

# What We 'Know' That Isn't So

by Robert P. Jr Dugan

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*Christian ignorance about politics hurts, and Christians must be informed and involved in order to make a difference.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:1

**Topics:** "Christian Politics", "Faith Action"

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## Description

Robert P. Jr Dugan preaches about debunking common myths surrounding Christian involvement in politics, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and understanding to avoid ignorance and misconceptions. He addresses myths such as the belief that all politicians are corrupt, the idea that morality cannot be legislated, the misconception that Christians in politics must compromise their beliefs, and the notion that one person's actions cannot make a difference. Dugan encourages Christians, including preachers, to actively engage in politics, dispelling the myth that they should stay out of political matters, and highlights the power of collective action and faith in making a positive impact on society.

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## Transcript

Although evangelicals achieved a great deal politically in the '80's, they could have accomplished much, much more. One reason they failed to fulfill their potential echoes down from God's eighth century B.C. indictment of Israel: "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes Christian ignorance about political matters hurts because "what we 'know' just isn't so." We cling to "myths, as hardy as dandelions."<sup>2</sup> Just as it isn't easy to rid the lawn of those perennial yellow flowers with their miserable broad leaves, demythologizing politics is tough. People know what they know. They are natural skeptics. But if we are to be effective in the political arena, we must peel away our mistaken ideas lest we be handicapped by misinformation.

Myth #1: All politicians are crooks.

Far too many Americans willingly accept Mark Twain's observation that "It could probably be shown by facts that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress." Years ago I would have laughed at the old curmudgeon's cynicism with everyone else. No more. I know too much.

Unfortunately, this kind of widespread skepticism breeds greater distrust and eventually disdain for our system of government. The attitude is poisonous. If the disrespect

was generally deserved that would be one thing -- but it is not. As with mother-in-law jokes, fairness demands that we stop making political officeholders the object of ridicule.

My earliest forays into the world of politics taught me a lot. I had set out to get acquainted with my party's leaders and its most active workers in order to gain support for my run for Congress. Night after night I would come home and tell Lynne about the really fine people I had met. Frankly, I was surprised. I assumed I would be meeting stereotypical hacks, but instead I kept on encountering genuinely concerned people who wanted to improve their society. With an idealism tempered by realism, they were volunteers in the best sense of the word. High caliber people that they were, most expected nothing but the satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

My guess is that the same is true of the other party's workers. Of course, I don't mean to canonize them all. There are losers in the ranks, including persons with hidden political agendas or selfish ends in mind. The same goes for some elected officials. But as a rule, these were genuinely admirable people.

When I became Colorado's Senate Chaplain I suddenly acquired dozens of political officeholders as acquaintances and, before long, friends. Here too I was surprised at what I found. Don't laugh, because I'm not kidding when I insist that the majority of them were dedicated public servants. The majority -- not all.

Take one senator who had become a good friend. One morning I was dumbfounded to read in the papers that his management consultant business had gone belly up. After the invocation, I asked him to sit with me on the Senate floor. Wasn't there anything he could have done to save his business? "Sure, I could have saved it by resigning from the Senate and devoting my full attention to it," he said. Why hadn't he? "Because I consider serving in this body a sacred trust from the people who elected me."

In Colorado, the legislature held a long session every other year running nearly six months. Alternate years should have run three months, but often went four or more. Senators put their personal businesses on the back burner during these months, and I recall several Senate wives confiding how tough it was on their husbands to start over each year after adjournment. Even then, however, they remained on constant call from constituents and were frequently assigned heavy interim committee responsibilities.

In those years, 1974-75, the senators were paid the princely sum of \$7,600 per year. I recall another senator taking three unpaid days of leave to argue a case in court. His client won a judgment of \$70,000, which netted his law firm a 30 percent commission of \$21,000. This lawyer was able to generate in three days almost three times his annual Senate salary. He certainly wasn't in the legislature for the money. Nor were most of the others.

Now, I know there are other benefits and rewards for serving in public life: a sense of power or fulfillment, contacts that lead to opportunities, the chance to run for yet higher offices, increased self-esteem, to mention a few. Admitting all that, I still regard most of these people as genuine public servants. The same goes for a good percentage of the members of Congress, or of your local school board or city council. These bodies probably contain dishonest or decent elected officials in direct proportion to the citizenry at large.

Christians must be especially careful here, lest they violate the Lord's command: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged . . ."3

Put the shoe on the other foot. Suppose a friend says, "Look, I don't want to hear any more out of you about Christianity. As far as I'm concerned, all religion is a racket and all preachers are Elmer Ganttrys." It pains you that your friend has so badly misjudged Christianity. Tragically, she is dead wrong, and you want to scream in protest.

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Now imagine how it feels to be an honest officeholder who realizes that you and your friends (suppose it is your whole church!) probably think of him as crooked. You could be wrong, so don't judge.

Myth #2: You can't legislate morality.

The dogmatism of those who repeat this bromide would be laughable, except that it is no laughing matter. Christian have been beaten into political inactivity by the continual repetition of this line. They have been made to feel that they are out of bounds, somehow in foul territory, when they attempt, for example, to protect unborn human life.

Sincere disciples of this doctrine are very much like a bishop of a century ago, who pronounced from his pulpit and in the periodical he edited that heavier-than-air flight was both impossible and contrary to the will of God. Oh, the irony that Bishop Wright had two sons, Orville and Wilbur! Wright was wrong. Sure of himself, but wrong.

Those who honestly oppose the idea of legislating morality are convinced that any such effort is futile. They contend that if abortion on demand is declared illegal, women will still have abortions -- thereby proving that such moral behavior cannot be legislated.

But shall we then cancel laws against stealing because millions will break them? I'm not sure most Americans want society's standard to remain firm: stealing is wrong. Whether some citizens make careers of burglarizing homes, stealing cars, or picking pockets is beside the point. The law sets the standard.

Others use this pious "can't" for devious reasons. They resent the pressure for religion-based morality in society, and wish to make pro-lifers feel guilty for forcing their personal moral convictions on others. Of course, they never admit that, if their pro-abortion view prevails, that would be the "moral position" of our society under the law. Then they would be forcing their morality onto society.

Whatever happens, our society will have values. The

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only question is, whose will they be? Cardinal John O'Connor of New York put his finger on the problem in his book *His Eminence and Hizzoner*, co-authored with former New York Mayor Ed Koch:

Public officials, perhaps more than most people, are fond of saying they have no right to impose their moral beliefs on others. That's equivalent to saying their obligation is to make only value-free judgments. That's nonsense. They would have to remain mute about all public policy issues. To make a value-free judgment is to make no judgment at all.

Anyone still convinced that "you can't legislate morality" should turn to the civil rights movement of the '60s. Honest scholars and the media must acknowledge that the civil rights movement was driven by deep religious conviction -- just as were the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements in the United States and England. What our nation conclusively legislated was this conviction: "All men [and women] are created equal." We not only legislated morality, we legislated theology.

There's hypocrisy here. Some in the media and academic elite who applauded the moral influence of religion in the civil rights struggle of the '60s are the same people who denounce the moral influence of religion in the abortion battle of the '80s and '90s. In this case, they resist our "morality" because it differs from theirs.

But is not that the nature of the democratic state? All laws are impositions on someone, unless they are unanimously supported. Some Americans were not pleased when women were given the right to vote through ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. But the majority imposed its will on the minority, constitutionally enforcing the moral conviction that justice required that women be treated equally and no longer disenfranchised.

Certainly we can legislate morality! Congress and our state legislatures do it every day. Speed limits on interstate highways and social security legislation both flow from

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tough decisions about the moral responsibility of government. You wouldn't want them to legislate immorality, would you?

Myth #3: It is impossible for a Christian to serve in politics because politics requires compromise.

My lunch with a prosperous business friend was fruitful. He was about to give me a \$500 check for my congressional campaign, but he wasn't going to let go of it easily. There were some things he needed to say. Expressing personal confidence in my integrity, he nevertheless worried that if I became a member of Congress, I would inevitably change -- and not for the better. Like all the rest of them, I would doubtless compromise here and there and be the worse for it. He feared that, spiritually, I would never be the same.

I had thought a lot about his concerns before he ever mentioned them. I had firmly determined never to compromise my convictions. On the other hand, it seemed to me that a proper humility required that I be open to compromising my opinions. Who needs a congressman who has all the answers before he goes to Washington? Who needs a congresswoman for whom committee hearings, expert testimony, and thoughtful debate are irrelevant and a waste of time?

Compromise is not a bad word. Husbands and wives who have not learned to compromise have probably long since ceased living together. Shall we vacation at the beach or in the mountains? Shall we go to a basketball game or a concert tonight? Shall we buy Encyclopedia Britannica or a large-screen TV? Nobody has it his way all the time.

Likewise in politics. Suppose as a senator I am convinced that \$50 million is necessary to help a Third World nation in a time of disaster. Having argued for that amount, I realize that the most the Senate will appropriate and the president will sign is \$25 million. Shall I vote against the lesser amount, preferring nothing to a "compromise" of my opinion? But what if my vote

becomes the swing vote, and no aid is then authorized? The applicable political adage is: "Half a loaf is better than none." If that's compromise, I have no problem with it. Those who don't hold the high office of dictator must settle for what they can get.

There's another kind of compromise, however, that is unthinkable for a Christian. Should I violate my deep conviction of the value of life made in the image of God to vote pro-choice, if the polls showed that 75 percent of the people in my district favored abortion "rights"? God helping me, I would not make that kind of compromise even to get reelected. Trading a birthright for a mess of pottage is never a good deal.

What I would have done as a member of Congress is purely theoretical because I never made it there. But for four fellow alumni of Wheaton College in Illinois, the situation is quite different.

Indiana's Dan Coats was the first to be elected, in 1980. Then followed Paul Henry of Michigan in 1984, and Dennis Hastert of Illinois two years later. Politically unlike these Republicans is liberal Democrat Jim McDermott of Washington, elected to the House in 1988. House Chaplain Jim Ford says it's unprecedented to have such a delegation in Congress from a school of only 2,000 students -- and an evangelical college at that.

This modest congressional chapter of the Wheaton Alumni Club might be a place to ask our third myth. Are Christians in office inevitably forced to compromise? I can hear them answer in unison: "No!"

Myth #4: There's not a dime's worth of difference between the parties.

It was George Wallace in 1968, trying to justify his independent candidacy for president, who uttered the oft-quoted dictum: "There's not a dime's worth of difference between the parties." Maybe not on the civil rights issue which was all-important to Wallace that year, but the disparities between the parties have always been significant.

Over the years there have been hundreds of billions of dimes' worth of difference between them.

One major difference is the constituencies to which the parties appeal. Republican cultivation of evangelicals has been extended from 1980 through the '84 and '88 elections to this day. In '84, the Democratic Party gave official recognition to a gay and lesbian caucus -- hardly a move calculated to attract evangelical support. In 1988, Republicans initiated an invitation to NAE to testify before their national convention platform committee. When no similar invitation came from the Democrats, we initiated contact with them. I was told there would be no equivalent opportunity for NAE to speak to their platform committee.

I testified before the Republicans in Kansas City on May 31, and several days later (unknown to us), the Democrat platform committee met in Columbus. The National Abortion Rights Action League received an invitation to provide input, but we did not.

When we first learned that evangelicals would be unable to appear before the Democrats, I inquired about submitting a written testimony. Without enthusiasm, my informant supposed it would be O.K. "How many copies do you need and what is the deadline?" I asked. he thought two copies should do it. Two copies?

He should have been fired for failing to make even a pretense of interest in our concerns. Nobody at the Democratic national Committee headquarters was going to remove my staple and duplicate our statement, at their expense, in sufficient quantity for all the members of the platform committee to read.

In 1984, the parties' divergence became especially clear in the traditional major issues of peace and prosperity. Ronald Reagan and the Republicans wanted to make military spending a larger share of the budget, believing that weakness invites aggression. The Democrats wanted to reduce the rate of increase in defense spending and would have ended production of two major weapons systems.

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Republicans supported and Democrats opposed the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan contending that the Mutual Assured Destruction stand-off lived up to its acronym, MAD, and that Mutual Assured Security through "star wars" was the truly moral course to take.

When it came to prosperity, Reagan's party said people must be given an equal opportunity to compete on the basis of merit, under equal protection of the law. To Mondale's party, economic fairness required unusual treatment of individuals in order to produce greater equality of results. Tax policies and affirmative action illustrated these philosophically conflicting approaches. The rhetoric about a "conservative opportunity society" versus a "liberal welfare state" may have been overblown, but it did help to focus the debate. And in 1988, everybody in America who could read lips knew which party was committed to no new taxes.

To demonstrate other contrasts between the parties, let's move to a range of values issues that became crucial in the election. Positions stated here were lifted from the official party platforms on which George Bush and Michael Dukakis ran for president.

Democrats opposed the federal death penalty and supported gun control; the GOP took the other side on both issues. Republicans supported a human life amendment to protect the unborn and opposed federal funding of abortions; Democrats wanted to guarantee the fundamental right of reproductive choice and insisted on federal funding of abortions. Democrats supported a federally regulated child care system and opposed any religious activity even in church-run centers; the GOP supported a tax-credit approach which would not discriminate against mothers staying at home or religious day care centers, among other things. Both parties supported equal pay for equal work, but Republicans opposed and Democrats supported passage of the Equal Right Amendment.

When you catch folks arguing that there are only inconsequential differences between the parties, urge them to take another look.

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Myth #5: I'm only one person -- one person wouldn't make any difference.

The mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, was addressing the final breakfast meeting of NAE's Federal Seminar for Christian collegians. Her comments were forceful and on target. Suddenly she shifted gears: "How many Polish people . . ." she began. For a split second my mind raced. She wouldn't be about to tell an ethnic joke, would she? Of course not; she's not that kind of person, and besides, she's too intelligent to destroy her career with that kind of humor. Then I heard her complete the question: "How many Polish people does it take to turn the world around?" Pause. "One, if his name is Lech Walesa." Ahhh!

What a beautiful twist. The frequently maligned Polish people got a magnificent compliment. One of their shipyard workers becomes an independent trade union leader whose courage and humble effectiveness results in his country's first free election in forty years and the installation of the first eastern bloc non-communist prime minister in decades. That one man helped change the course of Eastern European history.

But let's move back to American politics. In the summer of 1983, a teenager by the name of Lisa Bender of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, struck a giant blow for the cause of religious liberty in the United States. As a high school student in Williamsport, Lisa wanted to begin a prayer club. When officials refused her that right, she took them to court. With the help of Sam Ericsson and the Christian Legal Society, she won. Her victory in court then prompted legislators to design and sign into law the Equal Access Act.

The lesson is simple. One high school student, faithful to her convictions, moved Congress to act. In a similar situation, Bridget Mergens of Omaha, Nebraska, ultimately forced the Supreme Court to vindicate her religious free speech rights, ruling that public high schools must treat all non-curriculum related student groups alike. Lisa and Bridget. Two high school girls. Acting one at a time.

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When the proposed Equal Rights Amendment was sent from Congress to the states for ratification, it appeared headed for quick adoption into the Constitution. But that never happened, even though three presidents, Congress, both parties (at that time), the labor movement, and the national media supported the ERA. As one state legislature after another got on the bandwagon, one person who thought through the implications of this far-reaching amendment decided to act. Phyllis Schlafly singlehandedly stopped the ERA on its fast track. This wife and mother of six, an attorney and outstanding debater, would deny that she did it alone, but she was the one to organize tens of thousands of volunteers into the Stop ERA movement.

Here's a name few readers will recognize -- today. Wait a few years. Joe Watkins was a young black preacher who volunteered to work in two Indiana campaigns in 1980, Dan Quayle's for the Senate and Dan Coats' for Congress. Both won. Early in '89, Joe became an associate director of the Office of Public Liaison in George Bush's White House. Who can predict what influence Joe will eventually have? But the administration is staffed by people like him, who, one at a time, somewhere got involved in politics.

More than once I've had the privilege of preaching at Calvary Temple in Denver. I particularly recall a Sunday morning in February 1982 when I had tried to build a case for Christian political involvement. When I was done, Pastor Charles Blair rose and said he was ashamed to admit it, but he had never attended a precinct caucus in all his years in Colorado. He promised to do so that year and urged all his people to do likewise.

Now, jump to Denver's McNichols Arena early that summer, where Republicans were meeting for their state convention. I had barely started down the aisle leading to my Jefferson County delegation, when a woman spotted me from below. She charged up the steps toward me, calling, "You're Bob Dugan, aren't you? I heard you speak at Calvary Temple last winter, and when Pastor Blair said he was going to his caucus I made up my mind to attend

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mine." Breathlessly, she continued. "Now look. I hardly knew what to do there, but I was elected to the county, congressional, and state conventions. So here I am today, with a voice in determining the person we will nominate for governor." She saw herself playing an important role . . . and she was right.

If you were expecting to hear about a one-vote election, I won't disappoint you. In the early 1800s, an Indiana farmer named Henry Shoemaker formed a ballot from a paper bag when his polling place had run out of ballots. He cast his vote for Madison Marsh for state representative; Marsh won by one vote. In those days, state legislatures elected U.S. senators, so Marsh voted for a man named Harrigan to represent Indiana in the Senate. Harrigan won by one vote. In the Senate, Harrigan cast his roll call vote in favor of Texas' bid for statehood. You may be ahead of me by now. Indeed, Texas became a state by a margin of one single vote.

Let's agree to throw out the cliché about one person never making a difference. And don't assume that you could never be an international figure like Lech Walesa. After all, he was once an electrician in the Gdansk shipyards.

Myth #6: Preachers should stay out of politics.

I once bought this platitude hook, line, and sinker. As far as I knew, nobody in my boyhood congregation of one thousand ever ran for political office or helped someone who did -- least of all the preacher. Politics occasionally drew a pronouncement from the pulpit, but generally only when resentment or sarcasm was called for. Nothing gleaned in college or seminary days would have inclined me to dirty my hands in politics.

Today, I believe the reverse. If you ever hear that I've written an article for a series on "How My Mind Has Changed," you won't need to be a whiz kid to guess my subject.

Take heart! Ordained ministers cannot be deprived of their rights as citizens. Believe it or not, Tennessee had a

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law prohibiting clergy from running for public office. In 1977, in *McDaniel v. Paty*, the Supreme Court struck down that law, Justice William J. Brennan writing:

The mere fact that a purpose of the Establishment Clause is to reduce or eliminate religious divisiveness or strife, does not place religious discussion, association, or political participation in a status less preferred than rights of discussion, association, and political participation generally . . . Government may not inquire into the religious beliefs and motivations of officeholders -- it may not remove them from office merely for making public statements regarding religion, nor question whether their legislative actions stem from religious conviction.<sup>4</sup>

I am not urging pastors to resign their churches and run for Congress. Running for school board, a part-time position, might be something else. Pastors ought to be involved in politics in their preaching, praying, and politicking. In the next chapter I will describe what I mean by a "political preacher."

Most ministers and church boards worry that they may jeopardize their church's tax-exempt status if they get into politics. That fear effectively renders the churches politically impotent. The first thing to be done, then, is for pastors to learn exactly what is allowable and what is not. For that purpose, a full legal analysis

titled "Political Activity by Clergymen" is included as an appendix to this book.

Two positive words set the tone. First, neither the Internal Revenue Service nor the Federal Election Commission has ever interfered with a church's right to educate its people on moral or political issues. Second, we know of no case where a clergyman has been questioned for endorsing or opposing a candidate, even from the pulpit, as long as it is only his personal view. Whether that may be advisable is another question.

Churches can hold non-partisan voter registration drives or political forums as long as all candidates are invited.

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Educational materials about candidates' views on issues, voting records, and the like may be distributed, as long as they comply with IRS rules on neutrality. Candidates may be introduced in a service, or even pray or speak, but not ask for money.<sup>5</sup> Churches may contribute to a legislative, moral, or educational issue campaign, although they may not spend a "substantial" part of their activity in so doing.<sup>6</sup> Churches cannot establish a political action committee (PAC), or contribute funds to a candidate or political party.

As for ministers themselves, they may support candidates or issues while being identified as pastors of their churches. They may lobby as individuals, and they most assuredly may preach about the importance of political involvement or publicly pray about elections. Again, a pastor's personal or public support of any candidate will not endanger his church's tax-exempt status, although he would be well advised not to make a regular practice of doing so.

Should pastors get involved in politics? Of course. If they do not, few of their people are likely to do so, and Christian "salt" will not get poured out of the church's shaker -- and society needs that preservative. Salt must come in contact with that which it would preserve.

Myth #7: You can't fight city hall.

Of all the fictions I have listed, this should be the easiest to discredit. For Christians, a one-sentence reminder that "with God all things are possible"<sup>7</sup> should do it.

Beyond that, the simplest way to undermine this falsehood is to point to an instance where city hall was roundly defeated. Look at San Francisco's city hall in early July 1989, where Mayor Art Agnos was poised to sign the Domestic Partners Ordinance passed by the Board of Supervisors. On the day before he would sign, a group of concerned citizens presented petitions with over twenty-seven thousand signatures which temporarily put the ordinance on hold, until the citizens of San Francisco could express themselves

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in a November ballot referendum.

The ordinance would have permitted unmarried couples to register their partnerships, much like traditional couples filing marriage licenses. That in turn would have resulted in health and life insurance benefits heretofore available only to married couples. The ordinance was regarded by the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco as a landmark for civic acceptance of gays, a model ordinance or other cities. But the petitions caught city hall by surprise.

The results in November's balloting were even more stunning. The temporary roadblock which forced Mayor Agnos to put the cap back on his pen became a permanent barrier. The voters turned down the Domestic Partners Ordinance in the American city with the largest and most politically formidable homosexual bloc. This battle, part of the gay agenda to legitimize homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle, was over.

The victory came only after a few concerned evangelicals discovered that Roman Catholic leaders were as troubled about the ordinance as they were. As the churches began to pray, they sought national prayer support for their strategic fight. San Francisco churches cooperated in an unprecedented fashion, first to secure petition signatures, then to organize -- with professional guidance -- to defeat the ordinance. It was a remarkable and gratifying achievement.

Be assured that you can not only fight city hall, but state legislatures and Congress as well. There was a forerunner to the San Francisco confrontation. Art Agnos was involved in that fray as well, as the state assemblyman who in 1984 led the California legislature to adopt gay rights legislation. Evangelicals were not organized adequately to defeat the bill, but afterward they provided strong and compelling moral support which emboldened Governor George Deukmejian to veto it.

When evangelicals fought city hall in San Francisco, they won a victory for traditional moral values, thus

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strengthening the entire nation. What if they had believed the myth?

Thankfully, they did not. But it brings up a question: How many victories are slipping away each day simply because too many among us "know what isn't so?"

It's time to shelve these myths permanently -- for the good of our nation and for the preservation of a heritage worth passing on.

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Notes

1. Hosea 4:6. [BACK]
2. A graphic phrase from that matchless Los Angeles Times sports writer, Jim Murray. [BACK]
3. Matthew 7:1-2. [BACK]
4. Quotation in Lynn R. Buzzard and Samuel Ericsson, *The Battle for Religious Liberty* (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), 226. [BACK]
5. In his "Super Sunday Campaign" in 1988, the Rev. Jesse Jackson solicited contributions from hundreds of churches, in what appeared to be a blatant violation of IRS regulations. Still, the IRS did not interfere. Suppose presidential candidate Pat Robertson had done the same thing? [BACK]
6. In one court case, an organization devoting 5 percent of its activities to lobbying did not lose its tax-exempt status, while in another case, an organization devoting more than 20 percent of its activities to lobbying was disqualified from 501(c)(3) status. [BACK]

7. Matthew 19:26; cf. Mark 9:23; Luke 18:27. [BACK]

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