

National debt is new hot issue for evangelicals

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Many economists warn that the government's huge national debt is a looming threat to long-term prosperity. But is it also immoral?

According to a growing number of conservative Christians, the answer is a resounding "Yes."

As Washington debates President Obama's proposed 2012 budget, the immorality of the deficit has become the hot topic on right-leaning Christian blogs, radio programs and political mailings.

The concern is not only that the estimated \$14.13 trillion debt could cripple the economy, some conservative Christian leaders say, but also that borrowing so much money violates important biblical tenets.

And while religious conservatives have long mapped personal piety onto national politics, some of the moral arguments against excessive borrowing are getting a new hearing among Christians already anxious about the economy.

"America's growing debt is a not just a financial issue, it's a spiritual one," said Jerry Newcombe, host of "The Coral Ridge Hour," a television program broadcast by Coral Ridge Ministries. "The Bible is

very clear about the moral dangers of debt."

The Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based evangelical ministry dedicated a segment of its television show earlier this month to the "monstrous debt burden," and has been sounding the alarm to its estimated 500,000 devotees through its radio programs, print publications and website.

Likewise, the Washington-based Family Research Council has delivered "action alerts" about the debt to its network of 40,000 pastors and myriad state-based advocacy groups. The Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for America, and the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a new group led by GOP strategist Ralph Reed, are also warning members with increasing intensity that the deficit is reaching immoral proportions.

Reed said concern about the debt is not new, but has risen to the top of some Christians' agenda partly because of the rising tally and partly because the Tea Party and Fox commentator Glenn Beck have focused so much attention on the issue.

"You can't give the Tea Party enough credit in terms of raising the consciousness about this issue," Reed said. For his part, Beck often cites on his television and radio programs "The Five Thousand Year Leap," a book that argues that the national debt imperils America's freedom.

John C. Green, an expert on religion and politics from the University of Akron in Ohio, said several factors, in addition to Beck and the Tea Party, have fueled interest in the deficit.

First, the national debt is a good mobilizing issue for the Republican coalition, able to unite social conservatives and fiscal

hawks, whose alliance has sometimes been strained. Secondly, it allows religious leaders to ride the Tea Party wave of anger against government spending. And lastly, it broadens the conservative Christian agenda beyond such culture war battles as abortion and gay marriage.

In its segment on the debt, Coral Ridge, whose late founder, the Rev. D. James Kennedy, was known for blending conservative Christianity and politics, quoted the Bible to denounce the debt.

"Proverbs 13:22 says a `good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children,'" historian and author William Federer said on the program. "Right now, we're not leaving a very good inheritance."

Other budget-conscious Christians have cited passages from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in which God tells Israel that "you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none."

Ken Blackwell, who is leading a balanced-budget campaign for the Family Research Council, cited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "fierce urgency of now" in a recent column advocating against the debt.

Blackwell acknowledged in an interview that King often spoke in favor of government-funded programs, especially to fight poverty. "But Dr. King did not say we should spend beyond our means, or steal our children's future," Blackwell said.

Lewis Baldwin, a professor of religious studies at Vanderbilt University who is editing a book about the political use -- and misuse -- of King's words and legacy, sharply disagreed with Blackwell.

"Dr. King felt the government should spend billions to deal with poverty and economic injustice in this country," Baldwin said. "So I don't get it when conservatives use him to argue in favor of decreasing government spending."

And while many evangelicals agree that the debt is a huge problem, some see partisan politics behind the recent surge in interest among conservatives.

"I wish the Family Research Council and Coral Ridge Ministries would have recognized the debt as a moral issue before they supported two unnecessary and immoral wars and endless corporate subsidies for years," said the Rev. Jim Wallis, head of the Washington-based group Sojourners.

David Gushee, an evangelical scholar and political centrist, agreed, saying many conservative Christians held their tongues when the debt nearly doubled under President George W. Bush because of tax breaks for wealthy Americans and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It's legitimate to be concerned about leaving our children and grandchildren a mountain of debt," he said. "But it seems that in American politics, every seemingly pure moral claim is mixed with hypocrisy."