

Life's Two Big Questions

MARK DEMOSS

This is one of the highest honors I've ever received. When I looked to see who some other forum speakers have been, I quickly felt out of place. In fact, I felt like the speaker I heard a few years ago at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC.

Some 4,000 guests attend this breakfast each February, including the president, the vice president, members of the cabinet, House and Senate members, visiting heads of state, and world leaders. Past speakers include Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Tony Blair.

Well, like me, this particular speaker was not especially well known and felt a bit intimidated by his task. He told of sending an email to his pastor the night before, seeking some moral and spiritual support. His pastor wrote back, "Just remember, if you're representing the Lord, you have nothing to worry about—it's the Lord who should be worried!"

Well, I'm not worried this morning, but I am aware that I'm not smart enough to be addressing a prominent university audience. Being in an academic setting reminds me of a story I heard about a class that had been studying birds for much of the semester.

They had studied everything you could possibly study about birds—their feathers,

their eyes, their color, and their mating and migration habits. Well, the day for the final test arrived. The teacher distributed a single sheet of paper with 10 pictures showing just the feet of 10 birds and a blank line under each one. He gave the instructions: "Identify each bird by its feet, and you're free to go."

Just then a guy at the back of the room pounded his fist on his desk and shouted, "This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen!" He wadded his paper into a ball, threw it toward the trash can, and headed for the door.

Just as he reached the door, the teacher yelled, "Young man, what's your name?"

The student ripped off his shoes and socks, pulled up his pant legs, and said, "Here, Teacher! If you're so smart, why don't you tell me?"

I've always wanted to visit Brigham Young University. Most of you were still in high school when Jerry Falwell went to heaven five years ago. Jerry founded Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, 40 years ago, and in 1980 I went to Liberty, where I played football for four years as a placekicker.

Mark DeMoss was an author and founder of The DeMoss Group when this forum address was delivered on 24 January 2012.

Since the earliest days of Liberty University, Jerry famously and repeatedly declared, “I want Liberty University to be for the evangelical young person what Notre Dame is for the Catholic and Brigham Young is for the Mormon—a world-class university.” Well, God gave him enough years to see that dream largely realized.

Today Liberty has 78,000 students, including 13,000 on campus, making it the seventh-largest school of any kind in the country. As an alumnus and a trustee of Liberty, I’ve looked forward to the day I would see BYU for myself. So thank you for honoring me with the invitation to speak from this pulpit.

Dr. Falwell also challenged his students and staff constantly: “If it’s Christian, it ought to be better.” I love high standards of excellence, and this university certainly models them. Sadly, much of what is done under the banner of “Christian” is done poorly. Nineteenth-century British novelist and poet Dorothy Sayers wrote a fabulous piece titled “Why Work?” She concluded, “The only Christian work is good work well done.”

We are in the middle of an intense political season in this country, and I’ve been privileged to be an advisor to a presidential campaign—something I’ve done voluntarily both in this cycle and the last one. I’m not here today to talk about politics, but I do want to share how my involvement with a prominent member of your church led me to try to make a difference on an issue that’s not political.

Incidentally, the last time I was in this state was in September, when I spent a day traveling with Mitt Romney and his personal aide, a young University of Mississippi graduate named Garrett. Mitt told me about a previous trip in Utah during which a man came up to Garrett after an event and, making an assumption, asked, “So, where did you do your mission?”

Not missing a beat, Garrett replied, “I’m a Southern Baptist—I’m on my mission.”

As an evangelical Christian, I was well aware of doctrinal differences between your faith and mine. But once I decided to help Mitt Romney, I began to see an all-too-ugly side of a theological divide. Sadly, far too much of the ugliness—though certainly not all of it—came from within my own camp.

In 2007 I was interviewed by a talented Mormon film producer for a documentary titled *Article VI: Faith, Politics, America*. The film opens with a moving scene from your semi-annual general conference, narrated by the producer. He shares how attending this important church gathering with his family was a highlight of the year for as long as he could remember—except, that is, for what he had to walk past in order to join his extended church family inside the LDS Conference Center.

Bryan Hall, like many of you, had to navigate a gauntlet of non-Mormon—really anti-Mormon—protesters, preachers, and loud mouths, most of them behaving as sorry ambassadors of the very Jesus Christ they purported to represent. Though I had nothing to do with this scene, which apparently is repeated every April and October, it convicted and saddened me enough to try to do something about it.

But first, let me tell you that Bryan Hall and I became wonderful friends through this film. We have shared much of our respective journeys with Christ and have learned from each other in the process. Bryan, you and Melanie honored April and me by having us in your home on Sunday and by coming here this morning. Thank you.

By the way, I also want to thank Professor Robert Millet and Pastor Greg Johnson—founders of Standing Together—for coming, and for your important work.

This treatment of Mormons—Latter-day Saints like Mitt Romney and Bryan Hall—by many who claim to be followers of Christ, along with the sometimes violent treatment from those who oppose your church for

your strong defense of traditional marriage, prompted me, as an evangelical Christian, to try to inspire a national dialogue about civility.

Also, though I disagreed with then Senator Obama on many things, I found myself, even as a political conservative, being troubled by the way many people were treating him—ways I also didn't think were Christlike.

So I decided to launch a civility project. I bought the appropriate domain addresses and began to develop a plan and a website. I wrote a simple three-point pledge, which I thought anyone in this country could agree to, regardless of political or religious affiliation. It read as follows:

1. I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior.
2. I will be respectful of others, whether or not I agree with them.
3. I will stand against incivility where and when I see it.

As I prepared to launch this project following the contentious 2008 election, I decided I needed a liberal counterpart. I didn't want this effort to look like a conservative was lecturing the left on incivility, especially since there was so much incivility within my own ranks. So I reached out to a most unlikely person.

Lanny Davis was the White House counsel at the end of President Clinton's second term. He is a self-described liberal and a democratic power broker. Lanny is also Jewish.

I didn't know Lanny at this point, but I had written him a letter some six months earlier. As an avid supporter of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, Lanny was on television quite a bit during the primary season. Whenever I saw him on TV, I found myself saying, "Now there's a liberal I really like."

You see, Lanny was always respectful of his adversaries. He didn't interrupt or raise his voice. He didn't attack on a personal level or on motive—only on policy. So as Hillary

Clinton was ending her campaign, I sat down and wrote a letter to Lanny at his law firm in Washington, DC. It began this way: "Dear Lanny, I am an evangelical and a conservative Republican who has spent the past year trying to get Mitt Romney elected president, and I suspect that, politically, you and I may have nothing in common."

I went on to commend him for his civility in the public square and to encourage him after a hard-fought campaign. We had no further contact for six months, until I sent him an email late one night reminding him of my letter and telling him I was starting a civility project.

"Could I come to DC and get your thoughts on it?" I asked.

At 4:36 the next morning I received an email I will never forget. "Mark, I'd be honored to meet you," it said. "Your letter sits in a frame on a bookshelf in my office. Call my assistant and set it up."

When I went to see Lanny the next month, he was on a call in his office but motioned for me to come in. While he finished his call I surveyed his walls, covered with framed notes and photos of Lanny with members of Congress, a secretary of state, and several presidents, including one of him and his 10-year-old son with President Bush on Air Force One. And there, displayed on his bookshelf, was my letter.

Lanny hung up the phone, pointed to the bookshelf, and said, "That's the nicest letter I've ever received."

Lanny Davis and I were, by any assessment, a political odd couple. But, thanks to a simple letter with a civil and respectful tone, we became fast friends. He offered his full help, and on the eve of the inauguration of Barack Obama we launched the Civility Project with an op-ed we wrote together for the *Washington Times*.

For two years we promoted civility through our website and through national media and various speaking opportunities—opportuni-

ties that took me to places like the National Press Club in Washington, a synagogue in Houston, and the West Wing of the White House.

In the summer of 2010, anticipating an ugly midterm election cycle, we sent a letter to every member of Congress and every sitting governor asking them to sign this simple pledge. Six months later, just three—three out of 585—had done so. One of your recent forum speakers, Senator Joseph Lieberman, was joined by two Congressmen.

I dissolved the project a year ago after concluding I wasn't able to devote the time and attention it deserved. Days later, Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot at a political event, and the national debate about civility erupted once again.

Most people viewed this civility project in a political context, but, as a follower of Christ, I had another motive. The Apostle Paul writes in the book of Philippians, "But in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (NKJV, Philippians 2:3). It is impossible to follow this admonition to regard you as more important than myself and also stand outside your general conference hurling insults as you walk by to worship with your fellow Latter-day Saints.

The First Amendment may give me the right to demonize you with public speech, but it doesn't make it right.

Paul then challenges the Colossians to "let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (NKJV, Colossians 4:5). And his final charge in his first letter to the Corinthians is crystal clear: "Let all that you do be done in love" (NKJV, 1 Corinthians 16:14).

Addressing a general conference, Elder Quentin L. Cook correctly pointed out:

There are some who feel that venting their personal anger or deeply held opinions is more important

*than conducting themselves as Jesus Christ lived and taught. . . . To recognize . . . how we disagree is a real measure of who we are and whether we truly follow the Savior. It is appropriate to disagree, but it is not appropriate to be disagreeable. . . . If we show love and respect even in adverse circumstances, we become more like Christ. ["We Follow Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, May 2010, 84–85]*

I will not attempt to speak for your church, but I will speak for and to mine: It is never an option to claim Jesus Christ as Savior and behave in an uncivil manner with anyone, under any circumstance. Never.

I pray I will be known for speech seasoned with grace, for regarding others as more important than myself, and for doing everything in love. In these days of political divisiveness, I urge all of us to defer to what Abraham Lincoln described in his first inaugural address as "the better angels of our nature."

Vice President Brent W. Webb mentioned in his introduction of me that I had written a book titled *The Little Red Book of Wisdom*. You might be wondering, "Why would a publisher pay me a lot of money to write a book about wisdom?" Well, that's what my mother wondered when I told her I had landed a contract to write my first book—not because she didn't think I had wisdom to share but because I was still pretty young to write on such a lofty subject.

You see, most people associate wisdom with age or people in positions of prominence and power. Well, I'm glad wisdom isn't reserved for certain people. It is available to any of us—to all of us. Wisdom does not favor intelligence or education, affluence or sophistication. Its call is to everyone, everywhere.

Incidentally, as proof that wisdom doesn't favor education, a college that denied me admission because I didn't meet their academic standards hired me several years ago to help them navigate a crisis. At least I was smart enough to accept that money!

So if wisdom really is available to everyone, how do we get it? I'll suggest three ways.

First, spend time around wise people. The Bible says, "He who walks with wise men will be wise" (NKJV, Proverbs 13:20). I've been fortunate to spend much of my life around wise people, and if wisdom is caught rather than taught, as someone once told me, this principle makes good sense.

Second, read the textbook. Pat Williams is senior vice president of the Orlando Magic and a popular author and speaker. I once heard him tell an audience that reading five books on any given subject makes you an expert on that subject.

I don't know whether that statement can be proven, but I am certain that reading five books on a given subject will at least make you more expert than the person who has read nothing on the subject.

Now, suppose instead of reading five books on a subject you read just one book—the most prominent book on the subject. Then suppose you read it dozens, even hundreds of times.

Many believe that King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, and, therefore, that his writings in the book of Proverbs comprise the world's greatest textbook on wisdom.

The book of Proverbs is conveniently divided into 31 short chapters, and I learned a simple practice years ago from my father. As part of my daily Bible reading, I read the corresponding chapter of Proverbs—meaning I will read through the entire book every month, 12 times every year.

I would estimate I have now read through the book of Proverbs some 300 times—and the Holy Spirit still gives me fresh insights almost every week. He also brings occasional humor. One morning I was reading my Bible while my wife was getting ready.

"Read me whatever you're reading today," she said.

Glancing down at the chapter of Proverbs I was about to read, I noticed the chapter

heading and said, "It's about 'the wiles of the harlot.' Do you still want to hear it?"

"No," she replied, "but I want you to hear it!"

When our son finished high school two years ago, I wrote him a letter and gave it to him the night before his commencement service. The next day there was a note from him on my desk thanking me for my letter. He closed that note with a P.S. I'll never forget. It said, "Dad, I've been reading Proverbs every day since eighth grade because of you."

If I do nothing else as a father, I will have achieved something special by passing along a Bible-reading habit learned from my father years earlier.

Third, we can get wisdom simply by asking for it. Billy Graham once said, "Knowledge is horizontal, but wisdom is vertical—it comes down from above." In other words, God is the source of all wisdom.

The New Testament book of James tells us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach" (NKJV, James 1:5). This is a wonderful promise—and, thankfully, there is no age requirement for asking!

So, if you want wisdom, even as a college student, spend time around wise people, read the textbook, and ask God for it.

A chapter in my book is titled "A Turtle on a Fence Post." If you ever see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself. Someone put it there. And someone—or many someones—has put each of us where we are today.

I have embraced this picture for as long as I can remember. I often wear turtle cufflinks, as I am today, as a reminder of this principle. I don't believe there is such a thing as a self-made man or woman. I didn't build a successful public relations firm and a wonderful family by myself.

First of all, I was fearfully and wonderfully made by God with certain abilities and talents—and then was blessed with good

health. Other people have also helped to put me where I am—teachers, coaches, co-workers, clients, and my wife—people who invested in my life, gave me opportunities, and supported and encouraged me. The idea that someone could be a self-made millionaire—or athlete or businessman or musician—is absurd any way you look at it.

I was fortunate to start a public relations firm 20 years ago that was the first in our niche—serving faith-based organizations and causes. Today our clients have combined annual revenues in excess of four-and-a-half billion dollars. But I am well aware of my debt to these clients, my talented staff, and especially God’s favor. I may be a self-starter, but I am not self-made. And neither are you.

One of those people most responsible for putting me on a fence post was my father—my hero. He was also the wisest man I’ve ever known.

Art DeMoss was a successful businessman—and is widely credited with pioneering direct response marketing of life insurance. He founded the National Liberty Corporation in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania—the first such company to sell life insurance without a traditional sales force. Instead, the company relied entirely on direct mail and newspaper and television advertising to sell policies.

I learned much from my father. For example, he taught me the importance of putting God first in my life by giving Him the first day of every week, the first part of every day, and the first dime of every dollar. He called this, in a simple little booklet he wrote, *God’s Secret of Success*.

On Labor Day weekend, 1979, just a few days before the start of my senior year in high school, my father dropped dead of a heart attack at age 53. My mother, just 40 years old, was suddenly widowed with seven children under the age of 22.

Shortly after we returned from the hospital that Saturday afternoon, my mother found a small piece of paper on my father’s nightstand.

In my mind I can still see—in his handwriting—the following words from the 90th chapter of Psalms: “So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom” (NASB, Psalm 90:12).

After my father died, I somehow believed that early death would pass over the rest of my family for a long time. But just seven years later, my 22-year-old brother David was killed in a car accident. In three months I’ll turn 50, meaning I’m nearly the age of my father when he died; and I’m more than twice the age of my brother when he died.

Losing a family member has a way of making one think about death—and about life. The Bible says, “You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (NASB, James 4:14).

As the Old Testament figure Job tried to grasp his own devastating loss and grief, he wrote these words: “Man’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months, and have set limits he cannot exceed” (NIV, Job 14:5).

Winston Churchill’s father died at age 39, and England’s future prime minister grew up also expecting to die young. In his first autobiography, the young Churchill credited his military exploits in India—and, in general, his fearless first decades—to his awareness of the ticking clock.

My own father’s death at age 53 circled that age in my mind—a red mark made darker and more certain by my brother’s sudden death only a few years later. I’m never so lost in living that I don’t hear the clock tick or have an eye on the calendar—not in a paranoid sense, but with a sense of purpose.

Perhaps most important, my father taught me the answers to what are arguably the two most important questions in life.

I remember my father telling the story of a discussion a man once had with a law school student about his future plans. The conversation went something like this:

“Son, tell me about your plans after law school.”

“I hope to get a job with a good firm and start making some money,” the student replied.

“That sounds good. And then what?”

“Well, at some point I want to get married.”

“I hope you do, son. And then?”

“I want to get a nice house and start a family.”

“Of course, and then what?”

“Then I want to raise my kids in good schools and earn enough money for a second home.”

“Right. Right. What then?”

“I hope to be making enough money to slow down and take nice vacations with my wife and children.”

“And then?”

“Well, I guess I’d like to see my kids get married and start their own families. I hear having grandchildren is even better than having children.”

“Yes, it’s true. Then what?”

“I hope I’ll be healthy enough to enjoy my later years—maybe travel some with my wife and see the world. I want to pass along my money to my children so they can enjoy life as I have.”

“And then?”

The young student paused. “Well, I guess . . . I guess eventually I’ll die.”

“Yes, yes you will,” the man said. “And then what?”

This story chronicles the standard-issue American Dream. Who in this room doesn’t identify with some or most of this young man’s vision for his life?

“And then what?” How would you answer that question?

Some 350 years ago, French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote these words: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator.” He then proposed the following: “Let us weigh the gain and loss in wagering that God is. Let us consider the two possibilities. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Hesitate not, then, to wager that He is.”

So what could be wiser than admitting our life is not a self-made proposition? What could be wiser than making this eternal choice sooner rather than later? I’m so glad I answered that question as a young boy.

But once we’ve answered the “then what?” question, I would suggest we must answer the next most important question in life: “now what?” What do we do now, here on earth, to serve Jesus Christ and make a difference for eternity? Sadly, too many people have no idea.

At the ripe age of 32, comedian Dave Chappelle certainly had his dream. He had just signed a \$50 million deal with the Comedy Central Channel. But the ink on the contract was hardly dry when Chappelle disappeared. He surfaced 8,000 miles away, in South Africa. The hilarious host ran away from the entire third season of *Chappelle’s Show* because, as he later confessed, “The higher up I go, for some reason, the less happy I am.” If a person could buy happiness or peace, certainly this young comedian would have been at the front of the line.

Jack Higgins is one of the most successful authors on earth—his thriller novels having sold more than 250 million copies in 60 languages. When asked by a magazine interviewer what he knew now that he wished he had known earlier in life, the rich writer replied, “I wish I had known when you get to the top, there is nothing there.”

How tragic—one man with so much . . . and so little.

I cannot begin to imagine life on earth without Jesus Christ at the center of it. He's not only all I need—He's all I want! I once heard someone say, "If there were no heaven and no hell, I'd still want to be a Christian just for the joy and fellowship we can experience here on earth." I feel that way every day.

I would hate to think of watching my mother battle a malignant brain tumor when I was still a child without an unwavering trust in the Great Physician, or surviving the loss of my father—when I was only 17—apart from the God who promises to be "a father to the fatherless" (NIV, Psalm 68:5).

I cannot imagine coping with the sudden death of my kid brother without the One who promises to be "a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (NIV, Proverbs 18:24). Nor would I have wanted to go through college or start a business without the Source of All Wisdom at my side.

I especially cannot imagine being married for nearly 24 years without having the One who created and ordained marriage, who loves my wife and me unconditionally, as the very cornerstone of our home—for "a three-stranded cord is not easily broken" (CJB, Ecclesiastes 4:12).

By the way, thank you, April, for being such a remarkable wife and mother. I love you, girl.

I'll close with two stories of young men—just a few years older than you students—who knew what they were on earth to do. Years ago a young man in Boston named Edward Kimball taught Sunday School at his church, feeling called to invest his life in the lives of young boys and men. In an effort to get to know his students better, he often paid a visit to them at their homes or places of work during the week.

One Sunday a 17-year-old boy showed up in his class—a boy with some rather rough edges, often bursting out in anger or profanity. Kimball thought about how he might reach this boy and decided to visit him at the shoe

store where he worked for his uncle. He was nervous. What would the boy say? How would he be received? He found the boy in the back of the store wrapping shoes and putting them on the shelves.

Kimball simply put his hand on the teenager's shoulder and mustered up some words about how Christ loved him. Amazingly, right there in his uncle's shoe store, this young man wound up committing his life to Christ. His name was Dwight L. Moody.

In 1879 Moody was instrumental in the conversion of F. B. Meyer, who went on to become a minister. Meyer mentored someone named J. W. Chapman and led him to Christ.

Chapman became a pastor and evangelist and started an outreach ministry to professional baseball players. One of those players, Billy Sunday, became Chapman's assistant for many of his evangelistic meetings.

Having learned from Chapman, Billy Sunday started to hold his own evangelistic meetings, becoming the greatest evangelist of the first part of the 20th century in America. In the 1920s, one of Billy Sunday's revivals in North Carolina was so successful, an associate of his, Mordecai Ham (who had given his life to Christ in one of Sunday's crusades), was asked to come back to Charlotte a few years later to hold a second series of crusades.

On one of the final nights of Mordecai Ham's evangelistic meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina, another teenager responded to an invitation to follow Jesus Christ. That teenager turned 94 in November, and thanks to a Sunday School teacher in Boston years ago, countless millions of people have heard about Jesus because of the preaching of Billy Graham.

Our second young man was finishing college last year, though I doubt any of you know who Neil Caudle is. Neil graduated from Spain Park High School in Hoover, Alabama, rated the seventh-best quarterback in America.

Besieged with scholarship offers, he signed to play at Auburn University.

With high hopes and expectations of playing quarterback in the SEC, Caudle's career was marked instead by coaching changes, injuries, limited playing time, and a talented depth chart at Auburn. Just when he thought it was his year to be the starting quarterback, along came someone you have heard of: Cam Newton. This finally caused Neil and his family to wonder if he even wanted to play football at Auburn.

Well, Neil Caudle persevered, even though he threw only a few passes in his four years there. He suited up for his final game as an Auburn Tiger one year ago in Arizona for the national championship against Oregon. Our daughter was a senior at Auburn, so we went out for the big game.

I didn't know or notice anything about Caudle until a week or so later when our pastor, who had spoken at a chapel service for the team the night before, told of a picture Neil's mom had captured of the final play of that thrilling game.

Her photo showed the giant scoreboard and video screen with the score tied 19-19, the play clock showing 19 seconds, and the game-winning 19-yard field goal soaring through the hold of number 19. Teresa Caudle's son, the promising quarterback coming out of high school, was now the holder—number 19. It was his hands, and not those of the Heisman winner, that would be the last to touch the ball as Auburn put the final three points on their national championship season.

In an email to friends after the game, Neil Caudle's mother wrote, "Neil always felt like he was in God's will, even when things didn't go like he wanted them to. You can do the math and see it is no coincidence. I believe God orchestrated Neil's last college football game to show His power and to affirm to Neil (and

to us) that number 19 was right where he was supposed to be all along."

As a former kicker, I love this story. But what I love most are the stories I have read and heard since about Neil Caudle's role as the spiritual leader on that Auburn team. You see, after the pregame evening chapel service for players and coaches, and after the players' meetings with their position coaches, there was one final meeting before going to bed. Number 19 convened a players-only meeting—a prayer meeting. And the players came to Neil's meeting week after week after week.

The sports world will remember the 2011 college football champions for Cam Newton, his undefeated season, his Heisman Trophy, and his team's last-second victory over a talented and fast Oregon team.

But years from now, a hundred players and coaches will remember a humble, unselfish young man who touched the ball only a few seconds each game but held high his faith in Christ and clearly had the answer to the question "now what?"

Two young men—a Sunday School teacher and a football player. One changed the world; the other still might.

Two questions: Then what? Now what? Just three simple words—yet both our eternity and our life on earth depend fully on our answers.

Thank you, Brigham Young University, for inviting me to this stage. Thank you, Elder Clarke and President and Sister Samuelson, for making the time to be here and for your warm reception of April and me. You have all honored us.

Would you now receive this benediction honoring God?

"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (KJV, 1 Timothy 1:17).