
Turning Lives Around

Marvin Olasky

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Dr. Olasky spoke in June 1999 at a joint gathering of Center of the American Experiment and Rebuild Resources, a faith-based organization that helps disadvantaged people recover from chemical dependency through spiritual growth, stability, and self-sufficiency. The occasion was a celebration of the opening of a new Rebuild Resources residential academy whose motto is "Let's build lives, not prisons."

It's good to be here in this new facility that represents the best of America because it represents a refusal to give up on what some call the worst of America.

Usually I start off a talk like this with a joke, but since the Littleton school shootings, I've been struck by a new seriousness in American politics. Newspapers have emphasized changing positions on gun control, but something far more important may be happening: a change in the national mood about God control.

Editorial writers here and elsewhere complain about "gun-control nuts," but

they overlook a far more influential group: God-control nuts. The God-control nuts have a distaste for anything spiritual. The God-control nuts worry that someone, somewhere is praying in a public space. The God-control nuts have dominated American society for far too long.

It's even beginning to appear that the key swing vote in the 2000 election may not be soccer moms but seeker moms—and maybe dads. Seeker moms, seeker dads: these are agnostic parents who sense holes in their own souls and are seeking something better. They sense some connection between school

shootings and the removal of religion from public places. They don't know exactly what that connection is.

I have a suggestion for both the God-control nuts and the seeker moms: Come to Rebuild Academy, look around, and talk both to those who offer their lives in dedicated service here and to those whose lives are being changed. I've found over the past decade that there's no substitute for personal involvement in changing lives. We have witnessed in recent decades many purported substitutes. We've seen government compassion, where people become numbers and statistics. We've had mediated compassion, where we see a tear-jerking ad in a magazine and we send a check. But we've missed out on real compassion, on suffering with those in distress, on person-to-person involvement.

I'd like to discuss, first, why non-governmental, tough-love, faith-based organizations—FBOs, as they are called—are needed. And, as we head into a campaign for the White House, I also want to discuss with you the political and public policy landscape involving FBOs. I will conclude by stressing what we can do ourselves, no matter what happens in the capitol buildings of Washington or St. Paul.

Tough Love, Tough Faith

Why should we care about FBOs, particularly when we have been told for years that we did not have to care? After all, American poverty-fighting has changed during this century from a pluralistic enterprise with thousands of

church and community organizations taking the lead and trying many different approaches, to a one-size-fits-all monolith over the past three decades. Why, since each of us is paying thousands of dollars in taxes each year for federal welfare programs, should we mess around with FBOs?

Here's why: The convenient thing to do is often not the right thing to do. The welfare nation-state over the last third of this century has been a convenience in many ways. It has been easier for the affluent to pay taxes, even with grumbling, than to find out about the real conditions of many of the poor. It has been easier for some of the poor to take the money than to persevere in trying to escape poverty. It has been easier for politicians to orate and congratulate each other for passing out spare change than to dive into complicated and controversial questions of how lives really do change.

It has been easier to go along and get along, just as it is easier for professors to give A's to mediocre students. When that happens, students love it, parents are proud, and the professor avoids complaints. The only problem is, such grades are lies. There is only one problem with the welfare nation-state as it has developed over the past few decades, with its claim of bringing people out of poverty: That claim is a lie. Federal welfare led to more poverty, not less; to more kids growing up without dads, not fewer. For a long time conservatives talked about money wasted, but nothing changed in the welfare debate until we started to see

things through the eyes of poor people: The severe waste is not in money, but in lives.

Welfare reform of 1996 now has begun to take effect. If we stay the course with that reform, we will see the end of the welfare nation-state and the return of pluralism to poverty-fighting, with many different groups involved. That will make life more complicated for many among the affluent. We won't be able to say as readily, "I paid my taxes. I gave at the office. I don't have to get involved personally with Lazarus at my gates, because the government says it will take care of all problems."

Out of necessity, pluralism in helping the poor is making a comeback. Slowly, we're seeing more churches and civic groups respond to the new imperatives. I enjoyed the recent graduation ceremonies when my oldest son was graduating from college and my second oldest from high school, but I enjoyed even more one at my church in Austin. A man named Ken Jones, who had been addicted to drugs, stood in front of folks at the New Start program our church runs. He clutched a certificate stating that he now had "all the necessary requirements to be economically self-sufficient."

On his graduation night after seven months in the program, Ken said this: "I was in a pretty bad situation. Out in the cold. I had prayed for some spiritual people to come into my life to help me. This program saved my life. I don't know what direction I would have gone in, otherwise. But when you believe in God, it helps you to believe in yourself." Ken looked at his gradua-

tion certificate, joked about his gray hair, and then said, "Been a while since I could complete something. But I stuck with it. Now I have something to build on when times are hard."

Ken Jones was speaking truth: People who are down and out need something solid to build on. Spare change, even a mountain of spare change, won't do it. Ken Jones needed a renewed faith in God to conquer the fear that he and millions of others have had: fear of living without drugs, fear of going off the dole and becoming financially independent, fear of annoying the little bureaucratic gods of our culture.

Here's where tough love and a tough faith are important. Making a break requires more than wishing. Those who want to escape welfare need to develop marketable character, the willingness to show up on time and do what it takes to get the job done. One way to grow marketable character is to get a job. First jobs are often demeaning experiences. They are steps on the ladder of success, yes, but also demeaning. But it is so important to learn that when a leader gives you instructions he is not disrespecting you, and you don't need to talk back to retain your pride. It is important to learn how to persevere all day long, whether you feel like it or not.

This may seem elementary, but ever since Adam's fall, it has not been natural. That is why faith—becoming obedient to God—is so important. Some of you might remember the first regular Bible study you were in. You may have learned a particular doctrine that has stuck with you, but you were also learn-

ing that you had to pay attention to God. You were learning that when God gives you instructions he is not disrespecting you: He has the authority, and you have to subsume your own ego to get along. You were learning that it is important to glorify God by pushing back the outside of the envelope all week long.

Things are better now for folks coming off welfare than they used to be: lots of welfare-to-work programs emphasize gaining marketable character by going to work. But the programs most needed are those that emphasize development of character by having God go to work on a person in need. The good programs develop relationships over time, relationships with God and relations among people. Government programs cannot do that. There is no effective alternative to faith-based programs like Rebuild Resources.

But a program like this needs and deserves more than praise. The problem is, with all the talk (and some reality) of shifting welfare from government to others, our taxes have not gone down. Now we are expected to keep giving at the office and also to become involved in FBOs. That is hard, given constraints on time and the need to work long hours to make ends meet while we're paying those taxes. I don't have an easy answer, because giving time and money to faith-based programs like Rebuild Resources requires faith in things long unseen, and that's not easy to come by.

Clouds of Witnesses

Three groups of people with faith in things unseen do stand out in my mind. First, I think of folks with familiar names like Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel. Through faith they subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, stopped the mouths of lions. Chapter 11 of the Book of Hebrews in the Bible talks of those folks. Chapter 12 gives the practical application: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us."

A second group of folks with faith in things unseen is probably not so familiar. Here are some names: Ballington Booth, Charles Brace, Thomas Chalmers, Humphreys Gurteen, Jerry McAuley, William Ruffner, Helen Mercy Woods, Robert Thompson. These nineteenth-century believers in the Bible formed a great cloud of witnesses to the efficacy of biblically helping the poor.

I've written about these individuals, so I will simply give you a few sentences about one of them, Charles Brace. He was a minister who read the Bible. He saw God's tough concern for the poor. Over a forty-year period from the 1850s to the 1890s, he built lodging houses in New York City that provided shelter to several hundred thousand abandoned children. He

placed 91,000 of them in adoptive homes, sending them on what were called orphan trains throughout the Midwest, including Minnesota. Think of the impact over the years. I suspect at least one person is here today who would not be but for Charles Brace and his orphan trains.

But there is a third great cloud of witnesses to whom we should be paying attention today, and their names may be more familiar to some of you: Fred Myers, Ed Twyford, Bob Bratnober, Pat Dale, Bob Jones, Cathee Hare, Bill Brice. Those are only a few of the individuals whose dedication to Rebuild Resources has made possible this opening that we are celebrating today. I am thankful for the dedication of such men and women, and of their counterparts around the country.

And yet, I do need to add one more, less hopeful note: I do not know if such dedication will be enough. Sometimes it is hard to see how Rebuild Academy, as good as it is, can be replicated often enough to take the place of the massive government programs that have failed, leaving devastated lives behind.

Once we had pluralism in fighting poverty in this country, with many different approaches used, but pluralism died in the 1960s when government overwhelmed private and church activities. I wish we could have huge tax cuts now, because I believe people with more money and time on their hands would contribute much more to good programs that would show their superiority. But I've come to a hard conclusion after watching the political roller

coaster in recent years: it seems unlikely that we will have the political will in this country to reduce the size of government as much as it should be reduced. It seems unlikely that our tax burdens will be enormously reduced; keeping them from going up seems about as much a victory as many of us will see. How, then, can programs like Rebuild be fostered around the country, among people who do not have as much faith in things unseen as the dedicated folks here have shown?

Killing the Concept

Let's turn now to public policy. It is both encouraging and troubling that even major defenders of the high tax/high spend approach have begun to praise FBOs. Vice President Al Gore pledged that faith-based organizations "will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration." He noted correctly that overcoming poverty-related problems "takes something more than money or assistance—it requires an inner discipline and courage, deep within the individual." He said, "I believe that faith in itself is sometimes essential to spark a personal transformation—and to keep that person from falling back into addiction, delinquency, or dependency."

Those are great words—but will the vice president be able to sell that vision to others in the Democratic Party? I hope so, but I can hear the left saying, "Watch it, buster! Are you saying these problems of poverty are related to internal deficiencies of the poor rather than the external circumstances

within which they are trapped? Aren't you blaming the victim?" Al Gore will have to spell out what he believes the prime causes of poverty are. If he emphasizes just the externals in traditional Democratic fashion, he will be undercutting his emphasis on the centrality of faith.

The vice president was also right to call for "concrete actions to clear bureaucratic hurdles out of the way of these good men and women who are helping to solve our problems. These workers are motivated more by service than institutional allegiance, so they try to get every penny to go to alleviating suffering rather than upholding a program for the sake of professional credentialism." That's great—but that powerful union, the Association of Federal, State, County, and Municipal Employees, is likely to respond, "What? Are government bureaucrats in the way of the real problem-solvers? Are they out to protect their jobs rather than help?" Al Gore went on to contrast "self-perpetuating" bureaucracies with FBOs that show "one-to-one caring, respect, and commitment that save lives." Excellent—but are you listening, AFSCME?

Vice President Gore also talked about some individuals. He spoke of "Herlinda," who was able to get a job because she changed her worldview after a woman "mentored her through prayer and Bible study." He spoke of an ex-drug addict named Vicki who needed religious conversion to "pry open the vise grip of drug addiction." Gore said he wanted government to promote such life-changing programs, but he also stat-

ed a strong opposition to "proselytizing."

I think you'll be hearing that word a lot. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "proselytizing" as the making of a proselyte, "one who has come over from one opinion, belief, creed, or party to another; a convert." That is exactly what happened to Herlinda and Vicki, so it would seem that the vice president should welcome more conversions. The ACLU was right to complain, after the Gore speech, "How can a religious institution counsel without proselytizing?"

Well, religious institutions are now supposed to counsel without proselytizing. There is a history behind that word, proselytize. It first popped up in the Charitable Choice section of the 1996 welfare reform bill. The Charitable Choice idea was that the federal government would not shrink its welfare task, but would give faith-based organizations the same opportunity to compete for grants that secular organizations have. To get that section of the bill through Congress, the Charitable Choice backers included a ban on proselytizing.

Such a ban, though, kills the whole concept for faith-based organizations that are serious about changing lives by converting people and not just being government look-alikes. I spent a couple of days visiting FBOs in Dallas, and the folks running them said the same thing: "We help people by helping them lose their fear as they gain faith in God. We try to lead them to that faith." Leading to faith—that's the definition of proselytizing. Only in a post-modern time when words and logic have been devalued would government

leaders think they can promote FBOs as they demand a shut-off of the engine that makes good FBOs go.

A Public Policy Scorecard

Let me offer a scorecard for tracking the public policy battle concerning faith-based organizations. I see a four-way fight. Absolutists on the left—the ACLU, People for the American Way—will say “No government involvement with FBOs” because any involvement with religion will mess up government. Separationists on the right will also say “No government involvement with FBOs,” but for two different reasons: such involvement would mess up FBOs, and a government-church alliance would co-opt opposition to government spending and forestall the possibility of large budget cuts and tax cuts.

Al Gore has staked out a spot in a third position—center-left—by arguing that the feds should support FBOs as long as they do not proselytize. This would effectively make the world safe for theologically liberal church groups but freeze out the theological conservatives, those who emphasize a biblical approach and not merely being nice.

The fourth position is one that I hope some center-right Republicans stake out: yes, FBOs are fundable, but they should have freedom of speech, as other groups funded by government normally have. Practical difficulties abound, but we’ve dealt with them in several instances in Texas. For example, Prison Fellowship has taken over a part of a prison with an explicitly biblical approach, and other groups could

do the same if they are willing to pay the extra costs for their program, with prisoners volunteering to take part. The key for FBOs is that no restrictions on free speech are attached; Prison Fellowship is free to proselytize.

If a political debate does develop, with both sides favoring FBOs but the center-left demanding a gag rule and the center-right demanding religious freedom, who will win it? It depends on whether we take to heart Peggy Noonan’s eloquent comments in the *Wall Street Journal* immediately after the Colorado school shootings. She noted that “a gun and a Bible have a few things in common. Both are small, black, have an immediate heft and are dangerous—the first to life, the second to the culture of death.”

Peggy also wrote, “A man called in to Christian radio this morning and said a true thing. He said, ‘Those kids were sick and sad, and if a teacher had talked to one of them and said, ‘Listen, there’s a way out, there really is love out there that will never stop loving you, there’s a real God and I want to be able to talk to you about him’—if that teacher had intervened that way, he would have been hauled into court.’ ”

The very next day, the *Journal* printed a letter in response: “I profoundly wish Peggy Noonan were right, [but] have we forgotten Jim Jones of Jonestown, who convinced parents that it was God’s will to put cyanide into their children’s Kool-Aid?” That’s the way it always is. Mention something positive done in the name of the God of the Bible, and someone will always, immediately, mention some-

thing negative. Although politicians give loose allegiance to the concept that faith in God is part of the solution to social ills, many among our social elites consider it part of the problem.

The critical question is whether we have enough faith in God to see belief in him as solution or problem. Our tendency since the 1960s has been to answer “problem,” and to minimize religion’s public role. That has worked, in one sense: government officials have frequently been able to say, “There was no use of government property or funds by any religious group on my watch.” But has that truly been playing it safe, except in the most narrow fashion? Is there no connection between the Bible on the back burner and the fires in our schools?

These questions go beyond school crises. For example, mandatory secularism within the welfare system has not been helpful to the materially down-trodden who are also spiritually low. Why is it terrible for a caseworker to tell a person who considers himself worthless, “Listen, there’s a way out, there really is love out there that will never stop loving you, there’s a real God and I want to be able to talk to you about him”?

Some government officials would say that a God-centered caseworker should be hauled into court for the modern crime of talking religion on the job. Secularists do have legitimate concern about a person applying for financial help and having no choice but to hear religious doctrine. The way around that, of course, is to promote the growth of a diversity of antipoverty groups, so recip-

ients can choose from a variety of religious or nonreligious traditions. That means moving away from the supposed safety of the naked public square.

The same logic holds for schools. Are we worried about tax money going to support one denomination? Give all parents, poor as well as rich, the freedom to send students to any school, religious or secular. Good nutrition has made our children physically taller, but the naked public square has contributed to reduced spiritual growth.

Earn It

We do have choices to make, and it is on that note that I would like to conclude. I suspect many of you saw Saving Private Ryan. You may remember that the last words from the dying captain to the man whose life he and others saved, at great cost, are “Earn it.”

In one sense we can’t earn our lives—they are gifts from God, and everything that happens to us is a gift. But we can show our thankfulness by extending to others a small part of the mercy that God has shown us. We can’t earn it, but we can give a little of ourselves. And this leads us back to a question that I believe I asked three years ago when I was here, and I’d like to ask again: Can you see, in your mind’s eye, at least one poor person whom you have directly, personally aided on a regular basis during the past year?

That help could include being a Big Brother or Big Sister, coaching a Little League team that includes kids without dads, or tutoring a child week after week throughout the year. Those are not easy tasks, but there are some even

more difficult: giving a room in your house to a young woman going through a crisis pregnancy; mentoring a soon-to-be-released, longtime prisoner who understands little about how to live in the free world; adopting a hard-to-place child.

Can you see anyone in your mind's eye, any poor person whom you have consistently helped? If you can, I commend you, and I hope you'll be able to do even more over the next year. But if there is no one there, I pray that you will take a small step over this next year, and maybe then a larger one. Most specifically, Rebuild Resources needs volunteers. Will you learn more about what needs to be done? Will you tutor? Will you mentor? Will you help in other ways?

A certain dark pessimism has been abroad in the land ever since Littleton, but seriousness need not be somber. With Rebuild and other programs showing the way, we know what to do, and we can do it. We can chart the obstacles and resolve not to let them slow us down. We can pray and we can work, and together we can get the job done, with God's grace.

Following his talk, Dr. Olasky took questions from the audience.

David Sturrock: Dealing with poverty and instilling self-sufficiency is a complicated, multitask project. Are there niches that you think FBOs need to be more aggressive on, or expand into?

Marvin Olasky: A particular need right now is to help single moms make the transition from welfare to work. There are lots of internal dynamics at work, but for many of them there are external barriers as well. In Texas, the government has wanted to get people from churches involved in welfare-to-work transitions but has asked them to just take a piece of the action—helping with transportation or child care, for example. That is good, but more and more churches, as they gain experience, don't want to have just a piece of the action. They want to be able to deal holistically with an individual's material and spiritual needs. There is a real need for programs that will do that and for government to encourage programs to do that.

Paul Lysen: I'm an evaluator for county social service programs. I would love to see faith-based organizations get the evidence to show that their approach is superior to that used in secular organizations that are funded by the state, so we can establish that there are clear differences and clear benefits to be gained. Much of what is done in the name of welfare or social services in our country is done because legislators are led to believe that they are having an effect when, in fact, there is very little hard evidence. I don't want to see policy based on erroneous assumptions.

Marvin Olasky: When I travel around, I'm always asking people for statistics. I hear wonderful stories, but

social scientists are suspicious of stories and dismiss them—with some accuracy—as anecdotal evidence. That is why I was excited to hear about four studies that have been done by Rebuild Resources—not just the one where people complete the program, but what happens to them over the next year, or three years, or five years.

Some other studies I have seen show exactly what I've been talking about as far as the success of faith-based organizations, but they are still isolated studies. We need a lot more. John DiIulio, a social scientist and professor at Princeton who has come to faith in Christ himself over the past few years, is studying FBOs and developing hard statistical evidence. My sense is that the evidence of effectiveness will be there, as the studies I've seen and the stories I've heard suggest. But if it turns out that that is not the case, then that is good for us to know and we may have to head in another direction. So far, everything looks very positive, but we won't know for sure until we have more information.

Morgan Brown: I'm with Partnership for Choice in Education. Another

real problem that seems to be facing FBOs is the reluctance of most American foundations to give, particularly if the FBO has any type of conversion or proselytizing component. Here's a whole realm of nongovernmental money, of incredible charitable wealth, that seems to be closed off. How do we go about changing the attitudes of some big corporate and other foundations?

Marvin Olasky: About ten years ago, I studied corporate foundations' giving conditions. Just about all of them had nonreligious, nonproselytizing clauses, which cut off this whole area. I've just begun to pick up isolated reports of change in several companies. This would be a very good time to go to others, with evidence, and say, "This stuff that you have been funding has not worked. You need to head in another direction."

In my experience, corporate foundations tend to be a little more pragmatic in many ways than some of the big ideological foundations like the Ford Foundation and others. Those are going to be a tougher nut to crack because some of them have a very hard antireligious center. n