Loving Your Neighbor and Living with Faith in a Hostile World

THE COLSON WAY

OWEN STRACHAN

AUTHOR OF RISKY GOSPEL
PRAISE FOR THE COLSON WAY

“Owen Strachan has given us a compelling account of Chuck Colson’s joyful and determined life of Christian witness and service. Those of us who knew him well and worked alongside him in promoting Christianity as a worldview, and not merely a religion of private piety, recognize him in the discursive portrait Strachan provides. The Colson Way is a praiseworthy intellectual achievement and a gift to the Christian community.”

—Robert P. George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence, Princeton University

“Chuck Colson was a valued mentor and trusted friend. He possessed a rare combination of hardheaded political smarts with a heart that had truly been transformed by Jesus. I regularly sought his guidance and counsel over the years, and never was found wanting. His courageous, winsome public witness and prophetic voice are sorely missed in the troubled times in which we live. This is precisely why The Colson Way needed to be written, and ought to be required reading for any Christian seeking to engage in the public square.”

—Frank Wolf, Senior Distinguished Fellow, 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative

“I was privileged to know and work with Chuck Colson in several respects. He was a man of character and conviction who understood that believers find themselves in ‘two cities,’ as Augustine wrote. As a member of the city of God, I have dedicated my life to strengthening the city of man. I am so thankful to see Owen Strachan’s The Colson Way celebrate this kind of vision. I commend it highly and urge pastors and churches to buy this book—and to share this vision with their people.”

—Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and host of Fox TV’s Huckabee, and bestselling author of numerous books—most recently God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy
“The Colson Way is an honest, enjoyable, and eye-opening look at one of the most significant Christian leaders of the twentieth century. Strachan not only captures the story of Chuck Colson, he offers invaluable insights along the way. I hope this book is widely read by Christians of all ages, but especially young Christians who will be both equipped and inspired by Colson’s life.”

—Sean McDowell, Ph.D., Professor at Biola University, international speaker, and author of The Fate of the Apostles

“A precious gift to the rising generation of evangelical leaders! In an era where cultural compromise is the trend, The Colson Way introduces a fearless advocate for the faith, family, and freedom, whose story of accountability and unwavering conviction is one every young Christian should know.”

—Chelsen Vicari, author and Evangelical Action Director at the Institute on Religion and Democracy

“Owen Strachan has very capably applied his considerable intellect and writing skills to interpreting the life and accomplishments of one of the most important Evangelical leaders of the last half century. It’s impossible to understand the recent history of Christianity in America without knowing Chuck Colson’s story. God raised him up for special purposes, and Colson leaves no clear successor as a collator of ministry, activism, and intellectual life. Hopefully this book will help inspire future Chuck Colsons.”

—Mark Tooley, President, Institute on Religion and Democracy; author of The Peace That Almost Was

“This book introduces Charles W. Colson to a new, younger generation that ‘knew not Chuck.’ In a time of retrenchment and retreat, the ‘Colson way’ calls us to fidelity, resolve, and hope. Chuck pursued this path with courage and love, and so must we.”

—Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, featured writer for First Things
“Owen Strachan’s new biography of Chuck Colson is timely, engaging, and insightful. Even more important, it’s needed. For a generation of evangelicals who came of age without many positive examples of cultural engagement, Strachan’s profile of Colson is a challenging reminder that we can—and must—venture into the public square for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor. I believe Chuck would be deeply honored by this tribute to his legacy of faith and service.”

—Jim Liske, President and CEO, Prison Fellowship Ministries

“As someone who was for four years Charles Colson’s first research assistant when he returned from prison, I thought I knew everything there was to know about Chuck. Not so. Strachan introduces present-day evangelicals (and others) to one of the most unique, and surprising, social reformers in the broader Christian world of the past fifty years. He communicates with a clear and engaging writing style and paints a moving portrait of a true American, Christian original. No wonder, when his whole life is seen in full, that he won warm admiration and respect from so many of his former critics. This vivid, lucid, and informative biography offers a ringing endorsement as to why this is so.”

—Michael Cromartie, Vice President, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington DC

“I’m often asked what it was like to work with Chuck Colson. I haven’t yet figured out how to answer. All I know is that I am different because of him, and so are many, many others. In The Colson Way, Strachan artfully describes what I struggle to communicate about this great man. And, I am convinced that those who read this book, like this person who encountered Chuck’s life, will be inspired to live culturally redemptive lives, loving God and people.”

—John Stonestreet, Speaker and Fellow, the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview; Senior Content Advisor, Summit Ministries
“Congratulations are due to Owen Strachan for producing this highly readable and thoughtfully presented book on the life and work of Chuck Colson. This volume offers illuminating insights into the motivation and manner of ‘the Colson way’ as it developed from the early days of his post-conversion ministry to Colson’s more mature role as evangelical statesman, leader, and mentor. Admirers of Colson will find their appreciation of Colson enriched, even as they are encouraged to extend Colson’s culture-renewing vision to the next generation. Those unfamiliar with Colson’s life and work will be challenged to follow Christ with renewed courage and faithfulness.”

—David S. Dockery, President, Trinity International University

“We live in a disillusioned culture hungering for authentic heroes. History will record that Chuck Colson was a prophetic voice and a truly transformational leader. As his pastor and close friend, I knew and loved him. Unlike a mountain which is majestic in the distance and craggy up close, the better I knew Chuck, the more I respected him. Owen Strachan’s marvelously insightful book is a lively read that inspires us in the Colson Way. ’Overcome evil with good’ (Romans 12:21). May a whole new generation be ‘born again’ and renew the ‘good fight.’”

—Dr. Hayes Wicker, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church Naples (Chuck Colson’s pastor)

“In this accessible biography of a spiritual giant, Owen Strachan has laid the foundation to retrieve the timelessness of Chuck Colson’s public witness. What Strachan shows is that Chuck Colson put first things first—gospel first, public life second. It was never as though public life was less important. It was all where the accent rests; and as Strachan writes of Colson, the accent rests first upon gospel, and secondly, on its transforming effects on society. I can’t calculate the degree to which Colson’s heroism and legacy towers. But in the The Colson Way, Strachan explains the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of one of America’s most important religious and political figures.”

—Andrew Walker, Director of Policy Studies, The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; author of Marriage Is
“Chuck Colson was one of the most important figures in American Evangelicalism in the last half of the 20th century. He was a complex man who was deeply concerned for the Christian worldview and at the same time participated in some of the most significant events and controversies of the Evangelical movement in the last several decades. But, more than anything else, Chuck Colson was a man who had come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as savior and his testimony of conversion to Christ—demonstrated through long decades of Christian leadership—is an important part of that story. Owen Strachan offers us invaluable insight into the life of Chuck Colson and the trajectory of 20th-century Evangelicalism.”

—R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Chuck Colson was a profound inspiration for so many of us concerned with bringing the truths of the gospel to the public square and to the most pressing issues of the day. Owen Strachan has managed to write an accessible and gripping biography of Colson that also builds on Colson’s agenda for cultural renewal, encourages the weary, and serves as a wake-up call for the thousands of faithful but timid Christians who are still wondering if they can make a difference. This book needed to be written, and Strachan was just the man to write it.”

—Jay Richards, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor, Catholic University of America; Executive Editor, The Stream

“Chuck Colson was a friend and a mentor to me—and I’m not the only one who can claim this. His influence continues to be felt not only inside the Church but in the culture at large. I’m thankful that Owen Strachan has taken the time to pay tribute to this unique and important hero of the faith.”

—Jim Daly, President, Focus on the Family

“Owen Strachan is an essential voice for millennials. His message urges all of us to look beyond emotion for transcendent truth. Buy The Colson Way especially for the young person searching. They’ll be engaged by a remarkable story and equipped for a life of bold faithfulness.”

—Penny Young Nance, CEO and President, Concerned Women for America
“The Colson Way introduces millennial Christians to a hero of the faith, who was committed to redeeming society, from prison cells to the halls of power. Through lessons and examples from Colson's life, Strachan winsomely provides guidance and encouragement to young Evangelicals on how we can be ‘boots on the ground’ for Christ, no matter what our calling, in a culture that desperately needs witnesses to the truth.”

—Bethany Goodman, Assistant Director,
March for Life Education and Defense Fund

“Millennials are desperately seeking Christian role models whose lives are marked by authenticity, transparency, and fearlessness in pursuit of justice. Owen Strachan has done them a tremendous favor by introducing Chuck Colson. His incredible story—of a great fall followed by salvation and world-changing redemption—is an example to those wondering what faithfulness looks like in these tumultuous times.”

—Eric Teetsel, Executive Director,
Manhattan Declaration

“Chuck Colson was larger than life. His life and career were the canvas upon which God wrought a masterpiece of grace. If Colson's life and times tell us anything, it’s that the Lord's arm is not too short to save. Owen Strachan has given us a powerful portrait of the man and his work. It is a marvelous story of an imperfect man, and Strachan tells it in this riveting account. I am so thankful for this important book on one of evangelicalism's leading lights. It is a signpost for a new generation that needs to take their public witness as seriously as Colson did.”

—Denny Burk, Professor of Biblical Studies,
Boyce College

“Years ago, my sleeping faith was awakened by Charles Colson's insights into the ways in which the Gospel governs all of reality. Now, in The Colson Way, Owen Strachan introduces Colson's life and work to a new generation—and reminds the rest of us that Colson's example of cultural engagement and public-square witness is as relevant and necessary as ever.”

—Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D., author of
Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me and
Fierce Convictions—The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist
To Eric Metaxas, practitioner of the Colson way
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When I came to faith in the summer of 1988, I was convinced that being a serious Christian—a born-again Christian, as I would then have put it, and still do—was so outre that no one who was anyone could be one. Billy Graham, who comprised his own category, was the exception. But other than him, the culture was wall-to-wall secularists. So when I discovered Chuck Colson of Watergate fame might be a born-again Christian, I flipped. If it turned out to be true, he would be my hero. Happily, it was, and he’s been so ever since. But who was Chuck Colson?

I was in sixth grade when Watergate exploded across the national consciousness in 1973. Though it was impossible to follow the scandal’s serpentine windings, everyone—from the paper boy to Johnny Carson—seemed to talk endlessly of strange things like “the tapes” and “the missing eighteen and a half minutes” and “Bebe Rebozo.” Those who hated Nixon wanted him impeached, but his defenders said every president since FDR had secretly taped their Oval Office conversations, so what was the big deal? They thought he should thumb his nose at his enemies by burning the tapes on the White House lawn.

Then one hot August day the controversy ended. I was in a
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motel room with my parents on the North Fork of Long Island and there on the TV set was Richard Milhous Nixon, resigning the presidency of the United States “effective at noon tomorrow.” For an idealistic boy whose father admired Nixon, it was mind-blowing stuff. In truth, America would never be the same. To see high public officials held accountable for their crimes and sent to jail was breathtaking.

One of the President’s Men, as they came to be called, was notoriously known as “the White House hatchet man,” willing to do anything to help the president get reelected. This was Chuck Colson. As it turned out, Chuck would go to jail for his misplaced zeal, as so many of them would. But what makes Chuck’s story far more interesting than the others is that before he went to jail he found Jesus, and after he got out of jail he determined to spend the rest of his life going back into jails, to help prisoners. In short, God had palpably changed Chuck Colson, and what might simply be a cautionary tale about a precipitous fall has become the story of a spectacular redemption.

So when I learned in 1988 that Colson was a born-again Christian, I was enormously inspired. Chuck was decidedly unlike the embarrassing televangelists who were then all over the newspapers, whose moral and sartorial failings brought ignominy to the faith. I bought his books, Born Again and Loving God, and devoured them both, not least because they helped me see it really was possible to be brilliant and profoundly serious about one’s Christian faith. But Chuck’s life showed me even more: that it was possible to live out one’s faith. In 1976, he founded Prison Fellowship, and although he spoke to all kinds of groups around the world, he often preached in prisons and prayed with men on death row. As far as I was concerned, this was Johnny
Cash with an Ivy League degree and a Brooks Brothers suit. Here was someone worth emulating.

In 1993, Chuck began doing a daily radio commentary called *BreakPoint* and as I was driving around Fairfield County, Connecticut, I would listen. In them, Chuck did what no one else seemed to do: he connected his faith to the culture, to things like popular books and TV advertisements. I vividly recall his column in *Christianity Today* on Woody Allen’s film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. A born-again Christian who appreciated a Woody Allen film? Was that even permissible?

One day in 1995 I heard Chuck was speaking at the Yale Law School and I sped thither to meet him, handing him a typed fan letter. Since I knew he had a grandson, I gave him a copy of my *Uncle Mugsy* children’s book too. A week later I was stunned to get a letter from Chuck, saying he would keep my name in his files in case our paths crossed again. I was further flummoxed when a year after that I heard from his office that they were looking for a new script writer/editor for *BreakPoint*. I leapt at the opportunity, and soon found myself working for the man himself. In the two years that I did so, seeing no daylight between his public and private personae, my respect for him only deepened.

But when our daughter was born in 1999, needing more money than a ministry could pay, I sadly bade Chuck and *BreakPoint* adieu and skipped off to write for Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber—who never did time in a federal prison, that we know of. For some years thereafter I saw little of Chuck, again admiring him from a distance. But when in 2010 my *Bonhoeffer book* came out, our relationship was rekindled. Chuck was positively effusive about the book, talking about it everywhere he went. That the man I deeply revered thought so
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well of anything I had done was almost too much to bear. But it was because more than anyone, he saw the parallels between how religious liberty was destroyed in the Third Reich and how it was eroding in our own culture. As the man who put the Manhattan Declaration on the map, he knew religious liberty to be of paramount importance and so he spoke of it at every opportunity, as I am privileged now to do.

The last time I saw Chuck was when he spoke his last public words in the spring of 2012. I was just behind him when he was stricken, as you will read later in this book, and even then he spoke passionately about Bonhoeffer and religious freedom. But everyone who knew him felt it fitting he should go out with his boots on. He was a Marine. He was a Christian. He was the real thing.

In latter years I've been amazed that many younger Christians haven’t heard about Chuck Colson. That needs remedying, and for my part, I made him one of the great men in my SevenMen book. But far better is the book that follows this foreword. Here is the full treatment that Chuck’s life deserves, and one that will inspire a new generation of devotees to what its author has aptly dubbed “The Colson Way.” That a young evangelical intellectual of Mr. Strachan’s caliber has been drawn to this subject is a profound encouragement. Chuck’s life should be known to anyone wanting the kind of faith that, in the end, is the only kind—one in which one’s mind and actions are both robust, and inextricably intertwined.

Finally, the book’s dedication—which I have only recently seen—so bowls me over I must refuse to think of it, unless I may see it as a wild typographical error that eluded the book’s otherwise crackerjack editors. But this book that honors me so
is indeed a gem, and a worthy introduction to one of the very greatest men of recent times. May God use it in your life, dear reader.

Eric Metaxas
New York City
March 2015
INTRODUCTION

It was an innocent trip. I was in pursuit of spaghetti, perhaps, or maybe an Italian sandwich. This was a part of my regular routine as a staff intern at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC. Every weekday morning I braved the Metro, hoofed it several blocks to the great stone rectangle that is the State Department building, and there commenced a struggle with the mailbox code lock. This is what DC interns did: they got the mail, unlocked the office, answered any early morning phone calls, and handled filing and photocopying. By midmorning I was usually ready for lunch.

The lowly position of staff intern at the State Department was nonetheless an exciting one for a boy from small-town Maine. Growing up, I was familiar with the city in the same terms as most Americans: from the nightly news video footage. Now, in 2004, I wasn’t watching coverage of the halls of power—I was walking them. I worked for the White House at State in the Office of White House Liaison. It was a heady role: I escorted political appointees to various offices, faxed resumes to the Baghdad Palace in the midst of the Iraq War, and handled phone calls from a dizzying array of very important people. I was in close proximity to greatness but had not directly encountered it. Until, that is, I went hunting for some pasta.
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As I rounded the corner in the vast but empty cafeteria of the State Department, I came face-to-face with Colin Powell himself: regal, ramrod straight, wearing his crisp jacket with row upon row of military decorations. I froze—just the Secretary of State and me.

“Hello,” I said meekly.
“Hi,” he said with a nod.

Colin Powell and me: two men united by an affinity for late-morning pasta.

My fleeting brush with global leadership multiplied several times over in America’s capital. I walked past a bleary-eyed Ted Kennedy late one night on Capitol Hill, where I lived. I went to the White House for one of President George W. Bush’s helicopter departures. When Ronald Reagan died, I stood in a very long line to see him lying in state. DC was, and is, a head-turning place. It may be the “nerd Hollywood,” but you can barely exit an overcrowded Metro stop without bumping into a wonkish celebrity.

There is a metaphor here for Christians in the American public square. Evangelicals have entered the halls of power. In some cases, actually, we built them, only to be ushered out later. In other cases, we came late to the soiree. But though we find ourselves in the great societal conversations of the age, we often struggle to know exactly what to say. This is especially true of young evangelicals. We know we want to be a voice for life and liberty and happiness in our time, but we’re not confident in our voice.

Millennial Christians—those born in the 1980s or later—do know very clearly what they don’t want to be. As a child of
1981, I’m aware of our desire to avoid social awkwardness, for example. Few things are worse in the age of entertainment monoclure than this: being the weird one, the person who talks too loudly, shows exceeding earnestness, and voices opinions too rapidly. Beyond this, we want to be liked, to be popular, and to have lots of “friends” and “followers” on social media. When it comes to politics in particular, we want to be a voice of fairness.

Many young Christians, I sense, feel that they have few public-square role models. This is not true in every category. If you want to be a preacher, you’ve got numerous faithful figures—Mark Dever, John Piper, Tim Keller. If you want to be a Christian academic, there are many examples—Mark Noll, Al Mohler, Karen Swallow Prior. If you want to be a public intellectual or media personality, one thinks of Eric Metaxas, Shannon Bream, and Lauren Green. But to whom does one turn to find a modern public-square exemplar? This is a trickier matter. Many of us might point to Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr., but is there anyone in the last forty years who comes to mind?

I think there is. This book is forged in the conviction that there is at least one major public figure of recent vintage who serves as a faithful evangelical model for public-square witness and cultural engagement. This man is Charles Wendell “Chuck” Colson. Colson is known to many Christians but, lamentably, to far fewer millennials. He was born in 1931 and died in 2012, and enjoyed his heyday while many of this generation were in diapers. His voice was prominent during their youth, but my hunch is that for many millennials, Colson is not front and center on their cultural radar.

He should be. Chuck Colson was a brilliant, shrewd, winsome man, a courageous public-square leader who practiced
an invigorating brand of cultural engagement. In terms that resonate with a generation attuned to authenticity, he was no square. He wore thick, dark glasses before they trended globally, searched relentlessly for ways to engage young people, and in his seventies experienced a certain thrill when he mastered the fine art of the iPad. Colson stayed young until he died, exhibiting a much younger man’s energy for travel and hard work, thrilling to the challenge of a new project or speech, throwing himself into training emerging leaders in order to strengthen the public witness of the church.

On numerous issues, Colson spoke prophetically. Years after his political career ended, Colson had a fantastic ability to predict the trends and twists of American society. He used this rare ability to lead and, if necessary, retrofit the many operations he led, ensuring that his ministry was always a relevant one.

But Colson was not merely dynamic. He was courageous. This, perhaps, is what a generation thirsting for genuineness might find most attractive about Colson. Many millennials, after all, have witnessed upheaval. We have experienced heartbreak—divorce, infidelity on the part of our parents, moral failings by public figures both local and national, the slow, trickling loss of confidence in one scandal-plagued institution after another.

What many people desire today is quite simple: authenticity. We believe in the good. We want justice. We crave models. But we have a hard time believing that either individuals or institutions will embody virtuous ideals. In Chuck Colson, we find an example of an internationally known believer who fought the good fight and stayed faithful to the end.

I come to praise Colson, but not to lionize him. Many who are familiar with him, after all, have only heard about him
because he was “Nixon’s hatchet man,” or because he was once reported to have said, “I would run over my own grandmother” for political purposes, or because he was embroiled in Watergate and went to prison for his involvement. To some, he is still a disgraced figure. The mainstream media has little love lost for Richard Nixon even today, and the same distaste is felt for those who worked closely with him. Some readers may have picked up this biography with a high degree of skepticism about Colson.

We will cover Colson’s role in the corrupted Nixon White House and Watergate in coming chapters. I will offer no contorted apology for him. Before his conversion, he was by his own account a tough customer. His autobiography, *Born Again*, does not shy away from frank discussion of his proud and morally questionable behavior in his political career. Colson was a fallen human being. He was conscious of his flaws and sins and would not have wanted a whitewash of his life. He was a part of the Nixon White House, and though he did a fraction of what was alleged, he nonetheless performed deeds that were immoral. Sin was not just in the system but also in Colson himself.

This is not a book on Watergate, but we will cover that period and clarify Colson’s role in the tumultuous and controversial days of Nixon’s presidency. Just last year, America witnessed the fortieth anniversary of Nixon’s resignation from presidential office. This anniversary brought a wave of new sources and books into the cultural conversation. Colson remains relevant for not only spiritual reasons but also political ones. For our purposes, another anniversary is still more relevant. The year 2015 marks the fortieth anniversary of his release from prison—or, as it might be called, the unleashing of Chuck Colson for ministry to the fallen and forgotten.
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It is my hope that my efforts will allow an entire generation of young evangelicals to find great encouragement in their own witness for Christ in these conflicted times. This book is not a definitive biography of Colson, but it does add a good deal of material to the Colson corpus. Jonathan Aitken published an early attempt at such a work in 2005, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed*, furnishing us with an illuminating and thoroughly researched study of the man and his work.

I am thankful for the depth of Aitken’s research and have profited from his lively and incisive portrait. That book had to leave off well before Colson’s career and life ended, however. Alongside Eric Metaxas’s chapter in *Seven Men*, *The Colson Way* fills out the story. This full-length book, the first published since his death in 2012, reviews the last decade of his life (and his death), adds numerous unknown biographical details and touches, and includes the valuable testimony of many eminent interviewees, many of whom had not previously shared their insights. In sum, I present Colson in the mold that best fits the broad span of his life and work: his public-square witness.

This book seeks to accomplish two major aims: first, it tells the overall story of Colson’s life with special reference to the motivation and accomplishments of his public-square work. Second, it forms this historical material into a compelling model for Christian public witness and cultural engagement. In the pages that follow, we do not only recount his work, but we apply it, considering how his witness shapes and informs our own. What was the Colson way? How may we learn from it, be encouraged by it, and even put it into practice? That is my burden in the pages that follow.

The idea for this book came after I gave the Family Policy
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Lecture in 2012 at the Family Research Council. My address was called “The Sacrificial Witness of the Christian Moral Tradition.” As I chewed on the themes from the talk and mourned Chuck Colson’s death in late 2012, I recognized that Colson was not well known among my peers. I had read Born Again a decade earlier and was stirred by it. Many of my millennial friends have not read the book, however. Colson’s incredible story needed to be told afresh.

This is no mere historical study. I want this book to wake up a generation. There are thousands of young believers who are struggling to find their voice in the contested American public square. These Christians love the Bible, trust its teaching, and ground their identities in the soul-saving cross of Jesus Christ. They sing Hillsong and LeCrae and Mumford and Sons in their cars, they capture epic life events on Instagram, they recoil when they think of tiny babies being aborted in the womb, they enjoy visiting big cities, and they are trying to figure out how to be meaningfully Christian in a world that more and more seems to find them deficient.

These young evangelicals aren’t angry. They don’t throw fireballs. They are my friends, neighbors, and students. I rub shoulders with them in my day-to-day work teaching theology and history to college and seminary students. And I want them to see that being a publicly minded Christian does not mean being old. It doesn’t mean being white. We need to remix what it means to be a Christian in public. Biblical ethics born of the gospel and bearing on every aspect of life cross all boundaries and divides—racial, social, economic, educational, geographic.

Our unity is not ultimately grounded in a political program, important as that is. It is not grounded in anger or fear or despair.
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It is grounded in Jesus Christ, crucified and ruling over all the world. It is Jesus and no other who would have us stop dividing ourselves needlessly and privatizing our public convictions. It is Jesus who beckons us to be Christians not only at our weekly service but also in all our lives.

This is the great need of our time: for the church to be the church. We need pastors who preach the whole counsel of God, and who train their people to know the gospel and the body of ethics and convictions that it animates. From there, we need ordinary Christians, people just like you and me, to speak up (Rom. 10), to act as salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16), and to love their neighbors (Luke 22:37). The church is told by secular culture today to be quiet, to muzzle its mouth, and to put its piety in a heart-shaped box, only taking it out on Sunday mornings. I want this book to encourage Christians to do exactly the opposite: to speak winsomely and with great conviction on behalf of gospel truth, biblical ethics, human dignity, and personal flourishing. This the church has done for two millennia; this it must do today.

In 2015, we do not know what the future holds. It is clear that we have witnessed the dawn of a new social order. Gay marriage is a cultural reality. Christian groups are getting kicked off college campuses. Pop culture has darkened in tone and morality. These are challenging times. Coming days may bring genuine hardship, even persecution, for American Christians. Or we may feature some ups and some downs, some great gains and some hard losses in the public square. The success of the pro-life cause over the years is just one example of how our country’s narrative seems less predictable than it might be.

The kids are going to be all right. The millennials will hold
the line on ethical issues. Sure, we regularly hear polling data that suggest otherwise. But if you had polled Americans in 1850 on the morality of slavery or in 1950 on the nature of civil rights, you likely would have been discouraged by the results. Cultures can shift. Views can change. Generations can wake up. As a millennial, I for one am tired of being told that my capitulation to secular culture is a foregone conclusion. It most certainly is not. I know that there are thousands, even millions, of people much like me. They will hold the line.

I firmly believe that there will be no truce on immorality. The true church will never surrender its convictions to the culture. It will never bow the knee to Caesar in slavish obedience. The church may suffer for being true to God. I am prepared for that, and we should all get ready for opposition and even persecution. But we will never give up the faith. We will not sell our beliefs for a cultural stew. I have written this book under this conviction. I believe that Chuck Colson would look us in the eye, take us by the hand, and tell us the same, were he present with us.

We are not here by accident. We have been called out for such a time as this. We are like Esther in days gone by. We find ourselves in the middle of a great societal contest taking place in the public square. The public square is the center of society in which all American citizens ask the great political and cultural questions of life and compete to give the most winsome and effective answers. We are not culture warriors, but there is indeed a competition of visions in modern America, and we have great answers to give. They can shape our culture for good. As Princeton professor Robert George said to me, “The future is not determined.” We don’t know what tomorrow will yield, in other words. Defeat is not assured. But much, it is clear, is at stake.
George went on to say, “In the public square, I don’t want to play defense. I want to play offense.” In other words, he wants to make a case, to persuade his fellow citizens to stand for life and truth and human dignity. Hearing George say this, I got chills. Later, I realized that he himself was similarly galvanized by a man who thrilled to take part in the great contest of ideas: Chuck Colson. Others had similar experiences with the man. For Robert George, Eric Metaxas, Timothy George, Congressman Frank Wolf, and countless others, Colson, as we will see in the following pages, had just this kind of inspiring effect.

It is my hope that his example, spelled out in this book, will have that effect on you. I want Colson to catalyze you to live with bold faith in a fractured age. Whether you counsel a young woman who feels abortion is the only way out of her personal nightmare, raise support to stop the sex trafficking of women in your county, or tell a classmate about the liberating gospel of Jesus, I want you to be like Colson and to be ready, as an ancient sage once said, to speak—but not only this. Like Colson, I want you to be ready to put steel in your words by acting courageously on them. This will mean, like Christ himself, that you must not expect applause for your witness, but that you be ready to sacrifice everything you have for the glory of God and the good of your neighbor.

These are momentous terms. This is a momentous time. Thankfully, we are not alone in this work. We have God at our side, and faithful examples who have gone ahead of us in his name. Their words and their examples still speak. And one of the most fruitful of those witnesses is Charles Wendell Colson.
Chuck Colson was sweating. He was standing just feet from the US president in his office. While Colson was perspiring, Richard Nixon was yelling. This happened often when his plans were frustrated. Nixon was not one to take setbacks lightly.

The president’s request was simple: in fulfillment of a campaign pledge, he wanted a commission appointed to study Catholic schools. Though a Quaker, Nixon liked the Catholic model of education and, as the most powerful man in America, wished it to be studied at some length in order to publicly commend it. It was not a complex request, as far as presidential wishes go. But for various political reasons, Nixon’s lead advisors had not acted to appoint the commission. Though America’s chief executive must deal with ten thousand matters, at 5:00 p.m. on a Friday in the winter of 1970, this one had his full attention. Other aides were out of the office, but Colson was present. He was contemplating a relaxing Friday night when Nixon suddenly called him into his office.

“Chuck,” Colson years later remembered him saying, “I
want a commission appointed now.” He paused and looked the thirty-eight-year-old staffer in the eye. “Break all the [expletive] china in this building,” he roared, “but have an order for me to sign on my desk Monday morning.”

With that, Colson was off. He ran back to his office, telling Joan Hall, his startled secretary, that he had no idea where to start. This was no easy mission to fulfill. It was a quiet Friday evening, the kind that features elite politicos fleeing their squeezed offices for ski slopes or coastal retreats, not digging in to meet the shouted expectations of world leaders. But Colson saw an opportunity, the kind his assertive nature craved. He hadn’t had much to do since joining the White House some months earlier as Special Counsel to the President.

John Ehrlichman, chief domestic aide, and H. R. Haldeman, Chief of Staff, led Nixon’s administration. The two men famously relished their roles as the president’s gatekeepers. They had little interest in cultivating Colson, with his bullish personality and penchant for brilliant political strategy. The human heart in its natural state is not generous to competitors.

This was Colson’s golden moment, however. The gatekeepers were temporarily away. Here was the world’s preeminent leader not merely asking him to fulfill a request, but commanding him to do so, ordering him to do so. For a former Marine like Colson, this was irresistible stuff.

He set to work, finding the necessary documents to draft an executive order, placing call after call to various officials, even pulling the White House budget director from his faraway ski slope to approve the money to fund the commission. He worked furiously through the weekend over two “frantic” days, sleeping little, barely taking note of his family, in order to honor Nixon’s
request. On Monday morning, he placed the executive order on Nixon’s desk. The work was done; the task was finished.1
   The china was broken.
   Chuck Colson had arrived.

The political overachiever did not hail from privilege. Charles “Chuck” Wendell Colson was born on October 16, 1931, in Winthrop, Massachusetts, just across the harbor from Boston. His parents, Wendell and Inez “Dizzy” Colson, raised Colson in upper-middle-class fashion despite lower-middle-class earnings. Dizzy was a force of nature with a classically extroverted personality. She was not adept, however, at managing family finances, a trait that created some chaos in the young man’s life. The family struggled with debt and making ends meet, fostering anxiety in the household.

   This was a plug-away era, though, and the Colsons did their part. Wendell devoted himself to what men of his generation took pride in: he put his head down and worked. He spent long hours in a meatpacking plant by day and took classes at Northeastern Law School by night to advance his family’s prospects. Years later, Chuck would do the same while raising a young family.
   For a certain kind of child, the feeling of desperation produced by unstable finances creates a propulsive energy to succeed and strive. Colson’s youthful experience left a mark on him, developing in him a desire to push ahead relentlessly despite tough odds. From eleven years of age, Chuck took summer jobs to defray his school expenses, which his father’s salary barely covered.
   Despite the family’s humble beginnings, in 1945 Colson
was placed in a small but elite Boston prep school, Browne and Nichols (now called Buckingham Browne & Nichols, “BBN” for short). Located in Cambridge on the banks of the fabled Charles River, the school drew many of the children of Harvard faculty members, including some who could not gain admittance to the upper crust of the New England prep schools (Groton, Andover, and Phillips Exeter among them).

Colson’s peers would go on to distinguish themselves, however. One year behind Colson was Anthony Perkins, the actor who would forever alter the American perception of roadside motels in *Psycho*. Mindy Kaling, beloved of *The Office*, is a more recent alum. In the years preceding Colson’s arrival, the school had established a reputation for itself along calmer lines, winning the Thames Royal Regatta in London and vanquishing foes from larger Boston schools in athletic competitions.²

Colson fit the school’s plucky mold well. He did not make his mark in sports, the dream of many a fifteen-year-old boy. Though he tried hard, Colson was an average athlete and a little heavyset for his age. But he had other, perhaps more potent, gifts: a forceful personality, the ability to rally peers to his cause of choice, and a quicksilver intellect. Colson worked his way onto the school newspaper, the *Spectator*, and quickly became its editor-in-chief. By 1948, the paper’s advertising revenue had tripled under Colson’s leadership.³ His instincts for business and his interest in intellectual influence were nascent but growing. Even among a gifted peer group, Colson stood out. He was named the valedictorian of the forty-person senior class and voted “Most Likely to Succeed” by his classmates.⁴ Little did they know just how well he would succeed.

Colson graduated from high school desiring an excellent
collegiate experience. After B&N, he applied to two Ivy League schools: Harvard and Brown, the latter located in Providence, Rhode Island. In what was his most remarkable coup to date, Colson won scholarships to both schools. This was the American dream, gift-wrapped and dazzling. Were Colson’s life story to end at this point, his trajectory was already spectacular.

His paternal grandfather was a Swedish immigrant who died when Wendell was a teenager and his maternal grandfather was a British silversmith. Neither side of the family had aristocratic connections. But Colson had an indomitable will. His application landed in the admissions office at Harvard Yard in a time when famed President James Bryant Conant (tenure from 1933 to 1953) effectively reshaped the storied institution, opening its famously restricted gates to students from diverse socioeconomic experiences.6

In an address given in 1940, Conant charged the American university to return to the educational ideals of Thomas Jefferson, who sought to enhance the intellectual life of all Americans, not just the upper class. More than a century after Jefferson, Conant sought an increasingly level playing field:

I look forward to a future American society in which social mobility is sufficient to keep the nation in essence casteless—a society in which the ideals of both personal liberty and social justice can be maintained—a society which through a system of public education resists the distorting pressures of urbanized, industrialized life.7

Colson was a beneficiary of this expanded vision, though it is likely that his talent alone would have won him admission.
to Harvard. Colson, however, did not receive the news of his admission to the nation’s most prestigious university with the customary awe and gratitude. Just the opposite: he turned Harvard down.

In his autobiography, *Born Again*, Colson reflected on how his humble origins clashed with the culture of Harvard. It was, he wrote, “pride” that drove him to sneer at his scholarship offer: “As a boy I used to stand on the pebbly beach looking across the gray-green waters of the harbor at the city then run by the Brahmins, the Beacon Hill establishment which traced its ancestry through generations of Harvard classes back to the *Mayflower*.8

Colson’s rejection was an act of reverse snobbery. He and his family were not part of this hereditary aristocracy. They were “Swamp Yankees,” as Colson noted, people who “fervently sought admission to the elite.” But in his mind, he showed Harvard that he was not desperate for its stamp of achievement. When offered an entrée to the corridors of influence, a place at the table, Colson pushed back from it. He entered Brown on an ROTC scholarship and never looked back.

For a man who would focus on religious liberty, Brown University was a noteworthy choice. The school sits on College Hill, a high hill overlooking Providence, the city founded by Roger Williams in 1636 as a spiritual harbor for colonists whose polity and piety did not fit the dictates of Puritan New England. For this reason, many Baptists flocked to the city, establishing the first Baptist church in America midway up College Hill in 1638. More than a century later, Baptists chartered the College of Rhode Island in 1764 and settled it in its current location in 1770. The school was the third college founded in New England.9 Its motto was *In Deo Speramus*—In God we hope.
By the time Colson matriculated at Brown in 1949, the cast of the university had changed dramatically. The school downplayed its evangelical heritage and featured a boisterous social scene. Colson joined a fraternity, Beta Theta Pi, founded at the school in 1848. He threw himself into the social life of the outfit, hazing members, organizing escapades, and spending time with his girlfriend, Nancy Billings, a sweet young woman from an upper-crust New England family. The two dated throughout Colson’s time at Brown and, as a result of Colson’s irresistible wooing, were married in June 1953.

Colson had already showed a penchant for aggressive thinking and an action-oriented philosophy. He continued in this vein at Brown, balancing his classes in political philosophy with his vibrant social life, student politics, and weekly drilling in uniform as a member of the Brown ROTC. Colson fit midcentury fraternity life to a tee. He smoked constantly (a habit that took him decades to drop), drank regularly, and galvanized those around him through his propensity for electric debates and organizational savvy. In a visit to Brown fifty years after his graduation in 1953, Colson reflected on how his environment shaped him:

The tolerance I was willing to fight for is the freedom in civil discourse in the public square to be able to present my truth claim and also listen respectfully to other people’s truth claims. That is tolerance. Tolerance, I learned at Brown was to sit and listen respectfully while I disagreed with the person who was speaking, because we are in a free society, and I will die to protect his rights to speak freely about what he believes.
As time wore on in Providence, Colson excelled in his studies in political philosophy, which featured an exciting array of thinkers. His classroom engagement with Nietzsche, Marx, and others trained him to relish the give-and-take of ideas, and the presence of classmates and professors who disagreed with him encouraged him to “listen respectfully.” Later, he would launch a phase of his ministry centered around intellectual exchange.

Colson’s training at Brown readied him for future endeavors. His academic preparation rendered him an unusual figure at times, for American evangelicals have had a rocky relationship with the life of the mind. Many Christians found themselves marginalized in elite academia in the early twentieth century. Some, in response, opted out of engagement with the secular academy, preferring instead to focus on practical ministry. In some evangelical circles, an attitude we could call “spiritual pragmatism” dominated.13

This was in sharp contrast to the past. In America, schools like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (originally the College of New Jersey) represented colonial efforts to equip ministers with a love for Christ and for truth. The mottoes of these schools captured this desire: Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae, “Truth for Christ and the Church,” at Harvard; Lux et Veritas, “Light and Truth,” at Yale; Dei Sub Numine Viget, “Under the Protection of God She Flourishes,” at Princeton. Today these schools are marked by their secularity, but they were each founded for a distinctly Christian purpose: to train young believers in a richly intellectual faith.

In 2015, when secularism looms large, evangelicals can give fresh priority to the life of the mind. In years past, Christians took it upon themselves to found colleges and universities that
would pass down the faith and invigorate the heart and mind for Christ. This was founded in biblical conviction. In the language of Genesis, we should “take dominion” of all we can (1:26–27). The “dominion mandate,” as it’s called, does not only apply to our backyard gardens and our animal husbandry. It surely extends to all of life and all of our education, whether we study philosophical systems, multivariable calculus equations, or flagellum in a petri dish. Academic instruction reaped from faithful instructors at excellent institutions prepares us to think well in public, and to defend and promote the truth.

Colson began to enjoy the life of the mind at Brown. Engaging with various schools of thought excited him, as it would in later life. Though his early academic efforts were not stellar, Colson graduated *cum laude* from one of Brown’s toughest departments. He later observed that, though he “read a lot of philosophy” at the university and “thought [he] understood it,” it was not until his “life was turned upside down” and he “made a mess” of it that he really comprehended it.

The young man enjoyed action as much as intellection. At this time in Brown’s history, military officers held official faculty positions at Brown, training students in military strategy and theory. These subjects proved centrifugal for youth like Colson. Decades later, Colson identified the straight-back, shiny-shoed officer who first drew his interest in 1951 as “Lt. Cosgrove.” The high standards and proud professionalism of the Marine Corps spoke to something deep in Colson. As often happens with college students, his idealistic side surged in him. Though acting like a boy with his fraternity buddies, he yearned to prove himself a man.

Cosgrove showed mastery in his dealing with Colson. He
played hardball with him, wondering aloud to Colson whether the would-be officer was “good enough” for the Marines. Once again, Colson sat across a desk from an eminent man, a gatekeeper whose approval could shape the course of his life. Unlike his experience in Harvard Yard, however, Colson had no snappy retort for Cosgrove. He was speechless, a condition that did not often overtake him in his voluble life. But Cosgrove got Colson’s attention. He threw himself into his ROTC exercises, seeking covertly to imitate the bearing and posture of Cosgrove. Not long after, in June 1953, he was commissioned an officer in the United States Marine Corps. He would later reflect that the moment in his ceremony in which he was first saluted as an officer was the proudest of his life.

The Corps offered Colson a life of discipline and accountability, order and authority. It was led by legendary figures like famed three-star general “Chesty” Puller. In a tradition that raises certain heroic figures to Olympian heights, Puller stood out for his reputation for bravery and toughness. His famous dictums speak to the confidence of military officials of the period. At one point in Korea, facing tremendous fire, he told his men, “[T]hey’re on our left, they’re on our right, they’re in front of us, they’re behind us. They can’t get away this time.” Such bravado led young patriots like Colson to follow Puller unquestioningly.

Colson never entered actual battle in the Korean War. By the time of his deployment, the conflict had ceased. Not surprisingly, Chuck found the peacetime military less appealing than the wartime military. He agitated to leave and begin a law career. But the military left a lasting impression on the young man. Amid his enjoyment of university life, Colson had found
for the first time a cause he considered worth dying for, as he told students at his alma mater in 2003:

When I went into the Marine Corps I was perfectly willing to lay my life down for the great opening words of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That is a great thing. That is a great freedom!

Colson’s patriotic zeal shows through five decades after his entrance into the Corps. Yet it is not his love of country that stands out. As captured by a seventy-two-year-old veteran, the idealistic young Marine was willing to die for a cause greater than his own interests. Colson knew already that the great end of life is to find something so precious, so all consuming, that it is worth even total sacrifice.

Colson did not stay a Marine for long. By 1955, two years after he entered the Corps, he won a spot on the navy’s Junior Management Assistance program, an internship in Washington, DC, that served as an elevator to top governmental positions. Though Colson chafed at the quieter days of his life in the Corps, his identity as a Marine played a major role in his personal narrative. More than fifty years after his time of service, Colson would regularly describe himself in earlier years as a “tough Marine” who was humbled by a mighty God. His Marine heritage, in fact, seemed to play a larger role in his self-portrait than his Ivy League background. He was not made for a military career, but he was profoundly shaped by his experience in the armed forces.
Colson next moved on to the office of Raymond Fogler, the assistant secretary of the navy. Colson focused on procurement in his work, helping to assess the possible recipients of massive governmental contracts. As was becoming a pattern with the talented and impatient young man, he initially enjoyed his work. It did not take him long, however, to master his duties and perform proficiently in his job. Whenever this happened, as it generally did within a matter of months, his satisfaction plummeted. Colson was a classic executive, imbued with a type-A personality and a hunger for new challenges. He could not easily turn off his energy.  

During his time in DC, he became friends with staffers in the office of Massachusetts Senator Leverett Saltonstall, the highest-ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Forces Committee, the body responsible for decisions on defense contracts. “Salty,” as he was known, hailed from a wealthy Boston family who, in classic twentieth-century fashion, summered in Maine, worshipped with the Unitarians, and graduated sons in bunches from Harvard. When the plum post of executive secretary opened up in the Boston Brahmin’s office, Colson applied for it and was hired. He was twenty-five years old.  

Colson was like a machine specially assembled for Washington. The young ex-Marine cut an impressive figure—over six feet tall, strong and standing straight, clad in the Brooks Brothers ensemble favored by many a graduate of elite prep schools. Colson took to the work at once, running Saltonstall’s discombobulated outfit with aplomb, streamlining the staff and the office’s operations. He was not intimidated by anyone and had a brain that never shut off.  

Yet being the number two in a senator’s office did not
satisfy Colson’s peripatetic temperament. After he completed his twelve-hour workday with its constant preoccupations and ever-changing demands, he headed across town to the law school of George Washington University, not far from the US Department of State and famed lobbying zone K Street. Then Colson traveled home to Arlington, where he ate a hasty dinner before heading into his basement to study more law.

The young politico’s plate was more than full. On the domestic front, Chuck and Nancy had three children: Wendell (1954), Christian (1956), and Emily (1958). By all accounts, the children loved their father, who had charm to spare and could be delightful when not distracted. But with all that Colson had on his plate, it was hard to avoid distractions. Many a young father seeking to provide for his family and win a sense of vocational and financial stability knows these kinds of stresses.

These were exciting times for Colson, but as he made clear in later life, he struggled to balance the competing demands of work, education, and family. His ambition, impatience, and idealism formed a powerful stimulant. Colson would not have identified it as an idol at this point, but his career was overshadowing his other responsibilities. His meteoric rise continued, but this pattern would exact hard consequences in later years.

Colson was a complex individual. Even in this period, he defies easy stereotypes. The idealistic strain that compelled him to brave the harsh conditions of basic training to serve his country showed itself in quieter moments too. As Aitken recounted, Colson showed impressive compassion in 1956 to a man he didn’t know when moving into the family’s beautiful new home in Alexandria, Virginia. An older African American gentleman was moving stones on the Colson property to build a new
The Colson Way

The Colson Way

pato when he suddenly collapsed. According to the social and racial codes of the day, Colson had no need to help the man. This was 1956, when Virginia Senator Harry Byrd convinced more than one hundred congressmen from Southern states to sign an anti-integrationist document entitled “The Southern Manifesto on Integration.” The state of Virginia even passed a formal resolution based on this manifesto in 1956, attempting an end around the Supreme Court’s pro-integration decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

In such an unjust climate, no one would have batted an eye had Colson yelled at the mover. He did the opposite. He brought the man inside and personally attended to him until he recovered. Aitken noted that “the other workmen stood gaping with astonishment” due to the unusual nature of Colson’s response.21 Long before the purpose of his life became caring for the forgotten of society, Colson had an inherent interest in helping others weaker than him. He crossed racial boundaries easily, a trait that mattered hugely in his later career, and that made him friends everywhere he went.

Pride ruled Colson’s life in this period. But even in his pre-converted life, he did not think of himself as better than other people. Coming to faith would bring these instincts to full flourishing, but they were already present in him. Chuck Colson always had an instinct for justice and a desire to serve in practical ways. It never left him.

Such character always leaves a powerful impression. Not long ago, I was deplaning after a long flight. One of the pilots walked ahead of me on the gangway and stooped to pick up a candy wrapper. There was no one else around; he didn’t look to see if anyone noticed his good deed. He just put the wrapper
in his pocket and walked on, posture straight as an arrow. This demonstration of character reminded me of the essential nature of leadership. Pilots are leaders, after all. They have tremendous responsibilities. This pilot was adept at his job, but he clearly did not think too highly of himself.

There is a profound lesson here for young evangelicals who wish to be leaders. It is not our talent that will matter most. It is our character, our God-shaped morality. If we live in virtue, then nothing the world throws at us can touch us. If we compromise our ethics, however, we set ourselves up for failure. Character is not only a set of practices, though. It is a mind-set. It is a posture of humility motivated by the recognition that we should be humble. Leaders of the Christlike kind, in fact, see that leadership is humble at its core. We put others before ourselves in acting for the corporate good. This is not only a high-minded way of life, but a cruciform one (Phil. 2:1–11).

Soon after this episode, Senator Saltonstall appointed his young staffer to be his campaign manager for his 1960 reelection effort. Colson threw himself into the work. He had worked on campaigns for more than a dozen years and knew the practicalities of winning elections. His task as Saltonstall’s campaign manager was not a small one, however. Massachusetts boasted a young political star named John F. Kennedy. As a young Democrat with a bright future, Kennedy would only help the prospects of fellow candidates, including Foster Furcolo, former governor of Massachusetts and Saltonstall’s Democratic challenger for his Senate seat.

Colson pulled out all the stops in the race, creating shadow committees to suggest bipartisan endorsement of Saltonstall, marshaling dozens of volunteers to send out carefully crafted
mailings, and diverting outspoken critics of his shrewd political style. In the end, his efforts prevailed. Saltonstall won the race and offered him a position in his office. Colson turned it down.22

In 1960, Colson yet again took on a massive challenge and conquered it. He served as the mastermind of the reelection of a genteel and somewhat detached Republican senator in a state that voted Democrat. This was by any measurement a career-making accomplishment. It could have allowed Colson—still not even forty years of age—to settle into a comfortable role as a DC politico. Whenever tranquility dawned in Colson’s life, however, his adrenaline intervened.

Instead of taking a cushy position in either Washington or any number of top Boston law firms, Colson decided to partner with a friend named Charles Morin to found his own law practice in his hometown. Colson and Morin struggled through several years of instability before landing a number of lucrative accounts with large businesses and firms. Once again, Colson had made the seemingly impossible materialize: Colson & Morin became not only solvent but also successful.23 In law, as in politics, as in education, Colson excelled.

All this achievement came at a cost. As noted earlier, Colson’s commitments took him away from his family and led to estrangement between him and his wife, Nancy. In January 1964, the two were divorced. Later in the year Colson married Patty Hughes, a staffer in the Saltonstall office. This period was one of the toughest of Colson’s life. For the rest of his life, he regretted the pain he caused his family. Colson never justified his actions or downplayed them. Though he did not wish to continually revisit his divorce, he made clear when he did speak or write of it that it spoke to his hardness of heart.
Colson’s travails did not stop his forward momentum. He kept his political hat in the ring, attending the 1964 GOP Convention in Miami. He developed a relationship with Vice President Richard Nixon, who had failed in his earlier bid for the presidency. Colson was not sanguine about the prospects of Republican candidates in the mid-60s; he worked behind closed doors to gin up a new Nixon candidacy. He did so while running a rapidly growing law firm that required him to shuttle up and down the East Coast. The pull was familiar even if the challenge was new and even bigger than usual: Colson wanted to be a part of a Nixon administration, were there to be one. He wanted not merely to be proximate to power but to plunge into the very center of it: the American presidency.

The runway to the White House for Colson was not a long one. He served as codirector of the Key Issues Committee for Nixon during his presidential run in 1968, helping to develop and articulate the candidate’s policy stances. The post was a crucial one, and when Nixon was elected to the presidency in November 1968, Colson became a household name. The Wall Street Journal published a lengthy front-page profile of him, which resulted in skyrocketing business for the law firm and the offer, in 1969, of the post of assistant secretary of state in charge of legislative affairs. Colson turned it down, adding this position to a list of others declined following the successful campaign. Then, in the fall of 1969, Colson received the call that he coveted: the president of the United States of America summoned him to the Oval Office. Colson recalled the moment of a lifetime in Born Again:

As I stepped for the first time into the sun-filled, stark-white, curving walled room, my heart was beating so hard
I wondered if it could be heard. I walked over a huge blue and gold oval-shaped rug, the Great Seal of the United States colorfully embroidered in its center, directly beneath a matching white plaster seal molded in the ceiling. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across the South Lawn, the President sat at a large mahogany desk.

The Harvard dean. Lieutenant Cosgrove. And now, Colson sat across from the “single most important man in the world,” the American president. The experience was intoxicating. Nixon offered Colson the position of Special Counsel, which Colson did not turn down.

One can hardly overplay the poignancy of this moment. Colson’s grandparents had struggled in their adopted country. His parents had little money to spare. Stress was a regular part of Chuck’s childhood, so he worked his way to the top at Browne & Nichols. Then he did the same at Brown, in Saltonstall’s Senate office, in Boston law, and now in the executive branch of DC politics. At thirty-eight he was rich, successful, and wanted. The underdog had beaten his competitors. It was the classic American success story.

Because Colson’s star rose so quickly, his coming fall would be spectacular. Yet none of Colson’s experiences, successes, and trials would be wasted. His future ministry was directly affected by the events of his early life. His humble beginnings and immigrant heritage allowed him to form meaningful connections with people who felt estranged from the success culture of elite American life. His ability to not only survive but also stand out amid patrician peers equipped him to navigate the halls of power with finesse and confidence. His credentials from excellent New
England institutions gave him access to conversations not easily entered by others. To the end of his life, these traits would prove invaluable to Colson and his causes.

These were not his only strengths, of course. Over the years, Chuck Colson learned the art of “breaking fine china.” Colson’s combination of will, talent, and idealism spurred him to seek out challenges and then do whatever it took to finish the task. One thread remained in full throughout coming days: whenever needed, Chuck Colson did his duty to the full.

The man who stood before Nixon as he shouted his orders passed his initial test. He may have perspired throughout his time under Nixon. Then and later, he found the capacity to get things done, to push past whatever low expectations had been set. This aspect of Colson’s life should profoundly encourage Christians today. Whether or not we have presidents calling us into the office for job offers, we can recognize that God has led and is leading every facet of our lives. He will use all of us, including even our sinful pasts, for his glory. Nothing that has happened in our lives needs to be wasted. Even before our conversions, God prepared us for work in his kingdom.

Colson’s example also reminds us that no one is God-proof. To this point in his story, Colson had carved out a remarkable life for himself. He beat the odds, became a success, and found his way to the top. He had precious little time for religion or spiritual things; his life was oriented in a thoroughly secular direction. Like it is for all of us outside of Christ, his life was based around him. But though Colson tried to live a self-sufficient life, he
ultimately would not be able to pull it off. No person can write God out of his existence. It will not work.

Even as Colson ignored God, God was charting his course. There is infinite wisdom in divine providence, and there is infinite potential in divine grace. Colson’s past was not an accident. Our pasts are not accidents. The challenge before us today is to recognize the hand of God in all our lives and to view ourselves not as hindered by our histories but as prepared by providence for whatever the future may hold. This includes our immediate circumstances, but also the sinful past we all have. God does no evil, but he will use even our sinful pasts for his purposes. There is no more shocking discovery one can make in biblical teaching, but no more encouraging one, either.

Colson would later use his energy and his vision to great effect as a Christian. His political experience and strategic bent prepared him for leadership in the church. The same is true of us and our experience and strengths. What has God done in our lives that can be redeemed and used in service of him? Considering this question takes us off the sidelines, admiring the great figures of the past, all too certain of our own shortcomings. It puts us squarely into the middle of things, and restores our agency and responsibility. The past cannot be altered. The future, on the other hand, has yet to be molded.

In 1969, for Colson, the future seemed very bright indeed.