

Come on down

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 9, 1998](#) issue

A bunch of religious academics, 87 to be exact, have been fussing with some of us about being too easy on Bill Clinton. According to their statement, they feel that some serious punishment is in order for the president's dalliance in the White House and for his period of denial that followed. Since I have been one of their targets--along with Jesse Jackson and Phil Wogaman, the president's pastor--a response is in order.

First, I agree with what the president has already said about himself: his actions were wrong and were sinful. Second, if the president has committed any civil or criminal offenses, they should be dealt with in the legal realm. But the time to deal with legal charges is after he leaves office. For a sitting president impeachment is the only avenue of punishment, and nothing he has done appears to me, and to most Americans, to rise to the level of an impeachable offense.

The religious academic critics are not satisfied with this response. They want to use Clinton's behavior to kick off a national moral crusade against sin. To a point, I am with them. Sin is bad, high moral standards are good. Where we part company is in their need to vilify the president as our highly visible sinner du jour. They speak of punishment, but they are fuzzy about what form it should take. Some say impeach, others say don't impeach, but none wants him to walk free. The scholars want to engage the nation in a serious conversation about sin, confession, repentance and punishment. The problem I have with this is that they want to keep Bill Clinton in the sinner's box while they carry on that discussion.

To launch this national conversation, the critics issued a manifesto denouncing presidential immorality, sent out a press release and, to indicate that they are both serious and modern about the ancient topic of sin, created a Web site.

I am all for a national discussion of sin; some mainliners have been so long on the social-action front lines that they have forgotten how to identify and deplore sin. And there is no doubt that Clinton's behavior, the Starr Report and the Judiciary Committee have put sin, punishment and repentance on the national agenda.

But there is something about finger pointing that makes me queasy. Maybe it's because I believe that the sins of the spirit are the source of all our sinful acts. And since I know the depths of my own sinful condition, I am reluctant to point to the personal wrongdoing of others. Indeed, I detect the faint odor of self-righteousness in such efforts--which right away indicates my own self-righteousness and therefore my own moral failure.

The critics' desire to see Clinton publicly punished makes me picture the following scenario. Imagine that Congress decides to censure the president and requires him to stand in the well of the House of Representatives to receive that censure. This is the moment of closure many in Congress have sought ever since it became apparent that there is no national will to impeach the president.

Imagine: The clerk of the House reads the formal censure before the members of Congress, the Supreme Court justices, and a packed gallery of visitors and journalists. The president stands shamefaced before the world, accepting his punishment. Slightly flushed but calm, he bows his head, and then looks up, confessing his sin again and apologizing to the nation and to his family. Then he speaks, his southern evangelistic cadence gaining momentum as he goes on:

This is a dark moment in American history; your president has been censured for immoral behavior. I accept your censure and I pledge you a new beginning. I want the American people to know that I am going to devote all my energies to their service. I know what it is to sin and to be forgiven by God. Now I want to invite you to join me and seize this moment of our national darkness and turn it into a new moral beginning for our nation. I believe that many of you, whatever your religious tradition, want to join me in this new beginning. Right now, you can find forgiveness for your sins.

In the hushed chamber, the president continues: "Don't be embarrassed, and don't be ashamed. Just come on down. If there are indiscretions in your past; if you have traded votes for financial contributions; if you have neglected your families; if you have wasted your talents in frivolous behavior--whatever your particular sins, only you and God need to know what they are. But right now, you can start over again. Now is the time to come down and turn away from sin."

The aisles slowly fill with repentant sinners, walking and weeping, as they move toward the president. Somewhere in the balcony a voice begins to sing, "Just as I am, without one plea." Others join in the singing. The president speaks one more time: "Come on down, we will wait."