

Judging Clinton: The religious debate

by [David Heim](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Do christian leaders have anything distinctive to say--or avoid saying--about the scandal in the White House and the impeachment of Bill Clinton? Though the issue is less pressing now that judgment day has come and gone in the U.S. Senate, questions about what is private and what is public conduct by political leaders--and about how and when such leaders can be forgiven for their trespasses in either realm--are not likely to go away.

These two books appear as opposing poles in the debate. J. Philip Wogaman presents himself as the party of Christian love and forgiveness. He appeared frequently as a commentator on radio and television during the impeachment crisis, arguing that the president should be forgiven and that it is time for the nation to focus on reconciliation and healing. Gabriel Fackre and colleagues, on the other hand, present themselves as the party of tough love and moral seriousness, combating the purveyors of empty forgiveness and cheap grace, among whom they count Wogaman (and James M. Wall and Jesse Jackson) in particular.

Both books attempt to join immediate political judgments with moral and religious claims. This proved to be an unusually difficult task, especially amid a strident debate and a scandal that seemed to diminish everyone it touched.

As the scandal unfolded, Wogaman had the opportunity literally to preach to the president. He is pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., which Bill and Hillary Clinton frequently attend. His book includes two sermons preached after the Starr Report was issued last summer, one of which the president heard from the pew. Despite these intriguing elements and the "pastor to the president" tease in the title, however, Wogaman does not draw on his relationship with the Clintons. He says that the book violates no "pastoral confidences," and that he wrote it simply as a contribution to public debate.

A decisive event for Wogaman was the September 11 prayer breakfast at the White House at which Clinton made his "I have repented" speech and received words of support and encouragement from many religious leaders. This was a "deeply

religious moment" for Wogaman and it supplies him with his main theme. The nation faced two alternative paths: "the path of the prayer breakfast, with its tone of repentance, forgiveness, love, restoration and healing," or "the path of the Starr Report, with its emphasis on exposing sins and crimes and passing judgment."

Wogaman stresses throughout his book that the essence of morality is love, not law, and that as a nation and as individuals we need to define ourselves by compassion, not judgment. He told one interviewer that, even though he had not done the things Clinton was accused of doing, he would still not say, "Bill Clinton, I am a better man than you are."

Wogaman went on to comment: "Who is to say that this or that form of sin is less serious than that of another person whose behavior may have been more highly publicized? Indeed, the spirit of self-righteousness may itself be a deeper form of sin. Our primary interest should not be in judging or condemning others whom we consider worse than ourselves; rather, our focus should be on reconciliation, healing, and restoration."

As a tool of analysis, Wogaman's ethic of nonjudgmental love is a rather flimsy instrument. One strongly suspects that if the issue at hand were the Watergate break-in or a case of racial discrimination, he would be talking not about the priority of forgiveness but about the necessity of judgment and about how reconciliation can take place only after justice has been served.

Wogaman is a former professor of ethics, and he certainly is aware of this problem; he knows that Christian thinkers have long struggled to give specific content to the often-amorphous shape of love, whether by grounding love in moral principles, or in norms of justice, or in the practice of the virtues. And he does make an effort to find a place in his ethic for law and "tough love." He admits, for example, that "catching and prosecuting criminals can be an act of love for the community that is being protected and, quite possibly, an act of love for the criminal in restraining him." But he doesn't think that this imperative applies in Clinton's case.

Why not? Because what is decisive for Wogaman is a series of prior practical judgments about the scandal: that Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, while reprehensible, was essentially private; that his lying about it, while wrong, was at least understandable; that public exposure and embarrassment already constituted serious punishment; and that it would be a dangerous precedent to remove an

elected president in such a case, especially when it was investigated by what many regard as a partisan and overzealous prosecutor.

I wouldn't quarrel much with that set of judgments. Nor, according to the polls, would most Americans. There is a problem, however, in subsuming these judgments under the rubric of Christian love and forgiveness. For it was not love and compassion alone that settled the case for Wogaman. One could actually have reached the very same conclusions he did simply by making prudential political judgments about the facts of the case and the welfare of the country--and with barely a trace of love or compassion for Bill Clinton.

An irritating sign of this flaw in Wogaman's approach is the fact that if one is inclined to disagree with any of his conclusions--believing, say, that the affair does deserve some kind of public scrutiny, or that the president should suffer some further penalties--one is more or less defined by the rhetoric of the argument as one of the loveless and the unforgiving. Until it's been decided what love and compassion actually require in the case, that's simply a religious form of name-calling.

Wogaman's argument also carries a particular danger for mainline churches, which have been perceived, with some justification, to have been eager to engage social and political issues but rather complacent on sexual misdeeds (unless those too can be given a political shading). Many students of public life, and especially those interested in the health of civil society, have come to realize that so-called private issues of marriage and sexuality have very public ramifications for the stability of families and especially the welfare of women and children. In this context, it is a mistake to say, or even to appear to say, that the loving Christian position is that sexual activity is private and therefore not open to public judgment, or that sex is not all that big a deal in comparison to politics. Wogaman explicitly tries to avoid giving that impression, but his mode of argument leaves him open to that interpretation.

It's understandable, then, that Wogaman's way of invoking Christian themes of love and forgiveness draws criticism from the essayists in *Judgment Day* who think Clinton deserves much harsher criticism. The various authors, including Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago and Robert Jewett of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, aren't exactly sure what penalties should be imposed on the president, but they know cheap grace when they see it.

Judgment Day grew out of the "Declaration Concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis of the Clinton Presidency" that was issued last fall and eventually signed by well over a hundred scholars. The declaration complained about the "misuse of religious symbols" by the president and his supporters, and warned that the religious community was "in danger of being called upon to provide authentication for a politically motivated and incomplete repentance that seeks to avert serious consequences for wrongful acts." The declaration contended for the seriousness of the charges against Clinton, saying they involved nothing less than the "moral basis of the constitutional system."

The declaration concluded by calling for further debate and, to their credit, the organizers of *Judgment Day* took that call to heart: along with articles by some of the principal signers of the declaration, the book includes essays by six people who decided not to sign, including Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale Divinity School, John Burgess of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Lewis Smedes of Fuller Theological Seminary.

The proponents of the declaration are quite right that the various charges against Clinton need to be considered on their merits and that they can't be set aside simply by appealing to the Christian directive to be forgiving. And much remains to be said that Wogaman doesn't say about the egregious ways Clinton betrayed trust, exploited an employee, tarnished public discourse and perhaps broke the law.

Unfortunately, some of the essayists, perhaps overwhelmed by their disgust with Clinton, do not bother to sort out carefully the many dimensions of the case that need to be considered--constitutional, ethical, religious, personal, public, legal and political. As a result, while they make a good case against the "abuse" of religious language, their case against Clinton himself is often imprecise and overstated.

The most remarkable deficiency in the declaration and the corresponding essays in *Judgment Day* is any reference to the political context of the investigation of Clinton--that is, to Kenneth Starr's way of pursuing the president, his informal connections to lawyers in the Paula Jones case, and the extensive powers exercised by the office of the independent counsel. While Starr's excesses hardly excuse the president, they are crucial ingredients in any description of the political context of the crisis and crucial to any argument about whether impeachment or resignation is the needed remedy.

Nicholas Wolterstorff puts his finger on this problem when he suggests--by way of explaining why he didn't sign the declaration--that the constitutional system was less endangered by Clinton's misdeeds than by Starr's investigation, "a legal system gone berserk," and a brand of politics that "harnesses the legal system to the investigation of scandals."

In the lead essay in *Judgment Day*, Elshtain tackles some of the perennial issues raised by Clinton's affair: Can we really make a division between public and private life? Is what consenting adults do among themselves beyond criticism? She says no. "What goes on in the Oval Office is not enveloped within a private cordon sanitaire." Furthermore, "consent is no magic wand. Nagging questions remain. . . . Was this wise? Was it decent?" After summarizing Clinton's affair and his attempt to cover it up, Elshtain concludes, "Surely this has crossed the boundary into the public domain in every possible scale--ethical, legal and political."

Nagging questions remain for me after reading this. While Elshtain is right that public and private actions cannot be totally separated, surely they must be distinguished in some way. Otherwise, we would have to assume that everything that Clinton does in the Oval Office--a fight with Hillary or a quarrel with Chelsea--is a legitimate matter of public discussion.

Furthermore, Elshtain has targeted something of a straw man, since very few people have said we have no right to criticize Clinton's actions. Americans are virtually unanimous in thinking his actions were profoundly offensive and that they damaged his political stature. The main questions have been: What is the proper penalty for these actions? Are impeachment and removal the right responses?

Elshtain says that to affirm Clinton's political effectiveness in the face of his misdeeds is a brand of "amoral Machiavellianism." I'd be inclined to say, on the contrary, that such a position represents the kind of ambiguous practical judgment that constitutes the stuff of politics--something Elshtain, in so many other of her writings, has helped us to appreciate.

One of the most forceful essays in *Judgment Day* is by Jewett, who presses the charge that was prominently featured in the original declaration--that Clinton tried to avoid "serious consequences" by way of a "politically motivated and incomplete repentance."

Whereas for Wogaman the September prayer breakfast was a moving moment of repentance and forgiveness, for Jewett it was a repellant simulacrum of genuine repentance. He notes, for example, how Clinton's own rhetoric betrayed self-serving aims. When Clinton said, "It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine," he was more concerned that the audience feel his pain than he was with confessing his guilt.

Jewett points out that Clinton failed to mention any specific sins at all and merely made general remarks about people's need to renounce pride and anger. The speech "evokes religious sentiments but admits not a single sinful act." Moreover, Clinton continued to attack the special prosecutor's investigation and "denied any liability" for his acts. Jewett concludes that the event was political propaganda, the sort of hollow religious exercise that the Bible repeatedly condemns.

Jewett's essay offers a shrewd analysis of Clinton's speech and reveals a healthy skepticism about the conjunction of politics and piety. But as insightful as Jewett's comments are, the force of his argument turns out to be quite limited for deciding Clinton's fate. As he himself notes (as do other authors in the volume), the sincerity or "completeness" of Clinton's repentance is irrelevant to a judgment about his misdeeds. In judging Clinton's "liability" and the appropriate "consequences," the issue cannot be the quality of Clinton's repentance. If the point is that Clinton should be impeached and removed from office, then, according to Jewett's argument, he and the writers of the declaration needed to focus on the enormity and constitutional significance of his deeds, not on the quality of his repentance.

The fact that Clinton wanted to avert impeachment does not logically suggest anything about the quality of his repentance--unless, for Jewett and the signers of the declaration, only an expressed willingness to be impeached would have signified "complete" repentance on the president's part. Wolterstorff again locates the problem: "I myself am not aware of Clinton ever saying that he should receive no punishment for what he did. . . . The issue for him has been the level of punishment."

Like Jewett, I suspect that Clinton's remarks at the prayer breakfast exhibited the evasiveness of a man whose legendary political resilience is closely tied to his capacity for shamelessness. Still, in arguing that Clinton's version of repentance should not exculpate him from his crimes, Jewett is attacking a position that few people besides Wogaman have taken up. (And, as suggested, even Wogaman's case

against impeachment does not really depend on this position.) Most of those who decided to be satisfied with Clinton's version of repentance did not do so because they think his repentance relieves him of accountability. They did so because they viewed the issue of repentance as separate from the issue of impeachment, and because they didn't think his crimes warranted impeachment.

Nevertheless, Jewett, Elshtain and company have helped remind us of the shape that repentance should take in the Christian life. Repentance is a matter not of saying a few opportune words but of taking up practical tasks that can take years, perhaps a lifetime, to realize.

In the great modern novel of repentance, Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*, Ian Bedloe confesses his sin to Reverend Emmett and asks, "Don't you think I'm forgiven?" Reverend Emmett replies, "Goodness, no. . . . You can't just say 'I'm sorry, God.' Why anyone could do that much. You have to offer reparation--concrete, practical reparation." In taking up the task of reparation, Ian finds a new vocation and a new life.

One hopes that Bill Clinton has experienced a moment of what Jewett calls "transforming truthfulness" and embarked on the practical tasks of repentance--and that at some point Clinton has encountered, among his various pastoral counselors, his own Reverend Emmett.