

# LECTURE

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## Bridging the Religious and Secular Divide

*Dr. Barry C. Black*

### Abstract

*Political liberty and religious freedom were driving forces behind the settlement of the “New World” and led to the founding of an exceptional nation. Throughout our American story, the role of religious principle and faith juxtaposed to the political realm of compromise and expediency has proved to be a matter for ongoing and often heated debate. It is possible, however, to bridge the divide between these secular and religious worlds—and, quite arguably, for the betterment of both. U.S. Senate Chaplain Barry C. Black provides a 21st century perspective on these fundamental precepts that are so much a part of who we are as a nation.*

**BRET BERNHARDT:** It’s a real joy and honor to be here today, along with Senator DeMint, to introduce Chaplain Barry Black. Having served in the Senate as a chief of staff to Senator DeMint, I can tell you that Chaplain Black stands in a unique position in the Senate, which is indeed a secular institution.

As we look at the topic for today, bridging the religious and secular divide, it may cause us to think that the intention is to eliminate the divide and to meld the two sides into one. While not a perfect analogy, it is helpful to consider what the purpose of the bridge is. It does not exist to close the divide, fill the divide, or eliminate the divide; in fact, the bridge acknowledges the divide. It exists because of the divide. It simply traverses it.

The invitation for today’s program put it well when it said, “It is possible, however, to bridge the divide between these secular and religious worlds—and, quite arguably, for the betterment of both.” I can think of no better description of what Chaplain Black does as the

### KEY POINTS

- Even in a secular environment, the spiritual is often present.
- The challenge for persons of faith is to find a way to bridge the divide and to recognize that many times, to make a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is incorrect.
- To bridge the divide, we can be salt and light by making the workplace a more palatable place and bringing insights based upon knowledge of sacred scripture, by witnessing without words, and by living to serve.
- If we are salt and light wherever we are, if we witness without words, and if we live to serve, then the words of the hymn writer will become true: “If I can help just one somebody as I pass along, then my living shall not be in vain.”

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1249>

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62nd chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He is, as the Scripture says, “the man standing in the gap.” As a pastor to the Senate, he serves as counselor, comforter, and friend to many, including myself. Rarely a day goes by that I don’t consider something he has taught in one of the staff Bible studies which helps me through a challenging situation. After all, someone who has spent most of his career deployed most of the time as a Navy chaplain has plenty of practical advice.

Now it’s my pleasure to introduce Senator DeMint, President of the Heritage Foundation, who will introduce Chaplain Black.

—*Bret Bernhardt is Chief of Staff to the President of The Heritage Foundation.*

**THE HONORABLE JIM DEMINT:** Barry, it’s wonderful to have you here—out of the darkness into the light over here at The Heritage Foundation. I know; I just came from there myself.

Chaplain Black was commissioned in 1976 as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy, and he retired as rear admiral after a nearly 30-year career, serving as Navy chief of chaplains in his last position. He has earned doctorates in both philosophy and ministry; his autobiography, *From the Hood to the Hill*,<sup>1</sup> recounts the story of overcoming unpromising beginnings in the inner city of Baltimore. His more recent book, *The Blessing of Adversity: Finding Your God-Given Purpose in Life’s Troubles*,<sup>2</sup> distills the wisdom he has gained from 30 years as a counselor, theologian, and psychologist for addressing the many trials in life.

Barry, we have plenty of those, so I appreciate you coming and sharing with us today.

—*The Honorable Jim DeMint is President of The Heritage Foundation.*

**BARRY C. BLACK:** Thank you so much. I’m extremely nervous today because members of my staff are here and they are critiquing me.

A lady approached me some time ago and said, “Dr. Black, if they permit prayer in the legislative branch of government, why have they removed prayer from our schools?” I must confess that I was rather flip-pant in my response; it was a reflex, and I should have thought through my response a little more

carefully. I said, “Madam, as long as there are final exams, there will always be prayers in our schools.”

It demonstrates the fact that even in a secular environment, the spiritual is often present. In 1787 at the Continental Congress, the group had reached an impasse when Benjamin Franklin spoke. He said, “Gentlemen, I’m an old man, but I have lived long enough to know that if a sparrow cannot fall without God knowing it, that an empire or republic cannot rise without his help.” And Franklin suggested that the group should pray. I think it’s an example of bringing the spiritual into a secular environment.

Many of us feel that the work of the spiritual is that of the minister, and if I were only an ordained clergyperson, I could certainly inject some spirituality into my workplace, my work environment, or the secular environment. I would challenge that presupposition. I think it is critically important to remember that 90 percent of the life of Jesus was spent in a secular occupation. He was a carpenter: only three years in what we would consider the priest-prophet ministry and outreach.

Seventy-five percent of our biblical heroes and heroines were involved in secular occupations and yet were able to bring the spiritual into those occupations. Think of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. There were so many—Nehemiah was cupbearer for Artaxerxes—so many who brought the dimension of the spiritual into a secular environment. Joseph was prime minister of Egypt, and what an amazing contribution he made, bridging that divide between the sacred and the secular.

As Senator DeMint mentioned, I was in the Navy for 27 years, and I was delighted to be in that military organization because, as most of you know, Jesus was a Navy man—ships, walking on water. Some say he was a Marine, but I believe he was a Navy man. If you do the exegesis correctly, he was in the Navy.

I still remember having a supervisor—he was second in command—who rarely spoke a paragraph without plenty of profanity, and that’s rather aggravating for a person of the cloth. I would take him on in the evening prayer. On a ship, there is a public address system, and in the evening, the chaplain offers a prayer for all of the sailors. The executive officer and I were going back and forth

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1. Barry C. Black, *From the Hood to the Hill: A Story of Overcoming* (Thomas Nelson, 2006).

2. Barry C. Black, *The Blessing of Adversity: Finding Your God-Given Purpose in Life’s Troubles* (Tyndale Momentum, 2011).

as I would be debating him in the prayer, and after the prayer, as I was leaving the bridge, I would hear, “Would the chaplain please report to the executive officer’s stateroom?”

I would come in and ask, “What’s wrong, Sir?” He’d answer, “How dare you talk about me in the prayer!” I’d say, “Sir, I mentioned no names. I was simply saying that God must be offended by the amount of profanity that is happening on the ship, even at the highest levels”—a clever way of bridging the divide between the sacred and the secular.

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Then a new commanding officer came aboard. He did not wear his religion on his sleeve. He did not even attend the worship services or the Bible studies that I conducted on the ship. But after two days of wandering around the ship, he had a captain’s call—this is when the new commanding officer defines reality for the ship—and one of the things he said was that there would be no profanity aboard his ship. I was stunned: no profanity. He quoted George Washington, who said something about how needing to use profanity was an indication of a limited intellect.

I honestly believed that there was no way that the executive officer would be able to speak standard English. There was absolutely no way he would be able to obey this order. I had never heard him speak more than a sentence or two without using profanity. But miracle of miracles, all of a sudden, the language on that ship was clean, and it was absolutely amazing the difference that it made because an individual—and I don’t know how religious he was—was able to inject the ethical and the moral into a secular environment.

### Sacred v. Secular: A False Dichotomy

My challenge to you, if you are a person of faith, is to find a way to bridge that divide and to recognize that many times, to make a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is incorrect. In the Lebanese-American poet Kahlil Gibran’s wonderful book *The Prophet*, this recluse, a prophet, is leaving a town,

and they ask him to speak about various things. And whatever they ask him to speak about, lyrical soliloquies come from his lips.

“Speak to us of Love,” one says:

When love beckons to you follow him,  
Though his ways are hard and steep,  
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,  
Though the sword hidden among his pinions will wound you.

A woman says, “Speak to us of Children”:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

And then finally, someone says, “Speak to us of Religion,” and he says:

Have I spoken this day of aught else?  
Is not religion all deeds and all reflection,  
And that which is neither deed nor reflection, but a wonder and a surprise ever springing in the soul, even while the hands hew the stone or tend the loom?

I think I Corinthians 10:31 captures what we should be doing if we are going to make sure that who we are as spiritual beings follows us into the workplace. I Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” It is basically challenging us to glorify God in our behavior, whether we are at work, whether we are at home: Wherever we are and whatever we do, we should strive to glorify God.

### Be Salt and Light

I want to make just a few suggestions on how to do that. The first suggestion is to be salt and light. Now, some of you have heard the great communicator Ronald Reagan talk about America as a shining city upon a hill. He was actually paraphrasing Matthew 5:16, where Jesus said, “You are the light of the world; a city set upon a hill cannot be hidden.” We are to be salt and light if we are to glorify God in the workplace.

Your presence in the workplace, bringing who you are as a spiritual being and glorifying God in all you do, should make the workplace more palatable. People should not be high-fiving one another when you have a sick day. You should instead make the workplace a more pleasant environment. Be salt. Salt, in the days before refrigeration, also preserved food, and your presence in the workplace, bringing who you are as a spiritual being, should make the workplace a more secure environment.

You will recall in Genesis 18 Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. “God, if there are at least 10 people there, will you spare the city?” James chapter 5:16 says, “The effectual fervent prayers of the righteous avail much.” When you can’t do anything else, you can always pray, and there is power in your prayer.

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### Many times, simply paraphrasing a biblical insight will help you to be a force for good, particularly when in the workplace people are facing right-versus-right conundrums.

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So be salt by making the workplace more secure with your intercession, be salt by making the workplace a more palatable place, and be light. Illuminate. Make a difference by the insights you bring based upon the knowledge you have of sacred scripture. Many times, simply paraphrasing a biblical insight will help you to be a force for good, particularly when in the workplace people are facing right-versus-right conundrums. It’s very easy to solve right-versus-wrong conundrums, but the right-versus-right conundrums are the difficult ones to solve. That is one of the reasons why we are challenged in the legislative branch, because many of the issues debated in the chamber involve right-versus-right conundrums: truth versus loyalty, long-term versus short-term, justice versus mercy, right versus right, the individual versus the community.

You, a person of faith with revelatory knowledge, can illuminate that environment in the same way that Joseph was able to give illumination to Pharaoh and Daniel in Daniel chapter 5 was able to give illumination to Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and then later Cyrus and Darius of the Medo-Per-

sian Empires—a 70-year governmental career. Be salt and light in your workplace.

### Witness Without Words

Second, witness without words. That’s tough to pull off, because a lot of us are good talkers, but we don’t back up our talk with our actions, and if you’re ethically congruent, your actions should be the key thing that you focus on. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the Gospel everywhere you go; when necessary use words.” So you, a force for good in the workplace, can make a difference without saying anything.

Paul put it this way in II Corinthians 3:3: “You are a living letter to be read by all who see you”—a living letter. Edgar Guest put it another way. He said:

I’d rather see a sermon  
than hear one any day;  
I’d rather one should walk with me  
than merely tell the way.  
The eye’s a better pupil  
and more willing than the ear,  
Fine counsel is confusing,  
but example’s always clear;  
And the best of all preachers  
are the men who live their creeds,  
For to see good put in action  
is what everybody needs.  
I soon can learn to do it  
if you’ll let me see it done;  
I can watch your hands in action,  
but your tongue too fast may run.  
And the lecture you deliver  
may be very wise and true,  
But I’d rather get my lessons  
by observing what you do.

Witness without words.

### Live to Serve

Finally, if you are going to bridge that divide between the sacred and the secular, live to serve. Your focus should be about servant labor or servant leadership.

Max De Pree wrote a wonderful book, *Leadership Is an Art*, and in that book he said there are three responsibilities of leadership. The first is to define reality: The leader projects the vision for those who are working in a particular organization.

The last responsibility of the leader is to make sure that there's an orderly transition from the organization to retirement or wherever the person is going after he or she leaves, to say goodbye in a dignified way. That's why in the Navy we have what we call "hail and farewells," and you've got to be at the hail and farewell to say goodbye to folks even though you didn't particularly care for them.

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But in between, says De Pree, the leader is a servant. How can I serve? And it is this proclivity for service that should make all of the difference in the world. Are you a servant? Paul put it this way in I Corinthians chapter 4: "Think of yourself as a servant and a steward of the mysteries of God." Am I serving?

One of the last speeches made by Martin Luther King, the last sermon that he preached, ended by talking about what he wanted said at his funeral. He said:

If any of you are around when it comes my time to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long.... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

And then he ended, as every Baptist preacher has to do, with a little bit of lyrical intonation—we call it hooping in my tradition. He said:

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have any of the fine luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

And that is what each of us can do if we will bridge the divide between the sacred and the secular. If we are salt and light wherever we are, if we witness without words, and if we live to serve, then the words of the hymn writer will become true: "If I can help just one somebody as I pass along, then my living shall not be in vain." God love you.