

# The Foundation of Reality

As I watched the events surrounding the second inauguration of President George W. Bush, I was intrigued by an interview conducted with Michael Newdow, the physician/attorney who unsuccessfully challenged the inclusion of “in God We Trust” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Newdow wants to remove prayer from the presidential inauguration ceremonies based on his interpretation of the First Amendment of the Constitution, which excludes any reference to God in the context of any government function. I believe that Newdow’s understanding of the First Amendment is flawed in that the founding fathers were seeking to protect the church from government control not eliminate God for government. Notwithstanding the importance of this difference in interpretation, there is yet a more important issue at stake in the discussion: What is more foundational—physical or spiritual reality? Specifically, what is the relationship of spiritual and physical reality? Does one undergird the other? By eliminating God, Newdow’s position suggests that there is no relationship between spiritual and physical reality, which means that government, and presumably business, can function independent of spiritual truth. Is Newdow’s idea consistent with reality? To explore this issue, let’s consider the story of the famous department store magnate James Cash Penney.

Jim was born on September 16, 1875, in Hamilton, Missouri. His father, a hard-working farmer, was also an unsalaried Baptist preacher. His mother was a devout Christian with deep convictions. Jim was one of twelve children.

Provision for the family was sparse and mainly came from farming activities. The church was parsimonious; occasionally, however, a parishioner would give the family food or an animal. Family life was Spartan, but genuine and loving. The children were diligently taught the values of faith in God, hard work, honor, and the golden rule. Jim’s father frequently used the parable of the prodigal son to drive home the importance of faithfulness to one’s training and values. From a young age, the children had chores and helped to support the family. When Jim was a young lad, the church terminated his father for alleged doctrinal heresy. Although Jim’s father felt unjustly accused, he did not let this setback stop him and went on to pursue a political career. He demonstrated to his family the importance of

overcoming obstacles, going the extra mile, and not giving up. Jim was an astute student and learned these lessons well.

In 1895, Jim's father became extremely ill. Sensing the end of his life was near, he called each of his children to his deathbed, one at a time. When it was Jim's turn, his father spoke destiny to the twenty-year-old commissioning him to go into the dry goods business. His father observed Jim, as a young man, creatively and naturally making money to buy his own shoes and clothes by selling junk and animals that he raised. His father knew that God had created Jim to be a merchant. So confident was his father of this destiny that he arranged for Jim to go to work for Hale and Brothers, a local dry goods store.

Not long after his father's death, Jim went to see Mr. Hale about the job. Mr. Hale told Jim that he was hiring him only because of his promise to Jim's father. Jim began work as a clerk earning \$2.27 per month—less than a penny per hour—in February of 1895. For some reason, his fellow clerks resented him and looked for ways to cause him difficulty. Despite this acrimony, Jim practiced what he had seen his father do so many times: he persevered, went the extra mile, and practiced the golden rule.

After three years at Hale and Brothers, Jim's health began to fail. The doctor told him that he had consumption, or tuberculosis of the lungs. At that time, the only known treatment for this malady was an arid climate, and Missouri's climate definitely was not arid. A popular place for those with Jim's malady was Colorado. Though Jim hated to leave his family, he knew that it was necessary for his health's sake. So he packed up and took a train to Colorado.

Shortly after arriving in Denver, Jim found a job as a clerk at Justin Dry Goods. He settled in quickly and enjoyed favor from the store owner, but as with his experience in Missouri, his fellow clerks seemed jealous of him. Perhaps it was his industrious attitude and impeccable character that precipitated the jealousy. Whatever it was, Jim was not deterred.

Jim was frugal and an avid saver of his meager earnings. He continued this practice in his Denver job hoping some day to buy his own store. One day, Jim heard of a butcher shop for sale in Longmont, Colorado, about twenty-five miles north of Denver. Sensing an opportunity, he moved quickly to acquire the shop for three hundred dollars—his life's savings.

Shortly after acquiring the shop, Jim discovered that one of the shop's key customers was the local hotel. To do business with the hotel, he had to provide the cook with a regular supply of bourbon. Jim loathed drunkards—people who use alcohol as a crutch for the challenges of life—and he detested bribery. Hence, the cook's requirement presented a conundrum for Jim. Would he violate his personal convictions against drunkenness and bribery just to make money? He did, but only once. The agony and guilt that he experienced proved to be too much. He was unwilling to compromise his value system, even for the sake of business. Jim's refusal to continue bribing the cook led to a quick demise of the butcher shop.

Now broke and out of work, Jim set out to find a job as a clerk in a dry goods store. He stumbled upon a company owned by two men—Callahan and Johnson. Jim interviewed with Mr. Callahan. Early in the conversation, Mr. Callahan stated that there were no openings. Refusing to be dissuaded, Jim replied that he was called to the dry goods business. He had been commissioned by his father and was divinely led to Mr. Callahan. Mr. Callahan was somewhat taken aback, but was impressed with Jim's clarity of his life's purpose. Intrigued with Jim, Mr. Callahan proposed that Jim work part-time to supplement the store's staff since the busy holiday season was approaching. Jim seized the opportunity.

Jim worked hard and went the extra mile, from day one. Mr. Callahan was very impressed and quickly recognized that Jim had the potential to become a partner. Soon Jim was transferred to the Evanston, Wyoming, store located about sixty miles northeast of Salt Lake City, to begin training as a potential partner.

In 1902, Jim was offered the opportunity to become a partner and operate his own store in Kemmerer, Wyoming—a mining town of nine hundred people and twenty-one saloons. The cost to become a one-third partner in this store was two thousand dollars. Jim took five hundred dollars—all his savings—and borrowed fifteen hundred dollars to open Johnson, Callahan, and Penney (d/b/a the Golden Rule Store) on April 14, 1902.

Jim's operating principles were simple—provide quality merchandise, render good service, follow the golden rule, and offer single-pricing on a cash-only basis. The store was open seven days a week from seven in the morning, except on Sundays when it opened at nine, and closed when no more customers were coming in, usually around eleven at night.

In 1907, five years after opening the store, Jim's much older partners, offered to sell him the Kemmerer, Rock Springs, and Cumberland stores. Jim seized the opportunity. He remembered a comment by Mr. Callahan that if he were younger he would build a chain of dry good stores.

Jim began to add stores and build his chain. Store managers became partners with him. The partnership strategy worked very well and by 1909, there were seven stores. Jim moved his family to Salt Lake City and set up a central administration and distribution facility. There were fourteen stores with annual revenue of \$662,000 by the end of 1910.

In Salt Lake City, Jim and his wife Berta began to take time to do things besides work. Berta joined a church; Jim attended the church but didn't join because he was still wounded by the injustice he perceived the Baptist church in Missouri had rendered against his father. Nevertheless, the pastor, Dr. Short, became a close personal friend of Jim and Berta's.

After ten years of marriage, Jim and Berta decided to finally go on the honeymoon they had never taken. At Berta's urging, they planned a trip to the Holy Land. Prior to the trip, Berta's physician advised her to have her tonsils removed as a precaution, and she did. Shortly after the surgery, Berta developed pneumonia and unexpectedly died on December 26, 1910.

Jim was deeply affected by Berta's death. He was not the kind of man who could live well without a woman. He saw Berta as God's gift to him. She encouraged him when times were tough, believed in him when others didn't, and was the spiritual compass of the family.

Though Jim received an incredible spiritual heritage from his father and mother, he was still wounded by what happened to his father. He was very principled, but his childhood wounds blocked him from joining the local church in Salt Lake City. Nevertheless, the astute pastor was gentle with Jim; he understood that Jim was wounded. Dr. Short chose to just be his friend, which endeared him to Jim and provided the grieving man a shoulder to lean on as he struggled with the death of his beloved Berta.

Berta's death threw Jim into a two-year depression. He questioned God's purpose and goodness. Why would God take his precious Berta? Sleep was difficult because of bad dreams. Prayer was impossible because of his anger at God. He found himself drowning his self-pity in alcohol, something that he loathed growing up. He even considered suicide in his moments of deepest despair.

Though depressed, Jim was still trying to go on; however, it was very difficult. In January of 1912, he was in New York City on business and one evening left his hotel room to walk to the Bowery to soothe his pain with liquor. As he walked, he heard the voices of men singing. They were singing “Jesus Lover of My Soul,” his mother’s favorite hymn. Jim followed the sound to a homeless shelter, and inside he found a number of men—unkempt, unshaven, and malodorous. Looking at the men, he realized that he felt the way they looked and smelled. He sat down and listened to the old hymn that he remembered so well.

Soon a speaker began to share about losing a loved one and his job. As the man spoke, Jim so identified with the man’s story that it seemed as if the man was speaking directly to him. Mesmerized by the message, Jim was deeply moved. He heard a message of hope—not despair; of victory—not defeat; of overcoming—not being overcome. When the speaker finished, Jim was stunned. He knew that something profound had just happened in this most unlikely of places. As he left, he shook hands with the shelter’s director and slipped him some cash. On the walk back to the hotel room, he reflected on the parable of the prodigal son, an illustration that his father had used frequently in his sermons. Conviction flooded his soul, repentance buckled his knees, and thanksgiving flowed from his lips.

Jim realized he had been trapped in self-pity and anger. For two years he had failed to see through all the pain that God was there, lovingly reaching out to him. For the first time, he was able to embrace the goodness and grace of God. Though he still could not explain why God had allowed Berta to die, he knew that it would be used for a purpose beyond human understanding. And now, it was okay, not because of anything Jim had done, but because God met him in his despair, delivered him, and gave him a new perspective. Jim sensed destiny in his spirit as never before.

Jim gave up drinking and committed himself to the cause of Christ. He was so excited that he could hardly wait to get back to Salt Lake City and share his experience with Dr. Short. From then on, Jim was generous with time and money in advancing the cause of Christ.

Jim also decided that Berta would have wanted him to take the trip they had planned. Within a few weeks, Jim and his sons departed for the Holy Land, taking Dr. Short along as a personal guide. It was an inspiring and awesome trip. Jim and his party were scheduled to return to the United States on the *Titanic*’s second voyage across the Atlantic. Of course, the

*Titanic* didn't complete even the first trip across, so Jim had to make alternate plans. During the process he met Mary Kimball—the woman who would become his second wife.

Jim catapulted his company's growth with his newfound spiritual foundation. The company had 48 stores and \$3.5 million in revenue in 1913. He consolidated all the store partnerships into a corporation in 1914. When the company went public in 1927, it had 892 stores and \$151 million in revenue—it was the largest department store chain in the world. In addition to his enormous business success, Jim established a 120,000-acre experimental farm in Florida, built and funded a 60-acre retirement facility for pastors and ministers, and became a prolific writer and speaker. Still active in the business at ninety-five, he died of a heart attack on December 26, 1971, sixty-one years to the day after Berta's death. Jim was a man like King David of whom it was written: "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep" (Acts 13:36 NIV).

To what can we attribute J. C. Penney's success? There were many building blocks to his success—his father's training, his experience with Callahan and Johnson, his life with Berta, and even the failed butcher shop, but the most significant defining moment of his life was his spiritual renewal that cold January night in 1912. Jim was catapulted to an incredible level of success with the spiritual healing that came from that encounter with God in New York City. The success of Jim's business illustrates the truth that spiritual and physical reality are inseparably coupled, and that spiritual reality undergirds, empowers, and guides human beings to fully realize their potential.

If indeed my conclusion from this anecdotal story is true, the question becomes: Where does one find spiritual reality? J. C. Penney's spiritual reality was found in the God of the Bible who created heaven and earth, and revealed Himself to Penney in January 1912. I do not believe that Mr. Newdow has revealed the source of the spiritual reality that undergirds him. Interestingly, in all his discussions in the Media and in court, I am not aware that he was questioned regarding his spiritual reality. My conjecture is that Mr. Newdow is an atheist who has no foundation for reality other than his own opinion. I am thankful President Bush has a more accurate picture of reality than Mr. Newdow's. I was gratified to see Mr. Bush begin his inauguration day in public worship at church. He took the oath of office with his hand on the Bible, representing his commitment to God as the definer of truth and reality. The prayers offered by various persons through the course of the day represented our desperate

need for divine guidance. At one point during a prayer, the television camera panned the audience revealing a host of people with their heads bowed and eyes closed.

The United States is under assault by those espousing worldviews inconsistent with Christianity, but there are still many citizens who understand and embrace the fact that spiritual reality is foundational for life. Ours is a nation founded on the Christian faith and has been—and continues to be—blessed by the reality of that faith.

The same as with J. C. Penney, the principles and values of Christianity are essential for us to be able to fully realize our potential as human beings. Despite the misguided efforts of people like Mr. Newdow, one cannot divorce spiritual and physical reality—they are inseparable. The intent of our founding fathers in writing the First Amendment was not to divorce the church from the state; rather, their intent was to protect the church from interference by the state. Our founding fathers understood that without an accurate spiritual view of reality—a biblical worldview—a person cannot fully realize his or her potential, nor can we skillfully govern ourselves and prosper as a nation.

We must always remember that the God of creation, a Spirit being, called forth a physical universe out of nothing and put man in that universe to rule over it (Genesis 1:26–28). The very nature of this creative act suggests that spiritual reality undergirds physical reality. We must therefore look to God to find the spiritual reality (the philosophy, values, and principles) that will enable each of us to be who we were made to be and to do what we were called to do.

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