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# Facing Christian America's Sacred Ire: Can Christian Historians Successfully Bridge the Gap between Professional Integrity and Populist Constituency?

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# Facing Christian America's Sacred Ire: Can Christian Historians Successfully Bridge the Gap between Professional Integrity and Populist Constituency?

## **Abstract**

Paper presented at the biannual meeting of the Conference on Faith and History held September 24-27, 2014 on the campus of Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

## **Keywords**

Christianity, historians, professional integrity, Christian scholars, Christian historians

## **Disciplines**

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## **Facing “Christian America’s” Sacred Ire: Can Christian Historians Successfully Bridge the Gap between Professional Integrity and Populist Constituency?**

Presented by Scott Culpepper, Ph.D.  
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In July 1993 Dr. Barry Hankins sent a letter to the editor of the *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* with the intention of educating the community rather than provoking controversy. Hankins was serving as an assistant professor of history at Louisiana College in Pineville when he sent that letter. He had recently attended an Independence Day “God Bless America” event at the local Alexandria Coliseum which featured a presentation by Wallbuilder’s founder and Christian America advocate David Barton. As a Christian historian with a specialization in the study of American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, Hankins was deeply troubled by some of Barton’s emphases and his use of evidence. Hankins’ attempt to provide the public with a more nuanced approach to the issues Barton had raised brought him into conversation with members of Louisiana College’s local constituency who did not care for his input.

Hankins listed three “troubling” issues Barton had raised in his presentation. These issues included Barton’s claim that the founders intended a general official preference for Christianity even if they did not establish a particular denominational church, his sweeping assertion that the Supreme Court decisions on school prayer and Bible reading in public schools had started the nation on a path of decline since the early 1960’s, and the failure of both Barton and the event planners to “distinguish biblical Christianity from American civil religion, which is the blending of patriotism and religion until it is nearly impossible to tell them apart.”<sup>1</sup> Hankins did acknowledge that, “Barton is right when he argues that many secularists fail to recognize the profound and positive influence of Christianity in American history.” Despite Barton’s accurate identification of this secularist bias, Hankins wrote, “To mythologize America’s past as distinctly

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Hankins, “Letter to the Editor: Troubling Concepts,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July 7, 1993.

Christian, however, and then to call for government sponsorship of religious activities is not the answer.”<sup>2</sup>

Some prominent local constituents were quick to give their answer to Hankins’ critique with their own letters to the editor. Of the two most prominent letters, one came from a local pastor and the other from an attorney who had served as a state representative. The Reverend Bob Vincent, pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, expressed his strong support for Barton’s views. For Vincent, Barton’s user-friendly version of the past provided an important corrective to the moral decline in the public school system. He referenced the example of a public school teacher who “instructs children how to use a condom in a moral vacuum,” as an example of the decline in public education due to the elimination of school prayer and Bible reading that Barton had cited. Vincent acknowledged the religious diversity of colonial America, but also insisted that the “one thing” the founders had “agreed on” was “that the moral principles of Christianity undergirded not only the specific laws of the several states, but this system was the pivot on which our whole system of government and jurisprudence turned.”<sup>3</sup> In a recent e-mail exchange, Vincent wrote that he later came to reject Barton’s methodology, refusing to attend a later Barton event in Alexandria, but still holds the same views of the American founding he expressed in 1993.<sup>4</sup>

Pineville attorney and former state representative A. Dale Smith had a more aggressive approach. Smith addressed his letter to the editor directly to Louisiana College President Robert Lynn.<sup>5</sup> He first insisted that Hankins “suggested that prior to voluntary prayer being removed from public schools, our government compelled non-Christian school children to recite Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Hankins, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Reverend Bob Vincent, *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Reverend Bob Vincent to Scott Culpepper, E-mail text in the possession of the author. September 18, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> A. Dale Smith, “Letter to the Editor: Questions Professor,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July, 12, 1993.

prayers? (sic)”<sup>6</sup> Smith further informed Lynn before the eye of the general public that “despite overwhelming historical documentation to the contrary” Hankins had suggested “our nation does not have a uniquely Christian heritage.”<sup>7</sup> Hankins had been very careful to acknowledge the importance of Christian influences in American history in his letter, but all nuance was swept aside in Smith’s indictment. Smith closed his letter with an incendiary paragraph that questioned both Hankins’ Christian orthodoxy and his position as a professor at a Christian college:

Dr. Lynn, everyone has a right to an opinion which is contrary to a Biblical worldview. However, when a professor of history at a Christian-chartered college holds such opinions, how is it possible for him to help fulfill the school’s mission of imparting a Biblical world view to the students? Louisiana College does not accept public funding for the precise reason that it wants the unfettered right to impart a Biblical world view to the students without government interference. Most people who financially support Louisiana College expect the school to only employ teachers who will aid and support the school mission. Continuing to employ professors who do less is unwise stewardship.<sup>8</sup>

Smith’s devotion to Barton’s interpretation of American history ran so deep that he questioned Hankins’ orthodoxy and Christian character simply on the basis of Hankins’ disagreement with Barton.

Fortunately, two of Hankins’ colleagues wrote letters to defend him, and Louisiana College stood behind his right to exercise academic freedom in professional matters. Dr. Thomas Howell, Chair of the Department of History and Political Science at LC, admitted that he had not studied the issues Barton raised in detail, but staunchly defended the Christian and academic integrity of Barry Hankins.<sup>9</sup> Todd Tift, Chair of the Department of Communication Arts at LC, had already defended Hankins a few days prior to Howell’s comments. Tift identified Hankins as “a person of unquestionable Christian integrity, an active churchman, a

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Howell, *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July 19, 1993.

loving family man, a man committed to Christlike action, an outstanding teacher, a nationally prominent Christian scholar.”<sup>10</sup> Tift identified in his letter the most troubling aspect of Smith’s attempt to advance his opinion on early American history as a standard for Christian orthodoxy. Tift wrote, “Obviously, Mr. Smith does not know Dr. Hankins, yet he feels free to pass judgment on his suitability as a teacher at LC on the basis of a single opinion honestly expressed in a local newspaper.”<sup>11</sup> Christian America advocates like Smith who questioned Hankins’ suitability to teach at Louisiana College were essentially erecting an additional litmus test for employment outside the confessional commitments of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

Some of the most insightful comments about the nature of the debate came from Louisiana College students who also took to the editorial page to defend Hankins. LC student Anne Robinson took offence at Smith’s insistence that he knew “*the* (emphasis in the original) biblical worldview.” Robinson wrote that she did not realize there was only one biblical worldview; she defended Hankins’ right to state his views under the Baptist principle of the priesthood of the believer. Robinson gave one of the most succinct summaries of the principle at stake in the debate when she insisted, “I believe there is inherent danger for any institution of higher learning to limit its faculty based on appeasement of would-be critics.”<sup>12</sup> LC student Bart Marable insisted that he disagreed with Smith both as a Christian and as a student of history.

Marable wrote:

But as a Christian, I stand up because by deceiving ourselves by creating a history of what we would have liked to have happened, we Christians are diluting the truth. Smoothing over a past that is not as Christian as we would like only sullies Christianity’s image in the modern world.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Tift, “Letter to the Editor: Un-Christlike Attack,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July 16, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Anne Robinson, “Letter to the Editor: State Your Case,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July 16, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Bart Marable, “Letter to the Editor: Stand for Truth,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, July 16, 1993.

The support Hankins received from the administration and faculty at Louisiana College as well as many community members served to protect his position there. He continued to teach at LC with an outstanding professional record and the respect of the campus community until he accepted a position at Baylor University in 1997, where he continues to teach and serve as director of the graduate program in history.

Ten years after Hankins departed Louisiana College, the school had a very different leadership and a new, stricter theological litmus test for who could serve as a faculty member. A controversial presidential search had resulted in the selection of Joe Aguillard, a faculty member in the education department, as president in 2005. Aguillard quickly set out to implement the will of the conservative party of trustees who elected him. The conservative Board of Trustees and the Aguillard administration were supported by a potent populist network of local pastors, laypersons, and political pundits. A massive faculty turnover within two years led to a very different campus atmosphere by 2007.<sup>14</sup>

When Aguillard announced the formation of the Louisiana College Paul Pressler School of Law in 2008, David Barton's influence moved down the road from the Alexandria Coliseum to the Louisiana College campus. Barton was prominently listed as a member of the law school's "Board of Reference," an advisory board of directors that included a number of prominent evangelical media stars and political activists.<sup>15</sup> Barton's invitation to join the Board of Reference was extended when he came to campus on May 5, 2009 to give the commencement address. The commencement address was vintage Barton complete with PowerPoint and the same basic arguments that Hankins had critiqued in 1993. On this occasion, however, Barton

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<sup>14</sup>Associated Baptist Press, "Louisiana College elects Aguillard as president amid campus turmoil," *ABP News*, January 18, 2005, (Accessed September 6, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Al Quartermont, "Judge Paul Pressler School of Law, Q & A." *Columns: The Magazine for Louisiana College Alumni and Friends*, Winter 2010.

was treated as a distinguished guest on the Baptist campus.<sup>16</sup> When questioned by faculty, planners of the event insisted that Barton was being asked to speak from his role as a political activist rather than as a historian. Despite these assurances, Barton was introduced as both a constitutional expert and an authority on American history. A number of students were taken with Barton's presentation, but the astonishing aspect of the event was the number of the new faculty who were dazzled by Barton as well. I was serving at the time as an assistant professor of history at Louisiana College, my undergraduate alma mater. My own account of the aftermath of this event was published on the *Faith on View* web site and subsequently published in the *Alexandria Town Talk*.<sup>17</sup>

My first direct encounter with Aguillard's style of managing subordinates came in the spring of 2009 when I voiced concern, first through a series of e-mail messages and then through a letter sent to leading administrators as well as select faculty members, about comments made by David Barton at the spring commencement. Mr. Barton made several comments at the ceremony that were erroneous. Not only students but faculty members seemed to be taking his false assertions as fact. I had already communicated to the administration before the event Barton's well known reputation for distorting facts and his nearly universal repudiation by Christian academics. I requested that Aguillard allow us to present the other side of the argument for students and faculty who might be unaware of Barton's factual distortions. The response was bizarre. Dr. Chuck Quarles (Professor of religion and Vice President for Faith and Learning) had also written a letter in which he echoed some of my concerns about Barton's presentation. Aguillard requested that his personal assistant, Joseph Cole, vet my letter and Dr. Quarles' for factual accuracy because we probably "misunderstood Bro. Barton." Cole was a music major with no background in history who had not even completed his undergraduate degree. Aguillard finally called me in for a rather strange conversation in which I tried to convince him with historical evidence that Barton was incorrect, and he responded by continually asserting that I would believe otherwise if I felt the spiritual vibe at Barton's headquarters in Aledo, TX. The meeting ended with Aguillard saying that he forgave me for my letter. When I tried to diplomatically say that I stood by the letter and was not apologizing for its content, Aguillard said it would be best for my long term future at Louisiana College to forget about Barton.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> E-mail text in possession of the author.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Culpepper, "Open Letter to the Board of Trustees," *Faith on View*, February 24, 2013, <http://www.faithonview.com/louisiana-college-open-letter-to-the-board-of-trustees-by-dr-scott-culpepper/>, (Accessed on September 5, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

This prohibition did not extend to the classroom, where professors were generally still free to address the ideas of Barton without interference. It was widely known, however, that any general public disagreement with Barton or the Christian America philosophy he advocated was seen as an act of insubordination, a charge which carried the penalty of nonrenewal for non-tenured faculty without appeal under the provisions of the Louisiana College faculty handbook.<sup>19</sup> Despite the unofficial pressure, there was never any formal change of policy or stated requirement that embracing a Christian America philosophy was expected of Louisiana College faculty either for employment or promotion. The Louisiana College Pressler Law School never opened, and all indications are that the project has been abandoned.<sup>20</sup>

The events at Louisiana College are only one example, and admittedly a very extreme example, of one of the troubling issues confronting many Christian scholars teaching at Christian institutions. That troubling issue is the struggle to uphold the standards of intellectual and professional integrity when the constituencies that support our home institutions are sometimes operating out of worldviews shaped by populist sources advocating misinformation. This struggle is born of more than just a desire to please the academic gatekeepers in one's particular discipline. It is linked symbiotically with the Christian scholar's sense of vocation and calling. For Christian scholars, the goal of cultivating intellectual integrity demands a higher standard than simply meeting the minimum guidelines of the guild. Our scholarship and service is no less

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<sup>19</sup>Louisiana College Executive Committee, *Louisiana College Faculty Handbook*, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> The media coverage of the Pressler Law School project is a veritable cottage industry. The Wall Street Journal Blog published an account of Dean Michael Johnson's resignation which also lists the various deadlines for opening the school that passed with no action. Sam Favate, "Louisiana Law School Loses Dean before Grand Opening," *Law Blog: The Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2012/09/20/louisiana-law-school-loses-dean-before-grand-opening/>, (Accessed September 6, 2014). While the college still maintains that they will eventually open a law school, the sale of the building purchased to house the school and continuing accreditation issues indicate that the project is stalled if not finished. Katherine Timpf, "Louisiana College spent more than \$5 million on a law school that never opened," *Campus Reform*, <http://www.campusreform.org/?ID=5542>, (Accessed September 6, 2014).

than an act of worship presented to the King of Kings as well as an act of service to the church and society.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, energetic fervor to set hearts and minds afire for Christ often collides with some difficult realities. As much as we would like to think we are shaping the worldview of our Christian communities, Christian scholars soon discover that a large number, possibly even a majority, of the constituents whose decisions influence our ability to do what we do receive their formation and information from other sources. Some of these sources are intellectually honest and based on solid research. Some of them are not. Yet, well-grounded or not, the perception of reality cultivated by popular sources tends to trump the expertise of scholars in contemporary evangelical culture in America. Karl Gilberson, former professor of physics at Eastern Nazarene College, and Randall Stephens, Reader in History and American Studies at Northumbria University, discussed this phenomenon in *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulties professors face in addressing the concerns of those influenced by “the anointed” are daunting. Populist evangelical leaders enjoy highly visible media platforms while professors generally have a smaller public. A popular pundit like David Barton pursues his work with a comfortable financial cushion while the average professor at a small Christian liberal arts college is struggling just to make ends meet. Professors also face a deficit of trust from Christian communities who have been alienated by arrogant academics. Evangelical parents are inundated with exaggerated caricatures of the professoriate like Kevin Sorbo’s radical atheist Professor Jeffrey Radisson in the film *God’s Not Dead*.<sup>23</sup> Their distrust of secular academia gets

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<sup>21</sup> Jamie Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, has provided some fascinating insights on scholarship as an act of liturgical worship. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Culture Formation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 215-230.

<sup>22</sup> Randall Stephens and Karl Gilberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Cronk, *God’s Not Dead*, Pure Flix Entertainment, 2014.

transferred easily to the Christian scholar who does not play by the script set forth by their favorite popular evangelical pundits.

Despite the gravity of the situation and disadvantages Christian scholars have on the playing field of the popular evangelical subculture, I believe there is hope and possibly a promising future for the relationship between the Christian academy and our constituents. I propose that cultivating that hope involves healthy doses of love, gentleness, patience, self-control, and all the other fruits of the Spirit so necessary for the flourishing of Christian community. It also involves Christian scholars taking to heart Paul's theology of relating to the "weaker brother" and applying his insights regarding Christian humility to our constituency.

Christian scholars must first of all continue to do what we desire to do most anyway-mentor our students with insight, integrity, and patience. Instilling in our students the basic skills of critical thinking and modeling honest intellectual engagement for them as much as possible is still our central calling. One of the tragic consequences we see stemming from the predominance of the populist evangelical subculture involves the power of the evangelical subculture to set the terms of our academic pursuits. We find ourselves forced to provide nuance to Barton's overstatement of Christian influence on the American founding rather than talking about the contributions of those lesser known founders who were faithful Christians. Or we see a fruitful discussion on the importance of understanding creation as formed by God with specific intent and purpose overshadowed by intramural debates on the mechanics of that creational act sponsored by devotees of Ken Hamm and Bill Nye the Science Guy. Even as we seek to influence evangelical popular culture for the better, we must not allow popular opinion to set our priorities, especially not in regard to which matters are essential and which matters are peripheral. Our central priority must not consist in the answering of pundits but in the education

and spiritual formation of human beings. Correcting the incorrect must serve as a subordinate consequence of our greater mission to enlighten and illuminate rather than the driving force of what we do.

A great model for this type of approach to the Christian America debate is John Fea's *Was America Founded As a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*.<sup>24</sup> Fea, chair of the history department at Messiah College, makes no pretense about the fact that his book is an answer to the Barton Christian America philosophy. But his organization of the book defies domination by that goal. Fea manages to provide an excellent study of the nature of religion in the early American republic while folding his critique of Barton into the larger goal of educating his readers. Another great example is Warren Throckmorton and Michael Coulter's *Getting Jefferson Right: Fact Checking Claims about Our Third President*.<sup>25</sup> Coulter, professor of humanities and political science at Grove City College, and Throckmorton, professor of psychology and fellow for psychology and public policy at Grove City College, directly answer David Barton's *The Jefferson Lies*, but again doing so in a way that emphasizes the importance of understanding Jefferson properly rather than simply refuting Barton.

Christian historians and other scholars seeking to bridge the gap between professional integrity and populist constituency should also learn to navigate the political aspects of the evangelical subculture wisely. It is no secret that politics is generally about maintaining problems rather than seeking solutions. As long as a particular party within the state or church can gain a political advantage by keeping an issue inflamed, they will often do just that. The problem of political gamesmanship has been a particular issue in the Christian America debate.

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<sup>24</sup> John Fea, *Was America Founded As a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Warren Throckmorton and Michael Coulter, *Getting Jefferson Right: Fact Checking Claims about Our Third President*, (Ipswich, MA: Salem Grove Press, 2012).

One of the vexing weaknesses of many attempts to provide a corrective to Christian America views was that they were typically provided by people who were more easily dismissed by evangelical populists as being too liberal politically or “out of touch” with the concerns of ordinary Christians. This critique could be applied to Gilberson and Stephenson’s text *The Anointed*, which makes some great points about the excesses of dispensational prophets, creation science and the Christian America thesis. The authors then turned to a loaded discussion of homosexuality that was sure to alienate an evangelical audience, the very audience that most needed to hear the critique of the other items they reviewed.<sup>26</sup> Chris Rodda of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation unveiled some excellent research designed to uncover many of Barton’s distortions in *Liars for Jesus: The Religious Right’s Alternate Version of American History*. Unfortunately, her acerbic tone and populist political commitments made her an easy target for evangelical popularizers wanting to shift the focus from the substance of her argument to her potential bias.<sup>27</sup> Even the classic text *The Search for Christian America* by Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden was dismissed by some populist evangelical critics as the work of three highbrow professors who dared to question the “venerable” Francis Shaeffer.<sup>28</sup>

Recent works by Christian scholars who also tend to have a more conservative stance on political and social issues have provided the benefit of tentatively lifting the Christian America debate out of the morass of political gamesmanship. Dr. Thomas Kidd, professor of history at Baylor University, demonstrated with his series of articles critiquing Barton’s *The Jefferson Lies* in *World Magazine* and his book on faith in revolutionary America, *God of Liberty*, that one can

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<sup>26</sup> Gilberson and Stephens, *The Anointed*, 97-138.

<sup>27</sup> Christ Rodda, *Liars for Jesus: The Religious Right’s Alternate Version of American History, Volume 1*, BookSurge Publishing, Amazon Digital Services, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, George Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*, Helms and Howard Publishers, 1989. For more on how the Shaeffer debate led to the publication of this work see Barry Hankins, *Francis Shaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 211-227.

be constructive, conservative and critical of bad history.<sup>29</sup> John D. Wilsey, assistant professor of history and Christian apologetics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Houston, published *One Nation Under God: An Evangelical Critique of Christian America* in 2011.<sup>30</sup> Wilsey's historical overview of the Christian America thesis and balanced critique offered yet more evidence that the excesses of Barton are not a conservative or liberal problem, they are problematic for all honest thinkers. One of the interesting and ironic elements of this publication is that the forward was written by Richard Land, who was serving at the time as head of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Land praised Wilsey's work as did Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson in a cover endorsement.<sup>31</sup> Both of these men were central leaders of the SBC "Conservative Resurgence" which had come to dominate the convention in the 1980's. Even more ironic, Land and David Barton were both serving together at the time Wilsey's book was published on the Louisiana College Pressler Law School Board of Reference.<sup>32</sup> At just the moment Louisiana College was sounding a certain sound regarding the sacredness of Christian America, some of the most conservative leaders in their parent denomination were not quite as sure. This gradual change in the perception of the SBC leadership possibly indicates the potential for a more balanced view of American history to take root in the general constituency.

Finally, I humbly suggest that Christian scholars who want to bridge the gap between the demands of professional integrity and the expectations of populist constituency must practice the

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<sup>29</sup>The article at the following link includes a link to other articles by Kidd addressing the Barton issue. Thomas Kidd, "Doubting Thomas," *World Magazine*, September 8, 2012, [http://www.worldmag.com/2012/08/doubting\\_thomas](http://www.worldmag.com/2012/08/doubting_thomas), (Accessed September 8, 2014). Thomas Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> John D. Wilsey, *One Nation Under God? An Evangelical Critique of Christian America*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

<sup>31</sup>Wilsey, Foreword.

<sup>32</sup> Quartermont, "Louisiana College Law School Q &A," *Columns*.

Christian virtues of humility and tolerance in our interaction with even the most unreasonable elements of our Christian constituencies. Humility must characterize both our attitude and our methodology. In terms of methodology, humility requires that we must be willing like the Apostle Paul to become “all things to all men.”<sup>33</sup> The nature of media is changing and possibly offering new opportunities for Christian academics. In the past popular Christian media, like most American media, was controlled by gatekeepers such as publishers, radio stations, and television broadcasters whose evaluation of what was acceptable fare was dictated by the popular tastes of the evangelical subculture. We now live in a world where that is changing. All forms of media are becoming more fluid with fewer gatekeepers. That dynamic results in more white noise and less quality control, but it also provides a more direct connection to popular audiences for those scholars who have the courage and the humility to master communication in new mediums. The *Patheos* blog site is a great example of a forum where Christian scholars are able to connect with all audiences in accessible new formats. Blogs like the *Anxious Bench* hosted on *Patheos* or the Houston Baptist University blog *Reflection and Choice* demonstrate how Christian scholars can use new media forms to reach out to those audiences that were previously on the periphery of their reach.<sup>34</sup>

Practicing Christian tolerance and humility in our interaction with constituents demands that we must be willing to walk among them often and with compassion. Our own discomfort with interacting in new settings or simply the introvert streak that resides in most of us can frustrate our desire to build connections with constituents. The human factor of connecting often and honestly is still the best way to overcome prejudice in all of its forms. Whether that involves

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23.

<sup>34</sup> “The Anxious Bench,” *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/>, (Accessed September 8, 2014). “Reflection and Choice,” Houston Baptist University, <http://reflectionandchoice.org/>, (Accessed September 8, 2014).

possibly pursuing opportunities to teach a short series in your field at local churches or rub shoulders with constituents doing community service, those connections with other Christians can be invaluable in overcoming the general distrust many Christians, particularly evangelicals, have of academics. At the same time, there are some things that just are the way they are. Barry Hankins was attempting to do just this sort of thing when he was criticized by local constituents. Reactions to even our most sincere efforts to gently correct erroneous ideas among our constituents may still be met with hostility.

At these moments when we are most tempted to give up and retreat, the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 14 and 15 can be encouraging as well as convicting. At the risk of being accused of some of that famous academic arrogance, I would suggest that we can take both instruction and comfort from Paul's admonition, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves."<sup>35</sup> Paul is calling on the more mature, those with more complete knowledge, to recognize that they have a greater responsibility to maintain the bonds of fellowship with "the weak" or those whose scruples do not allow them to exercise the same freedom of thought and action enjoyed by the "strong." Exercising compassion in this regard does not mean forsaking the defense of what we believe through careful study to be true. Rather it means doing so in a way that honors the *Imago Dei* in each person and the bonds of Christian fellowship with other believers. And it means doing so even when they do not offer us the same consideration.

Can Christian historians navigate the tensions between professional integrity and populist constituency? We can, and we must. One key is seeing our difficult constituents as spiritual

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<sup>35</sup>Romans 15:1 (NAS).

siblings rather than adversaries. Or in the words of the Apostle Paul, “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Romans 15: 1-7 (NAS).