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Interview

with

JOEL BELZ

May 16, 1985

Asheville, North Carolina

By Bruce Kalk

Transcribed by Jean Houston

Original transcript on deposit at  
The Southern Historical Collection  
Louis Round Wilson Library

The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

BRUCE KALK: Mr. Belz, let me start by asking you a couple of questions about your background. Tell us a little bit about your family and childhood and the sort of education that you had that put you in the sort of position that you're in right now.

JOEL BELZ: I was born in rural Iowa, where my father was in the grain, lumber, and coal business. He was a third-generation grain, lumber, and coal dealer and really thrived on that business because it was very representative of the prosperous, hearty lifestyle in rural Iowa. Dad enjoyed it and was good at the work of grain, lumber, and coal, but he was also spiritually hungry and by the early nineteen-forties had come under the influence of a man who was later to become a national radio figure, Dr. Peter Eldersveld. It was under Eldersveld's influence that Dad decided to sell his business interests and go into the ministry, and so he went into the ministry in 1946. At that time, he had four children--there were four more still to come--and partly because of that, and because of his real interest in spiritual things, he became very interested in the work of Christian education. Long before it was fashionable--that is, in 1951--he and my mother, in rural Iowa, right out in the middle of the cornfields, started a Christian day school. The Christian day school movement in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, and now especially in the eighties, has become a thriving, growing movement, but in 1951 it was virtually unknown. That school was started with only seven students. So there was a heavy emphasis on Christian education in the early years of our family. At the same time, because of the economic needs of a big family, Dad started a print shop in the basement of our home. I

mention both of those things because I have never quite known whether I was to be primarily devoted to publishing, which I derived from my interest in printing early on, or to be interested in Christian education, and my life has gone back and forth between those two interests. Of course, right now I find myself in a vocation where I'm able to devote myself to both.

BK: Let me ask you just a question or two about the type of educational background that a person in your position would have. Where did you go to school, and what degrees did you get?

BELZ: I have the kind of education which I didn't set out to get, but which I find very valuable for the work I'm in. I spent the first four or five years of my life in public schools. At fifth grade, I went into a private Christian school. It was a good school even though, as I already alluded, we had only seven students the first year I was in it. I studied Latin there; I took my math and my physics and my trig from a man who had his master's degree from MIT, practically tutored by him. That was a hardy, rustic education, kind of the old McGuffey Reader kind of education. In 1958, I enrolled at Covenant College, which then was only three years old. It was still an unaccredited institution. There were twenty-five students in my freshman class, so once again, even on the college level, I had a kind of rustic, do-it-yourself education, although I had an excellent faculty to study under. After finishing at Covenant, I went to the University of Iowa for a master's program in mass communications. I might say that that professional program came after a broad liberal arts program at Covenant, where I had a literature major. I would, on reflection, say that the combination of both a broad, liberal education and a professional

education is, I'm finding, the right kind of education for the work I'm in.

BK: You alluded to involvement in the Christian school movement in addition to your involvement in publishing. What sort of experiences workwise have you had before your current involvement with the Presbyterian Journal?

BELZ: Immediately following my graduate work at the University of Iowa, I became Director of Public Relations and then Director of Development--that is, in fund development--and Public Information for Covenant College, which is now at Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. It's a private liberal arts college. I was on the staff there for about seven years, both doing that kind of public information work and teaching on an adjunct basis on the faculty. Following that, and perhaps just to test my own wings, I started my own business in 1970 doing freelance writing, doing consulting for organizations in their communications efforts, and had what was in one sense a dream job, because one of my primary clients at that time was a charitable foundation which sent me around the world to visit with different Christian organizations in other parts of the world in forty different countries, primarily in the Third World, to help them solve some of their communications problems. That was a very mind-stretching kind of assignment, and I think I could say that my life will never be the same after having worked closely with people in Third World cultures. At the same time, it was not the kind of task that I could devote myself to as a father and a husband, and that's why I had to end that work, because I wanted to be home with my family, and I couldn't travel around the world and be a faithful husband and father at the same time. I then



became headmaster of a Christian junior-senior high school in Chattanooga, Tennessee, which position I held for nearly four years before joining the Presbyterian Journal in 1977.

BK: And right now you're the executive editor, is that right?

BELZ: Yes, executive editor.

BK: Let me ask you a couple of other background questions before we discuss the Journal itself and maybe talk a little bit about theology and maybe a little bit about politics as well. Maybe you could just tell me some information about when you were born and how old your parents were at the time, were you the first in your family, how many children do you have, all this very basic sort of thing.

BELZ: Surely. I was born in 1941 just about three months before Pearl Harbor, so I was a pre-War baby by the barest of margins. I was the second in my family. I have an older sister. I, as I already indicated, have six younger brothers and sisters. It's interesting, perhaps, that while we were born to a poor Iowa preacher, all of us were blessed with the opportunity to go on and do college work. All of us completed that work, and I think four or five of us have completed advanced degrees. A couple are attorneys, one married a man who has his /doctorate in education, and so on. So we were a very blessed family in that respect, and we're a close family. Even though we're scattered across the United States, we keep close ties with each other on the phone frequently and share in each other's work.

BK: Moving into the realm of your work itself, what sorts of organizations, religious organizations, political organizations, or any other type, are you involved with, aside from your work with the

Journal?

BELZ: I continue to have a great interest in Christian education. I have five daughters, the oldest of whom now is just finishing her sophomore year in high school; the youngest is just finishing her kindergarten year. I'm very interested in both the quality and the kind of education which they receive, and so I have served for seven years on the Board of Asheville Christian Academy and spent a couple of years as Chairman of that Board. Asheville Christian Academy is a school of about 200 students, interdenominational, here in the Asheville area. I also serve on the Board of Covenant College at Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, and am Chairman of the Academic Affairs Committee there, which is responsible primarily for selection of faculty and the academic program. So education is obviously something I'm very interested in. I have worked closely with the denomination of which I am a member and have served on some of its committees. Probably the highlight of that task has been to serve on what was known as the Fraternal Relations Committee of the Reformed Presbyterian Church-Evangelical Synod. The significance of that committee, which can be a very dry and boring sort of assignment, for my sake was that we were able on that committee to negotiate and bring about the union of that denomination with the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Fraternal Relations Committee was the sort of negotiating committee which did the groundwork for that. So I had the opportunity for four years prior to 1982, when that union occurred, to serve on that committee. Perhaps one other thing worth mentioning is the role I have had on the Board of what is known as the Association of Public Justice. It's an organization based in Washington, D.C. which is a

group of Christian people seriously interested in bringing about Biblical justice in our society, justice for minorities, justice for educational groups, justice for the land to make us better stewards of the land which we occupy, and that sort of thing. I have served for several years on the Board of the Association for Public Justice. Perhaps that gives you a feel for the variety of interests.

BK: Let me turn now to the immediate work at hand for you, your position with the Presbyterian Journal. How do you envision your role here, the role of the journal, the role of yourself as its executive editor, in terms of relating to the Christian community and perhaps a public even beyond that?

BELZ: Well, you catch us here at the Presbyterian Journal with that question at a rather exciting and momentous time, and that requires just a bit of background, so let me fill you in just a little on the background of the Presbyterian Journal. The Journal was founded in 1942 by a notable North Carolinian, Dr. L. Nelson Bell. Dr. Bell was a medical physician who was a missionary to the land of China in the nineteen-thirties, but returned to this country in the early forties to discover what he considered to be an alarming liberal direction in the denomination of which he was a member and an elder. That was the Presbyterian Church-U.S., known more commonly then as the Southern Presbyterian Church. Dr. Bell had a great love for his church, and he was eager to see the church return to what he considered a more orthodox position. It was for that reason that he started what was then called the Southern Presbyterian Journal, and he started it in 1942 as a monthly magazine, but within about three months the demand

for it was so extensive that it became a weekly magazine, and it has been published on a weekly basis ever since the summer of 1942.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the Journal, from that time until, let's say, the mid-seventies, was always very unmistakably clear. That is, the purpose of the Journal was to expose the liberal direction of the Southern Presbyterian Church, to call the denomination back to a conservative theological position, and to help people in the pew, help the grassroots understand the great struggle for the allegiance of the denomination, for the heart and soul of the denomination. No one ever questioned that that was the role of the Presbyterian Journal. Its enemies and its friends alike said, "We know the Journal, and that's what it stands for. It stands for the conservative position." By the late nineteen-sixties, it began to become clearer that the conservatives no longer controlled, nor did they really have any hope of controlling, the Southern Presbyterian Church. There was increasing talk in the late sixties, and then much more pronounced in the early seventies, of a division in that Southern Presbyterian Church. That division finally occurred in December of 1973, when about 40,000 to 45,000 members--that would be 45,000, perhaps, out of about 850,000, about five percent--left the Southern Presbyterian Church to found what is now called the Presbyterian Church in America. The significance with respect to the Journal is this. Dr. Bell, the founder of the Journal, opposed that division. To his dying day, which almost coincided with the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America, Dr. Bell was a strong advocate of the position that we stay in the Presbyterian Church-U.S., the Southern Presbyterian Church,

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<sup>1</sup>The Southern Presbyterian Journal became a semi-monthly in 1945 and not a weekly until about 1950. J. Belz

and try to reform it from within. But the majority of the Board of the Journal had come to believe that that would no longer be possible, that the only solution was to leave and start over again with a new denomination. And it was a great grief, I'm sure. I never met Dr. Bell, but I'm sure it was a great grief to him to see that division within the Board with which he had worked for about thirty years at that point. And yet that was the position, and the Editor of the Journal at that point, who had been Editor since 1959, Dr. G. Aiken Taylor, cast his lot in a very pronounced way with the majority of the Board, which wanted to have a new denomination. So the Journal, from 1973 on, became identified very, very specifically with the Presbyterian Church in America--let's just call it the PCA--and the Journal was seen by many people as a sort of adjunct of the PCA. The irony was that it was not. It had always, from its first day, been an independent magazine, never received any subsidy from any denomination and still has not, even though it is identified closely with the PCA. So there was a great irony in that here was a magazine, in many respects credited with having brought the new denomination into existence, and not yet having any formal ties or even informal relationship with the new denomination. So now the question is--and when I say, "so now," I'm reflecting back, say, to 1975--what is the role of this magazine, which has been so important for thirty years? If you asked anyone in the PCA to name perhaps the two or three most significant influences in bringing the new denomination into existence, the Presbyterian Journal would always be listed. But now here it is sort of the midwife who has been around to see the birth, but what does the midwife do after the birth? You know, she's kind of excess

baggage, so to speak, and that was the role of the Presbyterian Journal in the mid-nineteen-seventies. And I would say to you quite candidly, sitting here now in 1985, ten years later, that that is still one of the major questions surrounding the Presbyterian Journal: what is the role of this magazine? Now I say that you have caught me with that question right at a critical point, because it happens that within the last month the Board of the Presbyterian Journal has taken some very significant action with respect to the future of the Presbyterian Journal. And I would cast that in this light, that four years ago we started here, under the umbrella of the Presbyterian Journal, the publication of a series of magazines for children, and, as unlikely as it may seem, the publication of those magazines for children and the success that they have had has sort of guided the way, provided the illumination, for the future of the Presbyterian Journal itself in this respect. Almost everyone remembers the little magazines called My Weekly Reader. Those magazines have nothing to do with our organization, but I use them to illustrate a point. The Weekly Reader series, of course, is designed for elementary children to provide an insight on current events. Because the Presbyterian Journal had been published on a weekly basis with a strong emphasis on the news for many years, several of us believed in 1980 and '81 that there might be a place for us to become the publishers of a parallel series of magazines for children published from a Christian perspective, current events from a Christian perspective. And this is where I will tie in my long-standing interest in Christian schools and Christian education. You see, by this time it was a burgeoning movement. There are now reported to be something like thirteen to fifteen, perhaps even eighteen thousand such schools of a Protestant nature. And if you consider that those have from even 100 to 200 average enrollment, you have several hundred thousand, perhaps even over a million,

students, well over a million students, in those schools. They had nothing like the Weekly Reader interpreting world events from a Christian perspective, and so in 1981 we launched, under the umbrella of the Presbyterian Journal, but not limited to a Presbyterian audience, such a series of magazines. They have been rather successful. By comparison, the Journal for the last ten years or so has had a weekly circulation hovering around 20,000, while our children's magazines now have a weekly circulation of 140,000, so you can see that it is one of those cases of the tail beginning to wag the dog. The children's magazines have become our primary occupation here, and the Journal we sort of slip in around the edges, even though the Journal is the mother organization. Now I said that that has illuminated the way to the future, and I wind up this little bit of history with this point, that as we have continued to puzzle over the future of the Presbyterian Journal, the Chairman of our Board, an attorney from Alabama whose name is Jack Williamson, said a couple of years ago, "You know, perhaps the future of the Presbyterian Journal is to become an adult version of the God's World magazines." The God's World magazines are the ones we do for children. And that began to make more and more sense, that there is not on the scene today a weekly magazine taking current events--and here I refer not just to current events in the church, but what happens in Ethiopia, what happens in Nicaragua, what happens in Washington, D.C. and so on--taking all those events and helping Christian people see those events from a Biblical perspective. That is now the commitment of this organization, to produce such a magazine for adults, and we are projecting launching that magazine in March of 1986. At that point, the Presbyterian Journal will continue

to exist, but if things go as we project that they will, the Presbyterian Journal in March of '86 will become a monthly magazine devoted almost exclusively to the ecclesiastical and doctrinal issues of the church as church. Simultaneously, we will start a new weekly magazine, which will be a current events magazine but addressed to a much broader audience than the Presbyterian world. That has been true of the children's magazines; they go to Episcopalians, to Anglican people other than Episcopalians, to Pentecostals, to Baptists, to Lutherans, to Reformed and Presbyterian people of all different affiliations.

BK: Let me ask you a very basic question about the influence of the Journal. Do you feel that, in addition to representing an audience in the PCA, it appeals to a certain segment of the larger Presbyterian church, and that it's very much an organ of, say, a conservative faction in the Presbyterian church at large?

BELZ: There is no doubt about that. Yes, I would affirm what you just said, and, while the PCA is now regarded, and properly so, as the largest of the conservative Presbyterian denominations, with its 140,000 to 150,000 members, it may still be smaller than the conservative faction within the Presbyterian Church-U.S.A. The Presbyterian Church-U.S.A. is now the mainline Presbyterian denomination, and it has something over three million members. Well, among those three million members, there are almost certainly more conservative, Bible-believing people than there are in the entire PCA. A relatively small number of them have an allegiance to the Presbyterian Journal; probably not many more know about the Presbyterian Journal. But among those who do, they look to it regularly.



They look to it weekly for the kind of information that it provides about the conservative movement. I would make one distinction here, however, and this is a troubling one, one that we haven't fully figured out. That is the difference between theological conservatism and political conservatism. There are many, many areas in which, of course, the two overlap, but there are also other areas where they do not overlap. One of the tensions, one of the challenges in our publishing effort is to sort out those areas where theological liberalism and political liberalism are not one and the same thing, because they are not necessarily one and the same, just as political conservatism and theological conservatism are not the same thing.

BK: One often finds it difficult to define a broad term like "evangelicalism" and to understand the very central tenet of its doctrine of the Bible. Perhaps you could shed a little light on that.

BELZ: In our very efforts to find whether there is a market for the new magazine I just described to you a couple of minutes ago, we have been working in the last two weeks with representatives of the Gallup Organization, which, of course, is behind the Gallup Poll. They are very interested in helping identify who in America are evangelicals, and it's interesting that they now have three tests which they use to identify evangelicals, one of which relates directly to the view of scripture. When they want to find whether you are an evangelical, they ask you whether you believe the Scriptures are the infallible and authoritative word of God. Now of course that's to be contrasted with those who see it strictly as a fable or perhaps even as a helpful myth, but nevertheless still a myth. But the Presbyterian Journal and all the publications for which we are responsible would take

a strong position that the Bible is factual, that it is not full of myth, that it contains no myth whatsoever. We were in a discussion within our staff only yesterday about whether we believe that every word in the Bible is to be taken as literally true, and of course we do not, because when Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," he is talking figuratively. And the Bible as great literature is absolutely full of great figures of speech, so to say, "I take every word of the Bible as being literally true" becomes rather ridiculous. But, nevertheless, we here are strong in our conviction that when the Bible seems to be talking about history or about the events of nature, it is to be taken as true. It is not full of ancient mythology. It is, in fact, true in the way it appears to be true.

BK: One of the most obvious questions that stems from what you just said is the contemporary debate over evolution. How does that fit into your understanding of the Bible, and how possible is the view that one could be both a Biblicist and also believe in evolution?

BELZ: I suppose that there are nearly as many positions on this topic as there are purported species among the animals of the world. But that doesn't absolve us of the responsibility for trying to be clear about where we stand. I would say this simply first, and I have to put it all against the background that I am in no sense a scientist. And I would also have to say that not even within this office do all of us necessarily agree. But there are enormous problems for those who hold to evolutionary theory. It is interesting that in the middle nineteen-eighties, we live in an era when even secular scientists are beginning to discover many, many holes in Darwinian evolutionary thought, and all you need to do is read popular magazines

like Time and Newsweek, much less some of the more sophisticated ones, to see what some of those difficulties are. Nevertheless, we live also in a generation which has been so thoroughly taught that evolution is an assumed fact. . . . I was reading the Wall Street Journal this morning, and in one of its Page One columns it was assumed that evolutionary history is that which is factual. And so we have to grapple with the fact that most people, nearly everyone, has been taught that way. But let me reflect very briefly to say only this, that I think that a thinking Christian today has to acknowledge the fact that there is what we call micro-evolution at work, that all you need to do is look at some particular breed of dog, and you can demonstrate rather quickly that that particular breed of dog might not have existed a generation or a hundred years ago. And so surely we acknowledge that there are those little changes that come along the way, and many of the species look quite different. The human species looks quite different right now from what it did a hundred years ago. Neither you nor I would probably have been as tall as we are, a hundred years ago. So let's acknowledge that those things happen. But my, that's a totally different thing from what is suggested to us in the area of macro-evolution, where one species turns into another species. And as soon as scientists begin to have the tiniest evidence that that has in fact happened, apart from a leap of faith, then they ought to begin to show that to us. Until then, those of us in this organization and in the conservative movement at large will remain quite happy to take at face value the early chapters of Genesis which say without apology that God created man quite directly, in His own image and by a special act of creation, and so that's where we

would stake our faith.

BK: Let's turn to theology per se for a moment. I'm aware that the Presbyterian Journal is a representative of Reformed and Presbyterian thought, and I'm very curious if you could give sort of a brief exposition of first, what modern Reformed thought entails, and secondly, how widespread it is and what sort of role it's playing in contemporary society.

BELZ: Let's acknowledge right up front that Reformed thinking represents a rather small component of current-day evangelicalism. Again to make reference to the Gallup Organization, their assumption these days is that perhaps twenty-five to thirty percent of the American population considers themselves to be evangelicals. That would translate to fifty, sixty million people. If you look at the statistics of those churches which call themselves Presbyterian or Reformed, it's going to be a rather small fraction of that fifty . . .

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BELZ: . . . probably more on the order of one-twentieth or even one-thirtieth of the total evangelical population consider themselves to be Presbyterian or Reformed. That's not a very significant proportion. The interesting thing is that the influence of those Presbyterian and Reformed people is all out of proportion to their numeric size and has been historically. The influence of such institutions historically as the Puritans, of course, of Princeton University. Princeton, of course, is a Presbyterian institution. If you were to look at just the Presidents of the United States,

you would find a certain strain of greatness running through those who called themselves Presbyterian or Reformed in various ways. And so, at the risk of sounding a little bit preferential in saying that, I would challenge most people to see that the good thinking that has been characteristic of the Presbyterian and Reformed world has had a profound impact on American culture and society. There are those, of course, who argue, and I think with good reason, that the American Constitution itself was primarily designed by Presbyterians, who took the Presbyterian form of government and made the American government over in the likeness of Presbyterian government, and that's worth exploring. But now with respect to the unique tenets of Reformed thinking, I suppose that to get to the core of it most quickly, we would simply point to our great confidence and our great joy in the fact that we believe in a God who is sovereign. There is perhaps no single tenet of Reformed thinking which is more important than to see a God who knows what He is doing, who has everything within His control, and who orders everything for His own glory and for the joy of His people. I would say that there is no single thought which runs as a strain through all of our thinking more than that does.

BK: For clarification, does that entail a belief in the traditional five points of Calvinism?

BELZ: Yes, it certainly would, because, even though those things are often misunderstood by those who ridicule Reformed thinking, of course, God's sovereignty in the process of salvation is very, very important. And so you take the five points of Calvinism, which would be the total depravity of man, and by that we don't mean, of course, that men are as bad as they could possibly be. We simply mean that they are sinful through and through; they're sinful in their mind, sinful in their heart, sinful in their best efforts. When we talk about total depravity, we mean that, that man really can't do anything

by himself to save himself. We talk about unconditional election as a second point of Calvinism, which means that God takes the initiative in our salvation. We don't naturally seek God; He seeks us. And we talk about the limited atonement, meaning simply that all those that Christ shed His blood for and paid for will be regenerated, that the atonement of Christ was limited to those people for whom He intended to die and whom He intended to take to be with Himself. And we talk about irresistible grace, that no one can stay God's hand. When He intends to be gracious to us, you can't reject His grace because He's powerful, and you're not. And we talk about the perseverance of the saints, that those who are converted and made part of God's family will persevere in that calling and will be His for good; nothing will tear them out of God's hand. Could I just say that, having gone through that whole thing, which is exciting and precious to people of Reformed thinking, I would not think that it would be good to let it ever be said that that is the totality of our faith, because that can come across as sounding like a very self-interested sort of faith. I think what we need to say with that is, what a gracious God it is that we are talking about when we describe Him that way, that He has chosen to reach down among people and claim some to be His own, and that He is planning not just all of His creation but all of history as well to bring glory to Himself through that process. It's a much more cosmic and much bigger scene than someone listening only to the five points might at first think.

BK: Are there any modern or contemporary thinkers, writers,

theologians that you feel carry on the strain of thought that you and similarly minded Reformed evangelicals hold to?

BELZ: Two of those who perhaps have done as much to shape more people's thinking in the last generation than anyone else are men who died within the last year or year and a half. One died within the last month; his name was Gordon H. Clark. He has been called perhaps the leading Christian philosopher in the United States in this century. Dr. Clark wrote some twenty books. He was a keen, keen mind who shaped some of the leading evangelicals today through the teaching that he did, especially in the nineteen-thirties and forties. The other is Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer, who died a little more than a year ago. Dr. Schaeffer had a very profound impact, especially on many college and university and seminary students through the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies, even into the early nineteen-eighties. Dr. Schaeffer taught from a base first in Switzerland, and then lectured and travelled very, very widely in the United States and Canada as well as in other parts of the world. But those two men stand out in my mind right now as two whose names I think will be known over the next couple of generations as those who were leaders in Reformed thinking. There are, however--and this is very, very exciting--many, many younger people these days who are embracing Reformed thinking because they find it whole, they find it full of integrity, they find it to be something which talks about the whole scene, not just man's spiritual side, but his whole person. And they see it as related to culture; they see it as related to politics; they see the Reformed faith as one that addresses the totality of man's condition rather than just his soul. That's why, even in those church and religious

groups that do not consider themselves Reformed, you find good thinking going on which is reflective of historic Reformed philosophy, even if people may not call it that directly.

BK: You've brought up the subject of politics, and perhaps we could talk about that for a moment or two, particularly your involvement in the Association for Public Justice.

BELZ: Well, perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned that, because my direct relationship with the Association for Public Justice ended a couple of months ago when I rotated off the Board of Directors. Would you mind if I switch it a little bit more to our interest in doing a magazine which does reflect very, very much the current political scene. I should stress that the Presbyterian Journal for all of its history has been known as a conservative voice, and that conservatism would be found both in the theological sphere and in the political sphere. I think anyone who had read the Journal consistently for the last couple of years would say, "I'm wondering if the Journal is going to continue to be conservative in a political way. I don't have any doubts that it's going to be conservative in a theological way, but I do begin to see some differences from what I used to read in the Journal on a political basis." And I would say that that is deliberately so, both on the part of those of us who have shaped the editorial philosophy of the magazine and those on the Board. And the distinction is a very, very important one but a subtle one, and therefore needs to be thought of carefully in this respect. Most of us are political conservatives. I voted for Goldwater in 1964. I was active in the campaign. I was very disappointed, youthfully disappointed, when he lost, and I suppose



I have rooted intuitively for the conservative cause ever since, because that's where my heart is. But some of us have also felt very strongly that it is just as possible for conservatism to be humanistic as it is for liberalism to be humanistic, and for us to place way too much trust in our own boot straps and the old boot strap process, to put too much trust there rather than in the Lord God, where our trust really ought to be. And concurrent with that, in too many conservative circles there has been an ignoring, sometimes casual, sometimes painfully deliberate, of those who are in genuine need, of those who the Old Testament would have called "the widows and the orphans," "the downcast and the oppressed." Some of us feel that traditional conservatism has indeed ignored the needs of such people. It's for that reason that, when we look at the political scene, some of us-- and I would say this is true of the Presbyterian Journal in particular and the various magazines that we represent--are not particularly interested in whether we are known as liberals or conservatives. We are much more interested that we be known as Biblically oriented in our thinking, and we think that will end up taking us in some directions which are neither liberal nor conservative. Because God's way is always a different way, and we think that many of the philosophies of conservatism are sound. My, our own generation is proving that. The Reagan administration is a popular administration, because it has called us to fiscal responsibility. It has called us to live within our means. There may be some exceptions to that, because the budget that Mr. Reagan proposed is hardly living within our means, but I think he has to be credited with that whole direction in our fiscal outlook. I think that conservatism calls us to see our enemies for

who they really are, that they are real enemies. At the same time, some of the things that conservatism calls us to are not necessarily Biblical, and it's our desire within these publications to call us to what, for want of a better shorthand term, I would call compassionate conservatism, conservatism which is rooted in Biblical principles of good economics, but nevertheless conservatism which has compassion for the oppressed, which looks out for the needy, and which does that perhaps in ways that conservatism hasn't over the last few generations.

BK: I'm going to mention three out-groups, and I'm going to ask you what you think a solution or at least a way to go to address their problems would be: women, blacks, and the poor in general.

BELZ: We are just this week dealing with the issue in one of our columns of comparable worth, and of course that brings up, more than any other group, women and how they are paid. And it's been an interesting discussion within our own staff here, because the column which was submitted to us was a typically conservative column, and so it helps us make the point I was just trying to make. The column stressed that the whole proposal of paying on the basis of comparable worth ignores freedom, ignores classic economic freedom which conservatives hold dear. And I agree with that, and I happen to be against the basic issue of comparable worth on a personal basis, because I think it is very unwise economics, and I think it will not work. I think it ignores many of the realities of why women are paid less. I think that some of it does have to do with prejudice and history, but I think it also has to do with women's expectation of how long they plan to stay in the labor force. Many, many women join the labor force expecting not to stay a lifetime, and that very fact diminishes

their value when it comes to pay scale. If someone comes to me and says, "I plan to work for you for a lifetime," I am obviously going to be willing to invest more in that person than I am in someone who comes and says, "I hope to work for you for about five years, and then I will probably be looking at something else." I can't afford to invest as much in that person. Now that may not be fair, but that's economic fact. However, the other side of it is the issue of justice, and I think Christians are always wrong when they deal only with the issue of freedom. And you see, that is too often what conservatives have done; we'd make reference only to freedom and not to justice. If a woman comes to this organization--and we happen to have a woman now who is our business manager, the third highest in authority here, and we are very delighted to have her here--committed to work on the same basis that a man comes to work, then I believe we have to look as Christians with great seriousness at the injustice of it if we say, "But nevertheless, because you're a woman, we're going to be paying you less." Freedom, yes, but also justice, and those two qualities have to be kept in mind as we look at all three of the groups that you just mentioned. Let's take up the issue of blacks. I have no simple solutions other than to say that I am impressed again and again that until we have actually rubbed elbows, until we have worked with those people in the place of their need, we had better not come up with simple formulas and simple solutions about how to deal with their problems. I think that that is where we evangelicals are way too often to be faulted. We have centuries-old formulas to apply to everybody's situation. I am not one who likes

the idea of broad, collective historic guilt. I do not consider myself guilty for the plight of the blacks in this country, and so I resent that kind of implication. But I consider myself very, very responsible, because God has put me in a place of plenty, in a place of relative wealth, and I think He will hold me responsible if I do not find ways to open those same doors to black brothers and sisters. And that is one of the commitments that we have in our publications, to call attention to that kind of responsibility. I don't like laying guilt trips on people where real guilt does not exist. But guilt is one thing; responsibility is another thing. I would apply the same basic thought to the task of the poor. We would distance ourselves--when I say "we," it's an editorial "we," editorially here at the Presbyterian Journal and in our various publications--from the writings of Ronald Sider and those who I think would lay what I would call a false guilt trip on many Christian Americans. I do not believe when I sit down to a good dinner that I am taking that food out of the mouths of those in Ethiopia or other needy countries. But, while I don't want to feel falsely guilty, neither do I want to let myself glibly off the hook, as I think too many conservatives do, and say, "I have no responsibility. We've made our way; let them make their way." And that, I think, is the message that comes across too often from conservatives in our own society.

BK: Let me bring a couple of these things together and ask you what your feelings are on the rather trendy subjects of liberation theology and the newer feminist critiques of the Bible.

BELZ: With respect to liberation theology, I would challenge

first of all those who hold to it to demonstrate where the Marxist roots, which I think lie behind liberation theology, have borne fruit in anything. I would buy entirely the word which you used in your question, "trendy." Where have those roots been anything more than trendy? Where have they borne fruit? Where has the thinking of Marxism gone on to bear solid fruit over a period of time? I think those who would hold to liberation theology have a responsibility to demonstrate that to us. Now at the same time, let's acknowledge that we are living in the wide open blessings of a country that went through a revolution, so we need to be careful when we put down every revolutionary movement. You and I are free people because, for better or for worse, a couple of centuries ago a country went through a revolution, and perhaps the oppression of Britain in this country was nothing compared to the oppression that many people feel in Third World countries. We have to keep that in mind, but I think it is nevertheless a misuse of scripture, a misuse of the theology of God's redemption, to apply it to the political scene. I think it would have been a mistake to say that the central teaching of Jesus Christ had to do with the colonies' overthrow of the British government in the seventeen-seventies, and I think that it would be a mistake to do that in El Salvador today or in South Africa. That is not the central issue of Christ's redemption. At the same time, there is a working out of our salvation, a working out of its implications, and that working out might ultimately have something to do with our culture, our politics, the particular scene in which we find ourselves, but it is by no means the central issue. With respect to feminism and the

feminist critique of scripture, what a volatile issue, and yet I think the falsehood that is at the root of so much of feminism is not to be laid so much at the feet of those feminists who have been badly taught. I fear, and I say this with humility, that very, very often the falsehood that is there ought to be laid instead at the feet of many of us within the Biblical church who have not filled good masculine roles in which we are imitators of a loving God who is in a very masculine role. We have found it convenient to be macho. God is not macho. God is very, very masculine but very, very loving and very, very tender, something that for several generations men in our culture and society have found it hard to be. I think that one reason for the rise of feminism is that men in our culture have not known how to be real men, that is, to be men after the image of God who nevertheless know how to love and be tender and how to be sensitive. And if men learn how to be that, then women will be able to be women and will have no need to be radically feminist in the mold that we find giving rise to the feminist critique of the scriptures which you mentioned. That critique, incidentally, is a terribly erroneous critique. It is very selective in what it chooses; it takes figures of speech to be too literal. But I still come back to the fact that we have to take responsibility in too many cases for giving rise to that, and I fault us more than I do them.

BK: Whither evangelicalism? What direction do you think that evangelicalism as a whole, and Reformed evangelicalism in particular, will take?

BELZ: That's a heavy, heady question, and who is wise enough?

We hope some things, and we dread others. But I suppose that, realistically, Dr. Francis Shaeffer's projections for the end of this century are projections which are going to come about. I think there will be a parting of the ways among evangelicals, increasingly, through which many evangelicals will choose to move more and more toward relativistic standards rather than rather direct Biblical standards. Some of the issues, in particular, where I would say this will be evident will be in the area of feminism and in the area of science, where we find ourselves embarrassed to be judged by those who have no interest in Biblical standards. I would project that in the next couple of decades, there will be increasingly substantial parts of evangelicalism for whom the traditional doctrines of Biblical creation, direct creation by God will have little meaning. And what we have considered to be traditional and direct teachings of scripture about the place of women in the church, I think those will have less and less meaning. I think those are two good examples, and I think that there will be substantial parts of evangelicalism which will nevertheless hold to what we call Biblical standards for salvation. That is, salvation comes by faith in the atoning work of Christ; they will believe that. They will certainly believe in the miracles of Christ and so on. But when it comes to ordering what some people call our secular thought and behavior, they will be willing to give a lot more elasticity to traditional Biblical positions.

BK: Let me just wrap up my interview with you by asking you what you feel are the single most important issues on the political and on the theological agenda today. Maybe I can throw in education

as well because of your vast interest in that area. If you could address one issue in each that you felt was of paramount importance.

BELZ: I don't want to be overly simplistic, but I would throw the same answer at all three issues, and I would say in theological terms for all three issues. It has to do with our ability to develop a practical hermeneutic. By that, I simply mean that the man in the pew--and I consider myself not a scholar, not a thinker, but a man in the pew--has to know how to take scripture and apply it to life. That is true in the church, because you see it has to do with whether we elect women as elders--what do the scriptures teach?--it has to do with the running of our political scene; it has to do with education. Can you have a sound educational program which doesn't make reference to God? Can you have a sound educational program which doesn't make any reference to his scripture, his revelation of himself? Well, I don't believe so, but it all has to do with how we interpret scripture, and we can't depend on people in ivory towers for our detailed exposition of scripture. We have to learn how to do that ourselves. That, of course, was one of the great teachings of the Reformation, that every plowman, they said, needed to have the scripture in his own language where he could read it day by day and understand what it taught. Well, if you and I, then, have to take that scripture, which we have in our language--we have multiple versions of it--and send that to some critic at a university or a seminary somewhere and say to that critic or that professor, "Now tell me what this scripture really teaches, because I can't understand it," we have undone the whole Reformation. And so I think the burning issue in politics, in theology, in education is how



do we understand scripture? Is it possible for you and me to pick up our Bibles, to take them at face value without having somebody very specialized come along and say, "Now let me tell you what it really means"?

[End of interview]