

Annual Paul Henry Lecture

**“Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global  
Human Rights”**

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Thanks to Henry Institute and to Corwin Smidt, whose scholarship is a national treasure.

To be the Paul Henry Lecturer is a real honor because years ago I interviewed Congressman Henry and found him to be a man of great wisdom and integrity, a model of Christian witness in the political world. Thank you all.

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Beginning in the mid 1990s a new movement burst onto the international stage – a movement devoted to advancing human rights through the machinery of American foreign policy.

This movement, which operates largely under the radar of the mass media, has successfully pressed a series of landmark legislative initiatives, each of which faced fierce opposition.

The first of these – and the catalyst for the rest – is **The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998**, the most sweeping human rights statute on the books, which has transformed the advocacy of religious freedom around the world. This outcome has

stunned observers at home and abroad. What are the Americans up to? Why do they care? What led Congress to do this?

The outcome was doubly surprising because prior to 1998, religious freedom was the step child of human rights. Human Rights groups slighted or sometimes even dismissed reports of persecution, especially against Christians.

Why ignored? Because the **Secularization** paradigm guided scholars and political leaders. The idea that as societies modernize religion wanes in influence, led elites to ignore or slight the continuing role of religion in people's lives.

Even into the 1990s, American diplomats were often ignorant of religious communities in their countries. Ambassador Sasser's ignorance of House Churches in China is a vivid example.

That changed through the scaffolding built by the new law, which makes promotion of religious freedom a basic aim of American foreign policy. Because diplomats must investigate and report on the status of religious freedom in every country on earth, they now maintain contact with persecuted religious minorities. And our government is obligated to shine the light on abuses. **President Bush insisted on speaking free of censorship to the Chinese people when he visited China, and he spoke of the right to religious freedom!**

That success galvanized other initiatives, so that in 2000 **Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act**, which commits US leadership to end an immense modern slave trade. The trafficking of women and children into grotesque sexual exploitation has always been with us, but it metastasized in the freewheeling globalization of the 1990s. Nearly one million are lured or sold into bondage in places

where they don't speak the language, lack papers, or are physically locked up to service clients. Millions more are trafficked within national boundaries. Because of the new law, and its tough enforcement by the U.S. government, countries around the world are changing laws and practices, crime syndicates have been broken up, and emerging norms are taking shape. Abused women and children are literally being set free.

**The third initiative was The Sudan Peace Act of 2002**, which plucked the tragedy of Sudan from the backwaters of international concern. Long before the current crisis in Darfur, and long before 9-11 highlighted the threat of militant Islamic ideology, Christian solidarity activists and their Jewish allies sounded the alarm about the genocidal aim of Khartoum's self-described Jihad against its African population – a population made up of tribal religionists, Christians, and non-militant Muslims.

In the South the regime's tactics – which included indiscriminate killings, scorched earth policies, manufactured famine, and abductions – left 2 million dead and five million displaced during the past two decades. It was pressure from the Sudan Peace Act that forced Khartoum to cease attacks in the South, setting into motion the mass release of slaves and the return of thousands of refugees to their homelands. Activists today hope that religious mobilization and U.S. pressure can likewise help end the tragedy in Darfur.

**And now the latest initiative: The North Korean Human Rights Act**, passed just this year, which focuses attention on the Orwellian regime of Kim Jong Il, whose abysmal human rights record includes a vast system of brutal gulags, wide-scale arrests, torture, killings and engineered starvation in which the authorities literally decide who eats and who doesn't. A German doctor who spent eighteen months working in North

Korea, saw children everywhere who looked like Nazi concentration camp victims while the party elite enjoyed sumptuous banquets, posh hotels, casinos, and luxury cars. The new law **expands** protection for North Korean refugees, **conditions** U.S. humanitarian aid on transparent improvements in access for people in need, and mandates inclusion of human rights considerations in all negotiations with the regime.

Any one of these initiatives deserves note, but collectively they suggest that *the new faith-based movement is filling a void in human rights advocacy, raising issues previously slighted -- or insufficiently pressed -- by secular groups, the prestige press, and the foreign policy establishment.*

You simply cannot understand international relations today without appreciating this faith-based impact.

Yet this impact remains underappreciated in elite circles, in part because American evangelicals – almost entirely cast as “moralists” in the cultural wars – provide the crucial grassroots muscle behind the unlikely alliances that champion these causes.

This distinct role arises from an historic confluence of circumstances that I describe at length in my book. But my message here tonight **is not** that we should **merely** applaud this humanitarian contribution. Rather, my message is that American religious believers – especially in the evangelical community – bear a heavy responsibility to ensure that this historic opportunity is not squandered. **PEOPLE OF FAITH WILL DETERMINE**

WHETHER OR NOT THIS MOVEMENT IS SUSTAINED. **My message, therefore, is a call to action.**

Now, why is it that the evangelical community has come to play such a vital new role in international affairs? Let me begin to answer that question by introducing you to some people I have gotten to know over the last six years.

-- Francis Bok of Sudan was a slave for ten years and is now a Christian voice for his people in the U.S.

-- Getaneh Metafriah Getaneh of Ethiopia was arrested and tortured for preaching the gospel and is now an American evangelist.

-- A Filipino known as Pastor Wally was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia for leading Christian worship services.

-- Noble Alexander of Cuba spent years evangelizing in Castro's jails.

-- Lee Soon Ok of North Korea, a communist official, became a Christian after witnessing the courage of believers in the gulags of the regime.

-- And a young woman I call St. Joan of Xian. A recent graduate of a top Chinese university, a political science major and a sophisticated young woman, she had a

promising career before her in government service, but confided to me that she could not profess atheism as a condition of such service. She calmly made a life altering decision for her faith.

**Many of you have heard the saying: If you were charged with being a Christian,** would there be enough evidence to convict?

For these Christians there is no question. They literally are convicted. They live the high cost of discipleship. They are models of Christian witness.

And they represent the increasingly **dominant face of global Christianity**. Because of the dramatic growth of Christianity in the developing world, and its decline in Europe, the vast majority of believers now live far beyond what used to be the geographic center of the faith.

**In 1900, only 20% of the world's Christian population** lived outside of North America and greater Europe. **Today that's up to 60% and growing. Perhaps three-fourths** now live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Thus American churches increasingly are mere branches of wider global ministries. That's obvious within the Catholic Church, to which I belong, but it is also true of the evangelical world.

What accounts for this **demographic revolution**? Why is Christianity now the majority faith in Sub-Saharan Africa? Why, despite persecution in China, is it growing so rapidly there? Why has it come to anchor the remnants of community in Southern Sudan?

**One explanation is theological:** the Christian message of God's love and transcendent reward is especially appealing to the poor and vulnerable of the earth. That's why, as one scholar of missions put it, Christianity tends to wither at the center, where it becomes established and comfortable, and grow at the periphery.

**Another explanation is rooted in social science.** The powerful modern forces of mass communication, technology, and economic globalization uproot people and weaken ancestral faiths tied to village or place. This produces a spiritual vacuum that the great universalist and missionary faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, rush in to fill.

Whatever the explanation, one result of this growth is that Christians threaten despotic governments that are fearful of independent civil society. Because believers pay allegiance to an authority higher than the state, they are not easily bribed or intimidated. And thus many become victims of widespread state persecution or mob violence by dominant religious groups.

At least 200 million Christians live under these kinds of conditions. Some examples:

-- China's fear of independent civil society: Strangle the baby while it is still in the manger.

-- Islamic militant campaigns against Christian minorities

-- Ministry to untouchables viewed as a threat to Hindu nationalism

**MANY MARTYRS TODAY...**

Thus the Christian church in many places is a **suffering church**.

But it **no longer suffers in silence** because global communications, travel, and international development networks increasingly link American believers with their vulnerable counterparts abroad. And because the church is also nested amidst poverty, violence, war, and exploitation, American Christians are awakening *more generally* to the afflictions visited on the world's suffering and exploited.

So we have the picture of a new concern among American believers for human rights.

**A second development** enables evangelicals uniquely to act politically on these concerns. Animated by distress over the drift of American culture, evangelicals have built a booming network of alternative schools, colleges, national associations, publishing houses, direct-mail groups, para-church organizations, and broadcast ministries. As Robert Putnam observed in his famous book, *Bowling Alone*, American evangelicals have built the “largest, best-organized grassroots” social networks of the last quarter century.

These two developments – **concern with the suffering church abroad and the growth of domestic social networks** – were moving in parallel fashion, **like tributaries of a river**, until they finally converged. As they connect, the social networks of the evangelical world, born of domestic conservative impulses, are increasingly put in service of human rights and justice concerns normally associated with progressive politics. This striking development is largely overlooked by the press in its obsession with the moral values debate.

And this development **facilitates unusual alliances**. During successive campaigns over the past seven years, I watched conservative evangelicals team up at various times with Jewish groups, the Catholic Church, liberal Episcopalians, Tibetan Buddhists,

Iranian Bahais, feminists, and the Congressional Black Caucus. What began as a Christian solidarity movement blossomed into a broader quest for human rights.

This has infused new life into a cause often trumped by other interests, **but** without sustained effort, powerful economic and strategic calculations will overwhelm human rights concerns, as they often have in the past.

Thus I return to my message. A confluence of circumstances – human rights zeal, the rise of movement networks, and I might add, special access to the Bush Administration – has given the evangelical community the capacity to sustain the cause of human dignity. With that capacity comes, I believe, a God-given duty to act, and act effectively.

But what does that take?

Let me offer a few **imperatives for religious political actors.**

**1) To be effective you must develop a deep theological grounding for political engagement** – and make it **integral to Christian formation.** This is something Congressman Paul Henry embodied and that Calvin College wonderfully promotes.

But Mark Noll warns against certain tendencies of immediatism and pietism that inhibit deep theological grounding.

Thus there is pressing need in the evangelical world to develop a vocabulary of justice, as Charles Colson has argued.

And to understand how believers can be stewards of wealth and influence for international justice, there are models today:

Frank Wolf, who told me that if you have a position of influence, you have a duty to use it. That is a great call to evangelical leaders today.

Or Chris Smith, a Catholic, who calls himself a Matthew 25 Christian (“whatsoever you do to the least of these you do to me”).

Or Sam Brownback, leader of many of the initiatives catalogued here, who sees his work as a Christian witness.

**2) To be effective you must be tough.** Power is seductive. Religious leaders are sometimes bought off by blandishments, by White House visits and advisory committee posts. That’s not enough. As Jews would say, you need **chutzpa**, you must **make tough demands** on the system; **know your power**. One of the striking things about the movement is how much evangelical leaders admit that they **had to be prodded** by Jewish leaders to be aggressive advocates for human rights and justice, including for fellow Christians.

**A good model of this aggressiveness is the parable Jesus told of the tenacious widow and the judge. She kept demanding justice until he gave it to her. Perhaps God is the woman demanding of us: Give me justice.... Give me justice.**

**3) To be effective you must think strategically.** Use your mind: numbers and passion are potent political resources, but only if channeled in productive ways.

We need to listen to those impacted by decisions.

We need sophisticated political analysis.

We need to assess opportunities, timing, and allies.

Because of the election, the current moment is a propitious time for evangelicals to make a difference.

**4) To be effective you must work in coalition. That's how our system works.**

A Key Movement feature has been Unlikely Alliances:

**Congress and Strange Bedfellows: Pelosi and Wolf**

**Evangelicals and Jews**

But the Sectarian impulse is still there:

Culture wars tension over Gay marriage may inhibit coalitional work.

So I have a question: to advance international human rights, are you willing to partner with those on opposite sides of domestic clashes? I hope so.

**5) To be effective you must be in for the long haul** – William Wilberforce fought against slavery from 1787 to 1833, and joined with diverse others in the cause. That made him a figure of such stature that he was also able to reform manners and morals of British society.

**You need a long term policy focus. Like in the movie Ground Hog Day, you have to fight the battles over and over.**

**Example: Trafficking battles in State Department; appointment of John Miller, who sees his job as ending modern day slavery.**

**Example: Sudan Reality:** On the eve of a peace treaty in the South, the regime unleashed attacks in the west against the African Muslims of Darfur, producing a humanitarian catastrophe, a slow motion genocide. While the Bush Administration has

acted to move relief supplies to those displaced and has issued the first genocide designation since the passage of the international convention, the situation in Sudan is dire and more vigorous action is needed to stem further mass death.

**Yet I do not see** the same degree of mobilization on Darfur as in the campaign to end the Sudanese war in the south. To date, the religious response has been fragmented, even anemic at times compared to the crisis.

**I pray** that diminished evangelical action is not due to the fact that Muslims are being slaughtered and not Christians.

**I fear** that the presidential election and the battle over gay marriage have siphoned off energies.

**But I can hope** that a new engagement will prevent Darfur from becoming another case of international neglect, like Rwanda.

**International pressure can make a difference. U.S. leadership can make a difference. Religious leaders can make a difference.**

**All of these imperatives suggest an ultimate lesson: Politics is tough, tough work, like the boring of hard wood. It takes tireless effort, relentless energy, and a deep commitment to justice.**

To illustrate, let me conclude this talk by showing just what it took to free one of God's children, **Laneh**, a six year old Cambodian girl, who was being sold daily for sex in a notorious village outside of Phnom Penh controlled entirely by traffickers and pimps.

**1) Gary Haugen, a devout evangelical**, was chief investigator for the U.N. Rwanda war crimes tribunal. That experience so seared him that he created International Justice Mission and continues to raise money and build its global network.

He had heard stories about the village, Svay Pak, and sent in undercover operatives who videotaped transactions.

Haugen showed the video to Cambodians. He showed to media, senators, and State Department officials. He received no response from Cambodian authorities.

**2) Meanwhile, parallel developments were ongoing in Washington.** There was an **intense battle to pass the Trafficking Act**, with months of ongoing negotiations. A **minuet of alliance building**, including feminist groups and evangelicals was occurring. A **battle went on within State Department** resulting in John Miller's appointment.

**And then, Haugen sent information to John Miller**, who sent clear signals to Cambodia: crack down or face sanctions!

**3) The result was a raid coordinated by Haugen and Cambodian authorities.**

Forty girls were freed and placed in protective custody. A wider crackdown took place throughout Cambodia.

**And so, in place of the grainy photo,** we see Laneh, soft-drink in hand, laughing with friends.

**It took a lot,** but because of the Faith-based movement, Laneh, a child of God, was set free.