
WORLD VIEW
SEEKING GRACE AND TRUTH IN OUR COMMON LIFE
MARVIN OLASKY

"Marvin Olasky has been one of the leading biblically minded journalists in America for years. He has shaped *World* magazine's timely and trenchant critique of newsworthy events impacting the American stage of politics, culture and ethics. This selection of his classic articles gives insight, stirs action and prompts reflection as we as believers endeavor to engage our communities with a conscious and consistent Christian worldview."

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"Christians are the intellectual outlaws under the current secular conditions. To believe the truth claims of Christianity is to defy principalities and powers—and to face an intellectual onslaught. In this context of increasing hostility to the Christian faith, Marvin Olasky's careful and theologically-informed reflection on the culture is a needed resource for the church. Olasky's new book, *World View*, is a thoughtful and rich resource for those who are seeking to walk faithfully during this challenging cultural moment."

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"For years, Marvin Olasky has inspired thousands of readers to stop separating their moral principles from their politics and start thinking compassionately about those left behind in our society. This volume puts his arguments into one handy compendium. Readers of all faiths and political stripes will find inspiration here to make sure their own ethical commitments are informing how they live each day."

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"The searing truth and wisdom in these pages is vintage Marvin Olasky. And the best part of all: it rubs off. See for yourself!"

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John Dickerson, Moderator, *Face the Nation*; author of *Whistlestop: My Favorite Stories from Campaign History*

World View

SEEKING GRACE AND TRUTH IN OUR COMMON LIFE

Marvin Olasky

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CONTENTS

Section Four: Causes

Section Five: Conclusions

Foreword

I fell in love with America in the sixth grade while reading Landmark Books, and with journalism in high school. In my mid-twenties, after a decade of jagged radicalism, I fell in love with Christ and with Susan (we've now been married for forty-one years). Many of the fifty-eight columns in this book, written from 1997 through 2016, reflect the interplay of these four loves.

This year is the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Protestant Reformation, which returned to the fore Christianity's emphasis on God's grace rather than man's works. It's the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, which led to class warfare. Martin Luther understood, and Vladimir Lenin did not, that we are all weighed down by sin, and can make little progress until we recognize our own faults instead of blaming others. That sensibility also underlies many of these columns.

"American Studies," an undisciplined discipline, was both my undergraduate major and my PhD field. As the United States has become increasingly disunited, seeking grace and truth in our common life is a challenge. In a sense, I'm inspecting a roof from the top of a tall ladder buffeted by fierce winds, with my shadow obscuring many of the shingles. I generally start columns with a rough idea but not an outline, so writing comes from peering and learning rather than regurgitating a party line.

Instead of including long series of columns excavating particular concerns of mine like poverty-fighting, abortion, education, religion, or baseball, I've tried in this book to mix up the topics so as to provide an American Studies sampler. The common denominator is counter-programming: I try to wake up those who are complacent and calm down those who are frantic. My columns may make sense to some

conservatives, but I hope they also reach—without any ideological kissing up—people on the left.

Jonathan Edwards in *Freedom of the Will* writes about a king and a prisoner. The king opens the jail cell and tells the incarcerated he is free to leave. The prisoner, though, hates the king. Maybe he has heard from others that the king is not trustworthy and plans to torture him if he leaves, so he stays in the cell. That's where many of my former comrades and journalistic or academic colleagues reside. We can learn to trust the king only if we go back to basics. We need to reexamine the changes, institutions, and causes we have advocated and defended. We need to conclude that we ourselves need to change.

As I learned on my own rocky path, we do not conclude this on our own. Maybe a columnist can help slightly, but our only hope lies in God's grace and the hard challenges He gives us. All of us need such prodding. Contra the 1970 song, we are not stardust and we are not golden—but God has told all who listen that "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (2017)

Section One: Basics

Fight or flight? Ride or hide? Sometimes, it's beneficial to be a Benedict, creating a community in which Christians can grow stronger and prepare to venture forth when the tide seems ready to turn. Sometimes, we should dare to be Daniels, risking our lives in the centers of power by speaking and living truth before those who probably won't listen.

Deciding which path to take requires great discernment. Rosa Parks in 1955 became a heroine when she was a Daniel and refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. A millennium before that, Christians facing Arab raiders, in what is now central Turkey, hid in underground cities and were probably wise to do so.

My own tendency at times has been to rush in, while recognizing that those with more angelic temperaments would wait. Still, this group of columns shows my desire that evangelicals should not become applause-seekers but should seek to demonstrate a Christian worldview. I propose in this section that fiscal conservatism doesn't work without biblical moorings, and that Christians won't rescue young prodigals just by displaying an elder brother sense of duty.

The Bible shows followers of Christ how to be emphatic but compassionate, ready to be Dirty Harry Christians rather than South Park conservatives—and in the process, we should emphasize humility and humanity by neither over-using nor under-using Scripture. We're part of the American tradition of making room for others and looking for government to promote the general welfare, not provide it.

Demonstrating Christianly

You may have heard the story of the time four decades ago when President Lyndon Johnson invited reporters to his ranch for dinner. Since his press secretary Bill Moyers had seminary training, LBJ asked him to say grace. When the designated prayer spoke softly, Johnson requested that he speak up. Mr. Moyers replied, "I wasn't talking to you, Mr. President."

The focal point of that anecdote for some is LBJ's arrogance—but the late president was right. Public prayer, whether in church or at the dinner table, has two audiences, one on earth and one in heaven. Prayer tells God what He already knows but wants to hear from us, and it also may teach human listeners what we do not know but should.

Public prayer should be not only loud enough for all to hear but discerning concerning what people will hear. The goal should be to communicate with God but also to communicate about Him and His attributes, such as holiness and mercy. Thus far, I hope most readers are with me, but pay attention, because a perhaps controversial application is coming: Public demonstration by Christians should also emphasize communication about God.

When American Christian activists are riled up about something, we show our displeasure. I can do this by writing, but I've learned that while rants may make me feel temporarily better and excite others, they don't accomplish much toward helping with what's appropriately called the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Christ's statement at the end of Matthew's gospel is more complicated than it may seem. It specifies "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," so Trinitarian teaching and then a baptismal sign and seal of the faith brought about by God's grace are both important. It also emphasizes "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you," so neither a vague spirituality nor a

theoretical mastery is sufficient. As part of a process that lasts a lifetime, believing hearers are to become doers of God's commands.

Put all this together and we start to see what an ideal Christian protest of a political or cultural event might look like. First, its goal should not be to make the demonstrators feel righteous or more cohesive in the face of a hostile world: the Christian slogan is not, "If it feels good, do it." Second, it should communicate that God brings in people and has expectations for us—in other words, both mercy and holiness.

Let's take abortion protests as a particularly appropriate example, given the January 22, *Roe v. Wade* anniversary cover date of this issue. A Christian demonstration outside an abortion business should declare that abortion is wrong and that God is merciful to aborters and abortionists who come to faith in Him.

Protesters who seem hateful to troubled women because they appear to offer condemnation rather than hope are not helping the cause of Christ. On the other hand, a demonstration that merely offers cups of hot chocolate to women arriving for abortions on a wintry day is also sub-Christian, since demonstrators might seem like spectators at a race urging the contestants on to the finish line.

The frequent biblical metaphor of Christians as salt is apt not only because salt is both a preservative and a flavoring, but because the two elements that make up salt—NaCl, sodium and chlorine—are both poisonous when ingested by themselves. Salty protests highlight what God opposes but also show, both in words and style, what God proposes: acceptance of His mercy.

My ideal prolife demonstration at an abortion business features protesters winsomely providing information about alternatives to abortion. Our folks would not use bullhorns, which The Blues Brothers effectively linked with Nazis. Some biased souls will see Christians as loudmouths no matter how we act, but we should not make it easy for them—and if we do, we're hurting rather than helping the cause of Christ.

Our models here should be Daniel in Babylon and Paul in Greece, both of which were rife with pagan belief and practice, probably including infanticide. When Paul walked in Athens and saw the city was full of idols, he did not try to smash them. Instead, "he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). (2005)

Prodigal Sons and Current Issues

As Tim Keller points out in *The Prodigal God* (Dutton, 2008), the parable of the prodigal son should have a plural in its name: sons. We all know of the younger brother's libertine living, but the elder brother has a more subtle problem: He is self-righteous and lacks joy.

Part of the evangelical political problem in contemporary America is that much of the press and public sees us as elder brothers. Sometimes we are that way in reaction to younger brothers. Sometimes younger brothers go their way in reaction to us.

In higher education, younger brother colleges are party schools that proffer sex and stimulants. Some Christian colleges try to avoid that by imposing tight rules in elder brother fashion. Those rules may lead to external conformity rather than deep belief. Both younger brother and elder brother colleges divert students from learning more about God.

In journalism, younger brother magazines ranging from *Rolling Stone* to *People* sell a continuation of younger brother college life. Elder brother reporters tend to be self-righteous fault-finders—and it's always someone else's fault. Elder brother journalism lacks love, charity, compassion, and a sense that all of us are in this mess together.

Christian publications that look only at sin among secularists can also be elder brothers.

In the realm of "social justice," younger brothers want governmental redistribution so everyone, regardless of conduct, gets part of the national inheritance. Some recipients of Washington's largesse are widows and orphans, but others are younger brothers or sisters: They

should go home but do not because government checks allow them to keep destroying themselves. Elder brothers, though, wax sarcastic about wastrels while they overlook the needy. "Social justice" turns into either social universalism or Social Darwinism.

The gay rights debate is another younger vs. elder brother combat zone. While covering Manhattan's annual humongous Gay Pride parade, I didn't see any lip-locks except when the marchers observed a dozen souls from a church waving Bibles and screaming at them, "You're going to hell, sodomite" or "You're an abomination in the sight of God." The presence of elder brothers allowed younger brothers to feel self-righteous: ironically, ranting reminders about sin provided the opportunity to forget about sin.

Younger brothers who perceive self-righteousness or joylessness in their elders head toward mockery. On the Comedy Network, Jon Stewart is a snarky younger brother and Stephen Colbert pretends to be an elder as he parodies FOX's tut-tutting Bill O'Reilly. Elder brothers tend to forget that truth without love is like sodium without chloride: Poison, not salt.

What's rare on television and in life are third brothers who, because they know deeply that the Father loves them, have love for and patience with both elder and younger brothers. Third brothers, knowing God has forgiven them, are not prideful.

A third brother Christian college helps students to see that all people are made in the image of God and all people are sinners. Because of that, beauty shows up where we expect banality, and evil emerges where we anticipate excellence. At a third brother college, students become bilingual and bicultural, able to move in both Christian and secular circles without ignoring the problems of the former or the knowledge generated in the latter, through common grace.

Third brother journalism rises out of the history lecture in chapter seven of the book of Acts: Stephen, with neither an elder brother's pridefulness nor a younger brother's sarcasm, realistically emphasizes the fallenness of his people and the holiness of God. He does not seek life's meaning in the formation of or adherence to a man-made religion that sets up a code of morality.

Third brother politics is also different. The Founders fought for both liberty and virtue: Elder brothers tend to forget the former, younger brothers the latter. Third brothers know that we can never have enough laws to banish sin. They tell the truth but do not rant at abortionists and gay rights activists. They control their tongues and lungs not because killing babies and killing marriage is right, but because their goal is to change hearts.

Third brothers ask pointed questions, and here are ones for each of us to answer: Am I a younger, elder, or third brother? Can we, through God's grace, leave behind elder- and younger-brotherism? (2009)

Earnest Grace vs. South Park

A raucous red glare, bombast bursting in air . . .

That's the face and sound of media conservatism these days, as celebrated on best-seller lists, top-rated talk shows, and books like Brian Anderson's *South Park Conservatives* (Regnery, 2005). That title comes from the cable cartoon program known for its helpful ripping of political correctness but its harmful endorsement of rage and sarcasm.

These days, being a South Park conservative is in, and the working definition seems to be: Hit hard and don't worry about hitting below the belt, because there is no belt. If you counter the left's sputum with your own, talk show appearances and book contracts will follow.

What big shots endorse, little shots snort. Anderson approvingly quotes one undergraduate talking about himself and cohort members who "get drunk on weekends, have sex before marriage . . . cuss like sailors—and also happen to be conservative."

Conservative, maybe (although if South Park is our future, there won't be much to conserve). Clearly not Christian, though. Those who follow the Bible are to be firm but courteous—as the saying goes, hating the sin but loving the sinner. Christians should not adopt the bipolar belief that either you're (Michael) savage or you're a wimp.

The Christian way is to practice what New Jersey pastor Matt Ristuccia calls "earnest grace, the reassociation of sensibilities that we moderns have judged to be beyond association: specifically, passionate conviction and profound compassion. . . . [The apostle Paul was] so wonderstruck by the way God brought justice and judgment for human sin together with forgiveness and hope in the death of this Jesus, that Paul's earnestness could not help but be seasoned with grace."

That's certainly the way things oughta be—but contemporary culture does have peculiarities. Ann Coulter spoke in May at the University of Texas; I was still hanging out in New Jersey, but a perceptive Christian student I've taught, Amy McCullough, was there.

Amy reports that the first question to Coulter was, in essence, "couldn't she be a little nicer? Coulter said people don't respond to subtle reasoning; one has to 'bop them over the head' and use humor to make people see the light." She's probably right: earnestness on TV shows and during after-dinner speeches doesn't turn people on, and Ms. Coulter's rapid-fire attacks do.

But Amy also noted a rare, slow-motion answer: "When a young, conservative woman asked how Coulter could stand the awful things people said about her because of her stand on abortion, she hesitated, messed with her hair, and said: 'Well, it's the same way I don't care about anything else: Christ died for my sins and nothing else matters.' I think my jaw hit the floor."

On this subject, Coulter is right: It doesn't matter what people think about us. We know that those apart from Christ will often view Christians as fools unless God changes hearts, so the advice offered by US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia is good and right: "Have the courage to have your wisdom regarded as stupidity. Be fools for Christ. And have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world."

And yet, while it doesn't matter what people think about us, it does matter what people think about Christ. Sophisticates showed contempt toward Paul's words in Athens (Acts 17), but some listened. What if, instead of arguing logically, he had ranted? Or, despite Paul's own personality and preferences, what if Areopagus leaders had allowed only sound-and-fury acts? Should Paul have contented himself with bopping the heads of his listeners?

Amy's conclusion about Ann Coulter: "I enjoyed a lot of what she had to say. It'd be nice if she was nicer." Some of Coulter's stage persona may be an act, but do we have a culture in which she needs an act like that to break through the propaganda that suffuses so many college courses?

How would Paul act in today's culture? How, for that matter, would eighteenth-century members of the religious right like Samuel Adams

and Patrick Henry? I suspect they would still be firm but courteous, displaying bravery without bombast. I'm not knocking Coulter; I only hope that she finds a way to rout liberal stereotypes without fulfilling others. She's too good to be South Park. So, for that matter, is any Christian. (2005)

New Neighbors

We worry a lot about presidential candidates, but this election is showing the need for thoughtful, hopeful voters. When voters are pessimistic and adamant about holding onto our own slices of pie, candidates respond in protectionist ways. When voters are optimistic about the opportunity to bake more pies and share the bounty, then campaigns brighten.

Churches and Christian schools that teach us to love our neighbors can grow better voters. They should teach that expansive, non-defensive Christianity has been the outstanding vehicle in human history for increasing the liberty of those seen as sub-human until Christians began viewing them as neighbors: the poor, the sick, the sexually-exploited; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; the not-yet-born and the declining but not-yet-dead.

Sure, we have to recognize that some Christians over the centuries defended slavery or embraced nativism, but they were doing what was common in much of the world. The sensational news is that many Christians have fought for what was uncommon. American Christians with an expansive sensibility have always been the leaders in taking risks and making "We, the people" include more and more people viewed not as threats but as neighbors.

The big US experiment from the 1840s to 1924 was whether the "we" could include millions of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. Some Protestants who thought of America as a Holy Land fought what they saw as pollution by immigrants, but by the end of the century the consensus was clear: We the neighbors includes Catholics and Jews, and soon came a smattering of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

The big twentieth-century experiment was whether the "we" could include different racial and ethnic groups. Despite Constitutional amendments, the Civil War hadn't settled that, since African-Americans largely remained poor and disenfranchised. In the mid-twentieth century, though, strong and courageous Christians (once again, sadly, with exceptions) fought for civil rights as many of their predecessors had fought for emancipation.

During February, Black History Month, children in Christian schools should learn the uniqueness of our history. In India, Hindu priests lead the opposition to equal rights for the generally dark-skinned Dalits ("untouchables"). In the United States, though, ministers like Martin Luther King, Jr., and others of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference demanded to be treated as neighbors. Many Christians and Jews joined their cause.

Like or dislike his politics, it was good that Barack Obama could win in Iowa, where few African-Americans live. Like or dislike the Clintons, it's shameful that they have fought back from that initial loss by playing racial cards. While recognizing the need to control our borders, we should be sad to see some GOP candidates playing the immigration card.

America has been a land of addition, not subtraction. Social Darwinists for almost 150 years have tried to subtract the poor from the list of We the neighbors, but compassionate conservatives have insisted on treating even the homeless as part of the "we" who are capable of working, marrying, and building families.

Christians have also insisted that unborn children are part of the "we," despite the Supreme Court's exclusionary attempt in *Roe v. Wade*. In the American house are many mansions, and our history is one of finding more room than we thought there was.

One woman who had an abortion wrote in 1976, our nation's bicentennial, that "there just wasn't room" in her life for the child growing within her. Later, she realized that she could have made room. She wrote, "I have this ghost now. A very little ghost that only appears when I'm seeing something beautiful, like the full moon on the ocean last weekend. And the baby waves at me. And I wave at the baby."

In this month that brings George Washington's birthday, it's worth remembering a letter he wrote to one synagogue in 1789: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." That should be our continuing goal for this nation. We can make room. Christians should lead the way. (2008)

The Daniel Standard

Christians in the public square should be known not only for years of perseverance in the face of snide attacks, but also for good humor in refuting them. Some people who would like to stand for Christ become irate, even despairing, but the Bible gives us confidence—in part, by showing how believers have been a harassed minority before, and how God was faithful.

Past circumstances were often far more difficult than those we now face. The last chapter of Second Chronicles, for example, tells how the Babylonians 2,600 years ago "broke down the wall of Jerusalem." Israelites had lived in a land where every aspect of life was to point them to the holiness of one God who reigned above all. Suddenly, they found themselves exiled to Babylon: instant culture shock.

Babylonia then was 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. But the book of Daniel tells of how he and a few other young men enrolled in a three-year course designed to leave them with an MBA—Master of Babylonian Arts. It also describes how he came to prominence when God gave him the grace to comprehend and interpret a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Training and grace were related. 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 statue broken into pieces by a stone cut from a mountain by no human hand. That stone then "became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."

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" (Daniel 2:44). Nebuchadnezzar, in turn, 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).

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, forgotten by a second king, came back just in time to predict the kingdom's imminent fall. Later, conspirators used Daniel's regular prayer habits against him in a way that led to his being thrown to 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."

That's the highlight reel of Daniel's seven decades in or close to government: Much of the time, it appears, those in power ignored him. Patient 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 challenged those beliefs by standing 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 from God's command. The prophet Jeremiah wrote (chapter 29, verses 4–7), "Thus says the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I 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.'"

To understand and apply Jeremiah's teaching, we need to understand that in his day Babylon was not the symbol of everything wicked that it had become by the time John wrote the book of Revelation. In Jeremiah's time some Babylonians were probably good neighbors, trading gardening tips—and that's how life is in America today. Our situation is different in one respect: America, unlike Babylonia, started out on a biblical base. But now the parallels are great, and so are the opportunities: That was a good time for gutsy Daniels, and so is ours. (2003)