



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is a writer, historian and Unitarian minister. In this election year, Dr. Forrest Church will help us explore the role of religion in our American democracy.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back our good friend, Grace Imathiu. She’ll tell us how growing up in an east African village taught her a special lesson about what it means to be a community.

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of Cordell Reed, who grew up in the same church he still attends sixty years later. It’s a loving, nurturing community that opened doors far beyond his dreams. For him, the word “church” means much more than just showing up on Sunday morning. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Cordell Reed: I think God has directed my entire life. How he can take me out of Ida B. Wells housing projects and teach me physics, chemistry, thermodynamics, calculus. I just have to think that was the Lord! We grew up in the Ida B. Wells housing project in the early 40s. I guess we were poor but we didn’t know we were poor. We always had enough to eat and we always dressed OK.

When I was about eight years old I went up to this church four blocks away, Metropolitan Community Church. We were soon directed towards a counselor. He was a Chicago policeman, Mr. James K. Little. Thank God for him early, early in my life! We were not perfect kids. We would say little swear words and laugh and giggle, but we wouldn’t say anything around Mr. Little! He showed us more than just theology. He showed us a way of life.

When I finished high school I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign. I entered into mechanical engineering. The church paid my tuition and room and board. It was four hundred and thirty two dollars a semester. That was all of the money on the face of the Earth in 1958! At the end of every semester I would bring my grades back to the trustee room and they would hug me and applaud me. Their acceptance of me was important. I was maybe the third African

American in mechanical engineering from the university and I was in the upper quarter of the class. Then, in 1967, four of us went down to the Dresden nuclear power plant to become start-up engineers. We were starting up the world's largest nuclear reactor at that time. We were doing things that no one in the world had done before.

I learned about management in the church. Conflicts arise, but it's not the power of the office but the power of the respect that people have for you. I was Chief Diversity Officer and Chief Ethics Officer at Commonwealth Edison. When we think of diversity we normally think of gender and race, but we were getting more and more people who were not Christian. There were Muslims and Jewish people. You wouldn't schedule a meeting on Good Friday, but we didn't know about Ramadan and the Jewish holidays.

I've lived my whole life in this community in a ten-mile circle. It's impossible for me to separate my life from this community, from the church, from God. My whole life history is in that church. I've been a member for sixty-one years. Can you believe that? That's what church is. It's not just Sunday mornings, it is being involved in the lives of people.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Our thanks to Cordell Reed for sharing his spiritual journey. Cordell sits on the board of directors of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, the producers of this program. We're so grateful for his leadership.

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Dr. Forrest Church is a writer, historian, minister, and theologian. As the son of U.S. Senator Frank Church of Idaho, he was raised in a political family, and questions about the intersection of religion and government have been a life-long pursuit. Forrest earned his doctorate in Early Church history from Harvard University and served almost three decades as Senior Minister of All Souls Church in New York City. He's the author or editor of more than twenty books, including a new book called "So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State." We're delighted to have Dr. Forrest Church with us today on "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Forrest.

MESSAGE

Forrest Church: Thank you, Daniel. It's good to be with you.

Since religion is playing such a central role in this year's presidential campaign, it may be helpful to catch our breath for a moment and examine the question of religion and democracy with an eye to our early history.

Today's Christian Right claims that the United States was founded explicitly as a Christian nation with a Christian government; they seek only, they say, to restore the faith of the founders. The secular Left claims that the United States was founded on an explicitly secular foundation, as codified in the Constitution. As it turns out, both sides are one hundred percent half-right!

Two competing themes combined to compose the dissonant music of early American politics. The first theme, sounded in New England from the time of the Puritans, posited the ideal of a Christian Commonwealth. Uplifted by the imperatives of Christian morality, the government

would be a shining city on a hill, fulfilling God's mandates and receiving his aid.

The second theme, codified in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, arose from Enlightenment France. Rather than that of Christian Commonwealth, it posited the ideal of individual freedom. Jefferson dreamed of establishing an Empire of Liberty, whose government sacredly would protect each individual's God-given freedom of conscience.

Both visions had religious dimensions—call them divine order and sacred liberty. Cast in terms of the nation's motto, "E Pluribus Unum" (out of many, one), the "Unum" people believed that, in order to uphold "one nation under God," the secular and sacred realms must rest on a single foundation. Without a united sense of purpose and clear moral vision, they argued, liberty would lapse into license.

Champions of sacred liberty, "Pluribus" people, as it were, believed that to promote "liberty and justice for all," the secular and religious realms must be kept autonomous. Government attempts to impose religious (or moral) values suppress religion instead, they claimed, by violating individual freedom of conscience.

Many of the questions that continue to roil the seas of presidential politics teem at the center of our first great culture war. But the players back then may surprise you. Two centuries ago, the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Unitarians stood squarely on the Religious Right. Numbered among the religious establishment of their time, these leaders saw no problem with giving God a seat in Government. After all, it was their God who would be enthroned. The religious laws, and government financial support, would favor their churches.

In the vanguard of the early religious left were the Baptists. No religious body fought more eloquently for freedom of conscience and church-state separation than the Baptists did. After all, they were religious outsiders, accustomed to persecution. Together with leading Methodists, Jews, Roman Catholics, and a smattering of influential Deists, the Baptists championed strict church-state separation as a guarantor of the religious liberty they long had labored to secure.

From the moment the new government opened for business in 1789, the question, "Is the United States destined to be a Christian Commonwealth or an Empire of Liberty?" spurred heated debate. At the presidential level, these contests took on the character of religious crusades. First the apostles of divine order were victorious, then the champions of sacred liberty. Though they shared liberal theological views, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had very different views on church and state. Adams presided over a Christian state; Jefferson, over a secular one.

By the way, pulpit politics during the early Republic carried, if anything, more voltage than they do today. Federalists and Democrats hurled imprecations at each other that would make a modern talk show host blush. When Jefferson defeated Adams in 1800, New England's Unitarian and Congregationalist preachers proclaimed the Apocalypse, even as America's Baptist preachers were hailing the dawn of the new Millennium.

The religious wars came perilously close to sundering the nation during the War of 1812. But then something remarkable happened. Immediately after the war, an armistice was struck. New

England's Puritan preachers, the most active advocates of Christian Commonwealth, had rebelled against the War of 1812, viewing it as a sacrilegious struggle against Christian England, which at the time was battling infidel France, putting America, in their view, in league with Napoleon, whom they anointed the anti-Christ. When America won the war, the established churchmen were branded as traitors. Their state churches were disestablished and silently they removed themselves from national politics.

Far from vanquished, the Standing Congregational Orders of New England redirected their prodigious organizational talents from electoral contests to Bible and tract societies, designed to redeem the nation from the grassroots up, not from the presidency down. Democratizing their gospel, they established national Bible, Tract, and Abolition societies. These voluntary associations laid the groundwork for participatory democracy as we know it today. During the Second Great Awakening, which began in Jefferson's day and flourished once the state churches were disestablished, religion grew like topsy. America's churches flourished, in number and spiritual power, during President James Monroe's "Era of Good Feelings." Incorporating both themes—moral citizenship and sacred liberty—the hard-fought contest to fashion America on either the Puritan model of Christian Commonwealth or the Jeffersonian vision of an Empire of Liberty ended with the fulfillment, temporary to be sure and strained severely by the continuing specter of slavery, of "E Pluribus Unum."

So neither side won the first American culture war. Or put differently, both sides won. Passed down from Puritan New England, we view our government today in moral terms. Religion and politics mix, freely and often creatively, in American life. Balancing this admixture, following the Enlightenment tradition of sacred liberty, church and state—which, when they do, mix combustively and divisively—remain for the most part separate.

Religion will always have a place in our democracy. Religious values are, or should be, moral values. They instruct both our activism and our votes. Yet, religion has thrived in America in large measure because the government was prevented from corrupting its franchise. The United States of America is the most religious western industrialized nation precisely because our religious institutions have maintained their moral independence and therefore their moral authority.

So defined, there may be too little religion in today's politics, not too much. Too little of the religion prescribed by the prophet Micah: "to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God." Too little of the religion taught by Jesus, who summed up all the law and the prophets in two great commandments: "to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself." Too little of the religion as defined by Thomas Jefferson, who said, "It is in our lives and not in our words that our religion must be read."

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a free printed transcript or audio copy of the message you just heard from Dr. Forrest Church, stay with us and we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now, let's talk with Forrest Church. Forrest, when I'm not doing this job, I am a Congregational minister, so I loved your description of the history of my denomination. I started my ministry in New England in the old meeting houses that were called "meeting houses," where political debates took place in the early times. I remember that many of those New England churches had clear glass windows as opposed to stained because the idea was that the Gospel light would shine out on the concerns of the world but the concerns of the world would always be visible from within the church.

Forrest Church: Yes. The goal was to be saved in the world, not from the world in a strange way. The churches had an enormously important role in the civic life in New England and that's what built the foundation for this idea of a Christian Commonwealth.

Lillian Daniel: Well, those clear glass windows seem to symbolize that permeable boundary, if you will, that we live with now. And it strikes me we are in another time of transition in our country. You referred to the Christian Right and the Secular Left. Don't you think those categories are perhaps breaking down as many Republicans are questioning the Christian Right and more Democrats are speaking about their faith?

Forrest Church: I hope so! One of the things that worried me was about four years ago. The exit polls after the election indicated that about three quarters of the people who went to church every week or had religious services every week voted Republican, and three quarters of people who never went to church at all voted Democratic. We were in danger of having a religious party and a secular party in this country. If we were to end up with a religious party and a secular party, an "Unum" party and a "Pluribus" party, a God party and a freedom party, which ever side won the nation would lose. So I think you're right. What has happened since then is that the leading Democratic candidates are people of deep, deep faith. The Republican party is more diverse in its appeals. By the polls I've seen, the Evangelicals are splitting right down the middle on the political issues. It will be much better for the country if both of our political parties are very diverse religiously.

Daniel Pawlus: I wanted to ask you about your book, "So Help Me God." I found it a fascinating read. For anybody that loves early American history, they're going to love this book, I know.

Forrest Church: Thank you.

Daniel Pawlus: One of the things that jumped out at me was each of our early presidents had their own unique faith life, and they all understood the role that religion could play in government, but it seemed as though they consciously were trying to keep that separate from their governmental life. Has that line just blurred considerably since that time?

Forrest Church: Well, here's what happened during that period: Adams, though he was quite liberal theologically, did believe that God had to have a seat in government. He ended up losing his race against Jefferson because he declared a national fast day in 1798 and the Baptists and the Methodists went crazy because they thought the Presbyterian state government was telling the people how to pray. And indeed it was New England covenant theology that was written into

this national fast day of Adams. After that, with Jefferson and Madison and Monroe, we did establish a secular nation. Religion and politics mixed a bit but church and state were separate. What's interesting and what happened is that while church and state remained separate entirely until the Civil War, during the Civil War, in a kind of unique religious, political storm, the wall of separation between church and state came down a bit. We established ourselves not as a Christian, but as a religious commonwealth. That's when "In God We Trust" was put on the coinage, for instance. That's when the Puritan Thanksgiving was made a national holiday, not just a New England holiday. Much happened and part of it had to do with Lincoln's own profound sense of God directing events that set a new course for our nation. That was codified in the 1950s during the "red scare" when "In God We Trust" became part of our coinage and our motto. I think that remains today. I don't think that we ever think we're going to become a Christian nation but we certainly are a religious one.

Lillian Daniel: Let's go back to the time of Jefferson and the wall. I thought it was fascinating that in that time of the disestablishment of the church, we also have the Second Great Awakening and the churches start growing like crazy.

Forrest Church: That is the great irony!

Lillian Daniel: It is. Tell us, in countries that did not disestablish the church, what effect did that have on the vitality of the religious life.

Forrest Church: If you were looking for one moral out of "So Help Me God," the moral is be careful when you attach your religious star to a political wagon because eventually it will get dragged out of the heavens and dragged through the dust. In Europe, where church and state were always in collusion and the church was strongly supported by the state, the argument was if the state doesn't support the church the church will die. That was the argument that the Federalists and the Congregationalists and the Unitarians back in those days were arguing.

Lillian Daniel: They couldn't imagine it otherwise?

Forrest Church: They couldn't imagine without state support the church surviving. What happened was that the church lost its moral authority in England, in Germany, in Sweden. Nobody is going to church any more. In the United States because of our church-state separation the church won back its moral independence. It was losing it when it gave its soul to the Federalist party during that first great cultural war. It was in danger of potentially losing it again. I don't think that's going to happen because the greatest victim of collusion of church and state is not the state, it's the church. They lose their moral independence.

Daniel Pawlus: I wonder, you also call out in the book when Madison introduced the First Amendment. Do you think at that time they thought it was going to be that divisive?

Forrest Church: That's another great story: Madison and the First Amendment. Everybody gives him credit and he did deserve it for the Bill of Rights, the First Amendment. This is his signature issue. But he was opposed to adding amendments to the constitution. He didn't want to do it because he wanted all the divisions to be tamped down. He wanted to go forward with the

constitution as it was ratified. It was the Baptists in Virginia who demanded the First Amendment. They demanded a freedom of conscience clause. They said they wouldn't elect him to Congress unless he changed his mind. He promised once he went to New York, as it was then, in Congress that he would lead the fight for a Bill of Rights. So it was Baptist pastors who got this promise from Madison. He went to New York. He talked about this "nauseous business of amendments," but without him we would not have a First Amendment, we would not have a Bill of Rights. And without the Baptists prodding him, neither one of those things would have happened.

Daniel Pawlus: A fascinating history. It really is.

Lillian Daniel: Very different from the climate today and in recent years.

Forrest Church: It is, but again you've got to remember that back then the Baptists were the religious outsiders and it was the religious outsiders who did not want God and government to be mixed because it wouldn't be *their* God and they wouldn't get support. Today the Baptists and other fundamentalist groups tend to be more the religious insiders. The mainstream churches tend to be more on the outside and fighting for church-state separation. It's just the same game, different players.

Lillian Daniel: Forrest, in wrapping up, I have to ask you, you're the son of a politician and you clearly have a great love for the study of politics. Did you ever think of going into politics?

Forrest Church: I did, but I finally decided that there should be a statute of limitations: one politician per family. Maybe there should be one preacher per family, too! So I went the other way.

Lillian Daniel: Well, we're delighted that you went that way. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Forrest Church: Thank you. It's great to be with you.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lillian Daniel: And now, Grace Imathiu, pastor of Brown Deer United Methodist Church, brings us this final thought on community.

REFLECTION

Grace Imathiu: When I was growing up in an eastern African village, a group of women walked to the forest every evening to gather firewood. They tied their bundles of sticks with a rope and carried them home. When I think of community, I remember that village and those bundles of sticks. You see, all residents of this village we call our planet Earth are bound up with one another in what Bishop Tutu calls "the bundle of life." Whether we define ourselves as a community or as villagers of one planet, or a bundle of sticks tied together with God's rope, fact is our individual lives are connected and what happens to one of us affects all of us whether we know it or not. The Scriptures put this way, "Christ is like a single body which has many parts. It is still one body even though it is made up of different parts."

CLOSING REMARKS

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Grace, and our thanks again to Forrest Church, Cordell Reed, and to you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.