussion of natural law theory.

---

*John Coleman is a senior at Berry College where he is an editor of the publication Ex caverna and a contributor to various newspapers, journals, websites, and magazines. He has served as a fellow with two Washington area institutes.*

# Spending Spiritually

*A review essay by Megan Maloney*

“Building Wealth from the Inside Out” is Lee Jenkins’ trademark phrase. Literally. Its meaning is unpacked in the pages of Jenkins’ *Taking Care of Business*. Written by a man who is both a financial advisor and ordained Christian minister, *Taking Care of Business* is an eminently practical mix of Jenkins’ financial expertise and biblically grounded faith, all intertwined with the wisdom and anecdotal color that comes from years of experience with both realms.

Bringing these two realms together has been a specialized ministry for Jenkins for the last decade or so. Over time, Jenkins felt called to establish a ministry that would bring a third reality to the mix of faith and finance: the reality of culture. As an African American, Jenkins has a deep appreciation for the role that culture plays in the financial and spiritual lives of individuals and communities. He understands the historical strength of the Black church and the faith of African Americans, as well as the particular needs and temptations of his own culture when it comes to financial matters. This attentiveness to the cultural dimension is reflected in the subtitle of Jenkins’ book, *Establishing a Financial Legacy for the African American Family*, as well as in his frank discussion of religious attitudes towards wealth, the legacy of slavery and the welfare state, and the tendency to engage in conspicuous consumption and to neglect the financial assets that can be passed on through the generations.

All of this is treated with a deft touch that is rare in the literature that explores the relationship between culture and economic life in the African American community. Jenkins believes he “was ordained to bring this message of financial freedom, wholeness, and empowerment to the body of Christ and the world at large,” and his text exudes this positive, hope-filled spirit, one grounded in the sure foundation of genuine financial knowledge joined with biblical faith. Jenkins has the confidence of a man who has made it in the

financial world and who has known and loved the Lord as his personal Savior since his youth.

Though Jenkins writes especially for an African American audience, he treats his subject broadly enough to benefit anyone interested in a primer on Christian financial stewardship. Conspicuous consumption, rampant credit card debt, and an anemic propensity to save are hardly phenomena unique to African Americans, after all. They have, in fact, become the American way of life for many. Outstanding consumer debt in the United States rose from \$355 billion in 1980 to \$805 billion in 1990, and then went on to climb to \$1.65 trillion in 2001. Credit card debt now averages somewhere between \$5,800-\$8,500 per household. According to the Federal Reserve, over 40% of all U.S. families spend more than they earn, and the number of consumer bankruptcies reached a record 1.5 million in 2001, while the year-end personal savings rate fell below 1%. Given this context, it is no wonder that the Department of Health and Human Services is reporting that 96% of all Americans retire financially dependent on the government, family, or charity,

In such a climate, Jenkins’ *Taking Care of Business* is a welcome application of God’s eternal wisdom to the perennial problems of personal finance. Take, for example, Jenkins’ trademark phrase, “Building Wealth from the Inside Out.” In essence, it is based on a biblical principle: God is about transforming persons, developing character, and fashioning us into the image of his Son. He is not, in the first instance, about changing our outward circumstances but about changing *us* interiorly.

Jenkins maintains that this principle applies to our financial lives as well. He illustrates his point with numerous stories of clients with six-figure incomes who had gotten themselves into financial straits—needlessly and heedlessly. The same principle holds true for folks at the other end of the economic scale. Without belaboring the point or adopting a strident tone, Jenkins points out that the War on Poverty that began in the ‘60s has by now spent about \$5 trillion

## Taking Care of Business: Establishing A Financial Legacy For the African American Family

Lee Jenkins

Moody Press/Institute for Black Family  
Development 2001  
240 pp. Paperback: \$12.99

on eliminating poverty—without success. In fact, the African American community is actually doing worse, with family breakdown, unemployment, and poverty rates now higher than they were in the '60s.

For Jenkins, this is not surprising. The same principle holds for rich and poor: “money problems can never be solved from the outside in, but only from the inside out ... poverty is never corrected by a redistribution of wealth but by a transformation of people .... The government has tried to take people out of poverty. *Jesus specializes in taking the poverty out of people.*” (27)

Jenkins goes on to develop a biblical notion of spiritual and financial “wealth” as opposed to “riches.” Although he admits the Bible does not convey the distinction by the use of these terms, Jenkins quite correctly identifies and explains two different realities described by the Bible, using these terms as a handy way of referring to the two realities. Riches are material, something we have. Wealth is more about who we are. It has a spiritual dimension. Wealth “is primarily achieved through the skills, obedience, spiritual knowledge, and character developed in obeying God’s laws.” (29) Pimps, drug dealers, and unscrupulous businesspersons can have riches; they can’t have wealth. Setting one’s heart on riches will lead one astray and into endless discontentment. Rather, one should seek the wealth that is first and foremost an inner spiritual reality, a matter of one’s person, developed under the discipline of the Lord.

Jenkins does not, however, simply leave it at that. He understands that Christians have tended to fall into two extremes regarding finances: the Poverty Gospel, which says that poverty is a sign of spirituality and the pursuit of wealth is ungodly; and the Prosperity Gospel, which says that wealth is a sign of spirituality and poverty is ungodly. Jenkins exposes the distortions in both ways of thinking and proposes a Stewardship model for guiding Christians’ financial lives.

Essentially, stewardship recognizes the biblical principle that everything ultimately belongs to God. *The earth is the Lord’s and its fullness thereof.* (Ps 24:1) We are the “managers of God’s assets” and he holds us accountable for our stewardship. For this reason, Jenkins maintains, “whatever we do with what God gives us has a spiritual dimension to it. In other words, *every spending decision becomes a spiritual decision.*” (51) But, he hastens to add, this does not mean God wants us to spend all our resources on church and char-

ity. Church and charity have an essential place in our budget (see the chapter on tithing and giving), but the parable of the talents shows that God is pleased with the servant who uses his God-given resources in a practical and profitable way, increasing their value.

Much of *Taking Care of Business* offers practical guidance on how to be a good steward of one’s finances, beginning with the big “D” word that afflicts so many Americans. In Jenkins’ view, debt is a form of slavery and costly status symbols are its shackles. He cites numerous scriptures that warn against debt and the debtor’s mentality, and describes the compounding financial burden of credit card debt and the emotional toll it takes on individuals and families. Jenkins then outlines realistic steps to freedom from debt: “The steps are simple, but following them requires hard work.” Building wealth from the inside out is, undeniably, about the hard work of transforming the person. And that, in the end, rests upon the daily choices that only the individual person can make.


God will help us develop a godly character, but he won’t underwrite our preference for a lifestyle beyond our means, or one that sacrifices our children’s future to our present enjoyment. In one of the many anecdotes that enliven his text, Jenkins tells how the Lord dealt with him in his early career when he celebrated reaching a six-figure income by purchasing a new Mercedes-Benz. “I sensed the Lord simply saying to me, ‘Lee, do you want to look wealthy or be wealthy?’” Jenkins examined his motives, switched to a more modest car, and invested the savings in the stock market and giving to the Kingdom.

*Taking Care of Business* is an engaging mixture of faith, financial advice, and familiarity with African American culture. Jenkins believes that many Christians who love the Lord simply don’t know how to be good stewards. In his view, teaching good stewardship “is primarily the job of the family and the church, and we have failed miserably at it.” (48) *Taking Care of Business* is intended to fill that gap, covering such topics as financial planning, spending and investing, giving back to God, personal integrity in the marketplace, and multigenerational financial planning.

His chapter on work draws together a number of scriptural themes: work as God’s first commission to Adam; the dignity of all kinds of human work; work as a God-ordained necessity as the means for supporting oneself and one’s family; the intrinsic, personal value of work in developing virtue

*Much of Taking Care of Business offers practical guidance on how to be a good steward of one’s finances, beginning with the big “D” word that afflicts so many Americans.*

and strength of character; work in the world and the marketplace as a calling from God. Jenkins is also convinced that his own community is overly dependent on government employment and insufficiently entrepreneurial. While he understands the historical reasons for this situation, he insists that “strongholds need to be broken, and attitudes need to be changed . . . to empower Black families to leave poverty, we must embrace God’s Word, self-sufficiency, economic independence and entrepreneurship.” (103–104).

*Taking Care of Business* is intended as a practical tool (complete with planning charts) for a popular audience. It combines an upbeat, easy style with sound advice that will challenge and encourage any Christian who needs to hear what God ordained Lee Jenkins to teach. 

## BOOK NEWS

---

### **Law and Revolution II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition**

By Harold J. Berman

*The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004*  
544 pp. Hardcover: \$49.95

Despite its formidable subtitle and its massive notes, this book is written primarily for the general reader. It is, to be sure, about a technical subject: law. But law is too important to be left to the technicians. Indeed, law today is on the minds of most thinking people. The policies and actions of law makers, the regulations and procedures of governmental and nongovernmental bodies, the decisions of judges are prominently featured in all the major media of information, whether the story is about international relations or political campaigns or the economy or crime or race or gender or even sports. This book is also about history and about religion, and these, as well, are matters too important to be left to the specialists. Moreover, specialists tend to stick to their individual specialties. Very few have put law together with history and religion, although the three intersect with one another in remarkable ways. Indeed, nowadays prominent legal scholars who put law together with something else tend to put it together only with politics. And that is troubling to those of us who believe that in the Western tradition the life of the law is linked inextricably not only with a society’s politics but also with its moral values and with its historical experience. This book is written, then, in the belief that the rediscovery and revival of the historical connections between the Western legal tradition and the Western religious tradition

will not only strengthen both but also facilitate dialogue and cooperation among adherents of the major cultures of the world in the development of universal legal standards and common legal institutions.

### **On Kingdom Business: Transforming Missions Through Entrepreneurial Strategies**

Editors, Tetsunao Yamamori and Kenneth A. Eldred

*Crossway Books, 2003*

352 pp. Softcover: \$22.00

While many unreached people care little for Jesus Christ, they spend a lot of time thinking about Adam Smith, who wrote the “capitalist manifesto,” *The Wealth of Nations*. To reach such people, we need to not only tell them the Gospel but also show it to them. How do we do this in the context of today’s globalizing economy, in which people’s felt needs center more on finding a job and attaining economic development than on investigating the claims of Christ? In a word, the answer is “business,” or, to be more precise, “kingdom business.” If the traditional Western missionary movement had some flaws this last century, surely one of the most obvious, in hindsight, was its failure to mobilize many Christian business professionals (beyond using their money) for the Great Commission. At the start of a new century and millennium, we can no longer afford this oversight. This book reproduces in edited form most of the presentations made at the consultation on this topic held at Regent University (Virginia Beach, Virginia) in October 2002. As at the consultation, the material is divided into three main sections. The first, “Case Studies,” looks at examples of kingdom business around the world. These chapters provide many practical and hard-won insights for those considering this kind of ministry. The authors examine common barriers to such ministry, look at training issues, and share their own successes and failures in the Muslim world, across Asia, and in the Middle East. The second part of the book, “Essays,” provides a more conceptual undergirding for this approach. The third, “Conclusion,” ties it all together with lessons learned and questions for the future. We will need many kinds of missionaries and Christian workers in the coming decades. The task ahead of us is enormous. Christianity gained no “market share” in the twentieth century, while Islam grew by more than 50 percent. If we want to make a difference in our efforts to fulfill the Great Commission, we need to be willing to try new things. We need to awaken and deploy the underutilized army of Christian entrepreneurs around the world for the expansion of God’s kingdom.

# Morality and Liability



The United States is far more litigious compared to other countries, and shockingly so. Most Americans have a favorite anecdote: the couple that sued for more legroom on an airline flight; the woman who sued a fast-food restaurant for its tough bagel; the man who sued the cable company for getting his wife addicted to TV.

The economic costs of this litigious lifestyle are incalculable. Even more troubling is how the problem does not admit to an easy political solution. As you look through the tort-reform wish list, one wonders whether people who have truly suffered wrong-doing by an institution would receive justice under the new strictures.

It would be tragic if tort reform ended up denying members of the public just compensation when they have been injured in a true case of corporate fraud or negligence—though we should remember that there is no greater protection against bad business than a free economy that rewards excellence and service.

The goal of any legal reform should be toward an even-handed system of strict liability that would, insofar as it is possible, place blame for damages on those who caused the damage, while not unjustly punishing those who appear to have deep pockets. This goal is much easier to formulate than to accomplish, if only because the reforms themselves will be heavily influenced by trial lawyers who stand to benefit from evading the new law (and will know its ins and outs better than anyone else).

For this reason, the tort reform issue cannot ultimately be solved through the political system. What can finally address the problem is attention given to the underlying cultural issue: it is impossible to preserve freedom without an equally strong commitment to personal responsibility. We should be free to act and to choose but we should not be protected from facing the consequences—good or bad—of our behavior.

God grants us the agency to make a choice between many alternative paths, some of which are good and some of which are sinful in varying degrees. At the core of the moral drama of faith is gaining the ability to recognize when we have done wrong, stop blaming others, accept our own personal culpability for error, seek forgiveness, amend our lives, and ask God's mercy.

Excuses and blame casting will not help our society. To rightly address the problem of tort reform and legal liability, we must first turn inward and ask whether we ourselves might bear personal responsibility when events take unfortunate turns. Only once we have done this should we turn toward others, using litigation only as a means of conflict resolution and not as a tool for harming others unjustly through a redistributivist mentality.

Or we might put it this way: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1–3, 5 NIV).

*What can finally address the problem is attention given to the underlying cultural issue: it is impossible to preserve freedom without an equally strong commitment to personal responsibility.*

---

*The Rev. Robert A. Sirico is a Roman Catholic priest and the president of the Acton Institute.*

Those who deny freedom to others, deserve  
it not for themselves; and, under a just God,  
can not long retain it.

—Abraham Lincoln—