

by Citizen Staff



**WILLING TO ENGAGE:** Jim Daly believes that not only do Christians have a biblical mandate to impact the culture, but to do so in a winsome way.

# A Political Conversation

*With a major election approaching, Focus on the Family President Jim Daly takes time to articulate his views on public policy and Christian responsibility.*

**C**itizen: Civic engagement through public policy is a bedrock activity at Focus. Why is it important for Christians to be involved in the public policy arena?

**Jim Daly:** I believe at its core that it's part of Jesus' command to love our neighbor. Romans 13 says God created the institution of government to restrain evil and encourage human flourishing. So as citizens blessed to live in a representative

democracy, we have an obligation to work toward the best government we can possibly have, for the benefit of all our “neighbors.”

If you look through Scripture and throughout history, you’ll see God’s people are agents for positive change in the culture. In Jeremiah 29:7, God admonishes the people to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” You can’t do that if you’re isolated and detached from what’s going on in the world around you. Involvement in public policy is a part of our Christian witness.

However, I do see a distinction between political commentary and our Christian witness. First and foremost, we must be citizens of Heaven. I think we can sink into the political mudslinging if we allow our humanness to overtake the fruit of the Spirit which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). We can’t forsake our Christian witness in order to win a political argument. That seems inconsistent to me.

**C:** *Much has been written about the need for Christians to change their tactics when engaging the culture. How would you describe the tactics that have been used in the past, and how do you think they need to change?*

**JD:** The key word is “engage.” Often, we’re tempted to either attack or withdraw. We might lash out at the world, expecting those outside the Church to act like we do. Or we withdraw into our congregations, simply singing hymns while society crumbles around us. A more effective approach is to engage those with whom we disagree—sitting down with them, if possible, and, when feasible, working toward the common good without compromising our core principles.

Some Christian activists, in their zeal to influence the political process, may have given the impression that our real hope lies in government—in electing the right officials or enacting good laws. These things are important, but they will not solve our deepest problems. That’s why even as we actively engage in the political arena, we should always keep in mind that our true hope is in Christ. I take great comfort in knowing that no matter how things go in Washington, D.C., or city hall, nothing will thwart God’s ultimate plans. I also try to remember that no one is beyond God’s reach. Saul of Tarsus was not beyond God’s reach. Although he helped orchestrate the execution of Stephen, as recorded in the New Testament,

God already knew that Saul would become Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s life was transformed. We need to remember this when we engage people who do not “see” truth at the moment but have the potential to be redeemed.

**C:** *Since taking over the helm at Focus in 2005, you’ve spent a lot of time talking about the importance of tone. What do you mean by that?*

**JD:** I believe this emphasis is consistent with the foundational principles of the ministry since its inception in 1977. I’ve been dismayed, as have many others, at the increasing lack of civility in our nation’s public discourse. Name-calling, overheated rhetoric, and character assassination seem to be par for the course in political discussion these days, and it comes from all sides. As Christians, we have a higher standard. We absolutely must remain engaged in the process, but the way we conduct ourselves is every bit as important as holding the right positions. People are watching, and they are making judgments about Christianity—and Jesus—based on what they see in us. I’m reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, example in the civil rights struggle of the last century. The patience, humility and love that he and others demonstrated even toward those who hated them eventually won over the culture, and it’s a great model for us today. I believe it’s also the way that we can open hearts to the Gospel, and shouldn’t that be the driving force for everything we do?

**C:** *You spent eight years as vice president of the International Division, where you helped Focus establish associate offices in countries hostile to Christianity. How did you go about it?*

**JD:** The family is the doorway. No matter what your religion or worldview, family is important. The truth is that people of all faiths—or no faith at all—want to have healthy relationships, to be good parents, to see their children thrive. I remember a conversation I had with a professor and family advocate from Kenya years ago, and I asked her whether she thought Focus’ programs and resources would be helpful in her country. She laughed and said, “You know, it’s like the Americans to think you invented families, but the fact is, as long as you’re talking about staying together in marriage and raising children, that’s a universal language that will have application around the



**DISCUSSING POLICY:** Jim Daly talks with Stuart Shepard, director of media for CitizenLink—a public-policy partner of Focus on the Family.

world.” We’ve made it a practice at Focus to only go where we’re invited, but through the universal language of the family the Lord has opened some amazing doors, including to several countries that would otherwise have a problem with our Christian identity.

In a word, the ingredient needed to make something happen is humility and action. If truth is truth, it is not about winning. It is about living the truth so others can see it, and when they see it, they desire it. I believe that is what the early Church provided to Rome and Western civilization. If our country continues to decline, the truth will become more obvious and the contrast between good and evil plain to see. Our readiness to embrace those who are broken by abortion, divorce, drugs, sexual addictions and other painful choices will be an opportunity to bring in the harvest for Christ.

**C:** *What do you see as some of the challenges for Christians in the U.S. trying to shape policy in a culture that’s increasingly hostile to biblical views?*

**JD:** Ever since our nation’s founding up to very recent times, there has been something of a cultural consensus on the most basic moral issues. But that is no longer the case. That means if we are to have continuing influence in our culture, we have to articulate our positions in ways that resonate with those outside the evangelical sphere. As Christians, we believe the Bible provides the blueprint for healthy individuals and a healthy society. But we have to take those biblical principles and explain why they are beneficial for the culture as a whole, not just for those who share our worldview. So we advocate for natural marriage not only because the Bible defines marriage as between one man and one woman, but because God’s design for the family benefits all men, women and children, and therefore, all of society.

I’ve had the privilege of traveling to more than 70 countries, including several where Christians are a distinct minority, and in some cases face significant persecution. We’re not there yet as a nation, but there are some troubling signs on the horizon. Still, I don’t think that should make us fearful or cause us to lose hope. In talking to Christian brothers and sisters in some of these other nations, I’m amazed at their boldness and the influence they have in their communities, despite the obstacles they face. They do that by earning the right to be heard—by demonstrating the love and compassion of Christ for those around them on a consistent basis. It’s why I talk so often about the need for both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Yes, we must uphold the truth of Scripture, but if we want people to be open to that truth, we must also put our faith into action by loving and serving others.

**C:** *In this age of polarization, do you feel that people on opposite sides of the issues can work together when they agree? Why or why not?*

**JD:** I believe it is absolutely essential that Christians find ways to work with those outside the fold on issues of common concern. For example, abortion proponents often attest that making abortion “rare” is one of their stated goals. I understand that not every abortion supporter truly believes this, but I will take them at their word if they make such a claim. Is reaching across the aisle something we can support as Christians? Can we not rise above our ideologies in order to save babies? Can we not get together—left, right, and center—to reduce abortion? I believe we can—and we must, in order to save some of these precious lives. In fact, I am willing to risk my reputation to do so. I am

most concerned about preserving the lives of innocent babies.

At a national level, I've appreciated the example set by former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton in their work together on various humanitarian efforts. I don't believe either of them has changed his principles, but they've been able to forge a friendship based on mutual respect and a desire to help alleviate human suffering. People resonate with that approach, and much good can come from it.

**C:** *There can be a tendency in a representative form of government to view politics as the primary solution to our concerns. Do you see politics as the solution or a tool?*

**JD:** Politics is not the solution. It's a tool. Psalm 20:7 says, "Some nations boast of their chariots and horses, but we boast in the name of the LORD our God." I am thankful to live in the United States and to enjoy the benefits of our representative form of government. I don't take it for granted and will work tirelessly to preserve the rights our founders sacrificed and died for. Ultimately, though, our citizenship is in Heaven. God's Kingdom is not of this world. But the world is full of people whom God loves and cares deeply about. This is why I believe it's incumbent upon us to do whatever we can within the parameters of our laws to preserve and champion policies that will best help humanity thrive here on earth.

**C:** *How does evangelism fit into public policy?*

**JD:** So many of the things we've taken for granted as Christians—religious freedom, the definition of marriage, and so on—are being questioned. By standing up for the things we believe with grace and humility, we are pointing to God's truth. Being involved in public policy is one way we can follow Christ's command to "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Personally, I've made it a point to build relationships with some of our ideological opponents, and that has opened the way for me to express the love and hope of Christ to people who desperately need to hear it. I encourage other Christians to do the same.

**C:** *Serious threats to religious freedom abound. How likely do you think it is that you may have to choose*

*between following an ungodly law and following God? How might you handle it?*

**JD:** This is a choice that our brothers and sisters in Christ are already facing in many places around the globe. If that day comes in the U.S., we can learn from their example, as well as that of many heroes of the faith, from Daniel to Paul, who risked their lives and livelihoods in order to follow God rather than the world.



**HOPE AND HUMOR:** Daly says it takes both to maintain a positive outlook in the midst of troubling circumstances.

Already we are seeing people—bakers, florists, sportscasters, technology executives—who are losing their jobs over their support for the institution of marriage. Some Christian business owners came within one Supreme Court justice's vote of having to close their companies for their refusal to pay for the termination of a pre-born child's life. I expect these kinds of challenges to our faith will only increase in coming days. Even so, we know Christ will sustain us during even the darkest of times. He promised: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). ■