



The View From the Hill

Essays by David Langford

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

In Washington, DC, our nation's capital, stand precious monuments reminding us of the roots and foundational truths of our nation. As Christians, we also have monuments, priceless and sacred, that point us to central beliefs undergirding our faith in Jesus Christ. It is appropriate that in this next to the last issue of *The Christian Appeal*, we feature more words from Consulting Editor and *Appeal* board member Dr. David Langford whose writing has blessed our readers immensely for many years.

—Curtis Shelburne,
Managing Editor

By David Langford

Monuments remind us of our core beliefs. As Christians, we have some precious monuments.



Curtis Shelburne

“I will consider
all your works and
meditate on all your
mighty deeds. Your
ways, God, are holy.”

Psalm 77

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CHRISTIAN APPEAL

The View From the Hill



The View From the Hill

Years ago, our family vacationed for a week in Washington, DC. It was the first time for my wife and kids to visit our nation's capital. For me, it was a chance to return to the place that was my home for one year in 1967–68.

It was a memorable year for me personally and for the nation in general. It was the year the nation saw the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. It was also the year the saints at the 16th & Decatur Church of Christ witnessed my death and rebirth; it was the year of my baptism.

It was an emotional and meaningful experience for me to go back forty-plus years later and visit the church of my baptism, the school in which I spent seventh grade, and the apartment complex where I lived and played.

The trip, though, was not primarily for me to revisit the historical places of my childhood, but for our family to visit the historical monuments of our country. It was a great trip, and for me the highlight came when we visited Arlington National Cemetery, especially when we climbed to the top of the hill of that cemetery.

From that vantage point, we were able to look out over the entire city. It was then I realized for the first time the positioning of the White House, the Capitol, and our three great national monuments honoring our three great presidents: Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington.

The monuments are at the very center of the city, facing each other. More than any others, these five structures represent the core ideals of America: Thomas Jefferson,

The View From the Hill

the author of our founding document, The Declaration of Independence; Abraham Lincoln, the president who preserved our union in the face of its greatest crisis; the White House and Capitol representing the balance of power necessary if a government is to be “of, by, and for the people.” And, in the center of it all, the monument to George Washington, whose leadership, as much as any other, led this nation to victory and freedom.

These monumental reminders of what our nation is truly about, stand at the

center of the city, facing each other, confronting each other



Curtis Shelburne

with the enduring wisdom and the foundational truths of our history.

Back in the city, however, as one drives and walks about

The View From the Hill

town, that defining perspective so easily seen from atop the cemetery hill is quickly lost in the menagerie of government buildings—hundreds of buildings, thousands of offices, tens of thousands of government workers all carrying out the business of governing.

A Love-Hate Relationship

I think most citizens have a kind of love-hate relationship with government. We love our country; we understand the need for government, but we often differ on how it should work. For some, government protects us from many problems in our country. For others, government *is* the problem

of our country. Both understandings are true.

Part of the genius of our country is that these conflicting political viewpoints are

built into our government, so that our differences are settled by elections rather than insurrections. The weapons of conflict in America are not guns and tanks, but honest controversy and reasonable dissent.

All differences aside, there exists in the majority of Americans a reverence for the core monuments that represent us all.

Whatever viewpoint a citizen may take politically, it's understood that those who disagree with him are still fellow Americans. Our controversies do not come so much from different ideals, but from different understandings of how best to implement the common

The View From the Hill

ideals of our nation. All differences aside, there exists in the majority of Americans a reverence for the core, central monuments, that represent us all.

Of course, sometimes people are tempted to see things differently. Sometimes people define only their political viewpoint as American, and any who differ from that viewpoint are labeled un-American. That kind of perspective leads not to honest controversy and reasonable dissent, but to bickering, name-calling, and the demonization of people's character. This is

what turns people off from politics and government.



Curtis Shelburne

This is why it is so valuable for citizens to occasionally climb up Arlington hill and

The View From the Hill

once again gain the perspective that comes from above.

Atop the Hills

As I stood atop the hills of Arlington Cemetery that day and looked out over our capital city, it struck me how the scene was a rich metaphor of our faith.

As Christians we too have great “monuments” or “beliefs” which stand at the center of our faith, core beliefs that define us and set us apart from others.

Our Scriptures begin with the words, “In the beginning God . . .” We believe there is a God. We are not atheists. And the God we believe in is not the silent God or impersonal God believed in

by many of our friends who follow various eastern religions. Central to our faith is our belief that God has expressed himself. He has

revealed himself and his will to us, as Hebrews 1:1 asserts, “at many times and in various ways.”

A second monument to our faith is that God has most clearly revealed himself to us through

his Son. We believe in the Incarnation. We believe that Jesus, the baby born in a manger, is in fact the Word who was with God from the beginning, through whom all creation was made, and who himself was made flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:1–14).

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The View From the Hill

We believe Christ was both fully human and fully God. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and on the third day rose again, defeating death and becoming Lord of all and a faithful high priest (Hebrews 2:8–18).

Deep Mystery

All of this is a mystery which we will never fully comprehend.

Nevertheless, we believe this mystery because of the compelling evidence and testimony to its truth (2 Peter 1:16–18; 1 John 1:1–4).

This particular monument, the Incarnation, is what most separates us from our Muslim friends and others who see Christ only as a teacher or

prophet. Christ is much more to us than that. He is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossian 1:15); his name is “above every name in heaven

and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:9–11). He is “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last” (Revelation 22:13). He ascended into heaven, and one day, from

the heavens, he will return to reign forever on his throne (Acts 1:9–11).

A third monument to our faith is the Holy Spirit. If Yahweh is God *above* us, and Emmanuel is God *with* us, the Spirit is God *in* us. Emmanuel tells us he will not leave us but will send his

We believe Christ was both fully human and fully God. He became Lord of all and a faithful high priest.

The View From the Hill

Spirit to us (John 14:16–18). The Apostle Peter ends his sermon at Pentecost with the promise of our faith being the gift of the indwelling Spirit (Acts 2:38). It is by that indwelling divine presence that we are made the children of God (Romans 8:9–11). And the internal dwelling is not merely in us as individuals but collectively as the Church which is the dwelling place of God through the Spirit, the Body of Christ in this world (Ephesians 2:22; 4:12–13). By the Spirit, God recreates us and does his good works in us and through us (Ephesians 2:8–10).

The Fourth Presence

This brings us to a fourth presence in this divine square, not monumental in the previous sense, and yet no less central to our faith, the Church.



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The Church is not so much a monument as it is the reflecting pool at the base of the Washington monument. It is there, not for itself, but to reflect the majesty of another.

In one sense, the Church could be referred to as monumental for it is the mystical Body of Christ in the world, what some call the “second incarnation,” Christ in the flesh

The View From the Hill

again, this time *our* flesh and working to unite all humanity in him (Ephesians 2:14–22; 3:8–12).

The Church is more than a mere social reality; it’s a supernatural reality, the supernatural indwelling of God’s Spirit in God’s people.

The Church is monumental, not in its own glory but in the glory it reflects, the “new creation” being recreated increasingly into the image of our Lord in order to better reflect Christ to the world (2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:17).

The Church is the voice of God in the world preserving the word of faith entrusted to it, the gospel, beginning with the faithful proclamation of the apostles (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 2:42), and then entrusted to faithful teachers (2 Timothy 2:2), teachings which we believe were divinely preserved in

The View From the Hill

the authoritative canonization of Holy Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

It is our faith in these wonderful monuments that makes us Christian. As the view from the cemetery in Arlington speaks to Americans, Christians find perspective by their view from a hill. Central to our faith is the hill of Calvary.

From that hill, we see most clearly who God is, a God of perfect justice and perfect mercy. At the cross, God solves the divine dilemma of a justice that demands punishment for sin and a mercy that desires forgiveness for sinners (Romans 3:25–26). That dilemma is solved

through the divine love that dies in our place. This is our faith.

To see our faith as monumental is nothing new. From the beginning, believers have tried to distinguish the defining truths of our faith. Paul gives a list in Ephesians. There is “one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

Father of us all” (Ephesians 4:4–6).

In the first few hundred years of Christianity, the core truths of Christianity were stated in classic creeds like the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, statements of faith expressing the beliefs of practically all who claim the

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The View From the Hill

name “Christian.” From the beginning, there has been a persistent impulse to distinguish what is monumental from what is not.

Coming Down

But when we come down from that hill, our vision of the foundational monuments of our faith is too often obscured by the menagerie of religious buildings, hundreds of different churches, filled with thousands of believers separated by their myriad opinions and interpretations of how best to implement and practice those monumental truths of the faith.

It has always been this way, even with those very first, first-century Christians.

We read in Scripture how, from the beginning, believers wrestled to understand what it meant to live out their faith. That is what all the letters of the New Testament were about. Each one was written to address the issues, and controversies, and disagreements that constantly came up as Christians differed on how to best live out the truth of Christ.

The same has been true throughout church history. In every century, Christians have sought to discern how best to live out the never-changing verities of the faith in the ever-changing venues of time and culture. From the beginning, Christians

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The View From the Hill

have struggled to follow Paul's dual admonition to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3), even as they continually sought to "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Falling Short

Unfortunately, there have been times in history when believers, in their effort to be the one true Church, became an oppressive, authoritarian church, using worldly governments to

enforce and even persecute those who dared to challenge official doctrines and teachings.

In response, attempting to correct such errors, another generation of believers would emerge in protest against such authority, emphasizing instead individual freedom to read and understand Scripture for themselves. This was the motivation behind what is known as the Protestant Reformation.

Tragically, though, that "correction" led to multiple divisions and subdivisions of believers into various factions, sometimes just as authoritarian, oppressive, and ill-formed as those they

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The View From the Hill

had protested themselves.

In the late 18th century, another generation of believers coming from these various divided communities began protesting the divisiveness of the protesters, re-igniting the dream for Christians to once again be a united Church, not by agreeing on every point of teaching, interpretation, and opinion, but to climb up the hill again, and to look down and see the central, defining, monumental truths of the faith.

Historically in America, during the Second Great

Awakening (1790–1840), what is often called the



Martin Luther, Dresden Statue: TamPisessith / Shutterstock

"Restoration Movement" was born from this impulse, born to call on Christians to recognize the unity of the Spirit that is given *to* us, not achieved *by* us.

The movement had several mottoes that expressed their

The View From the Hill

heart and mind.

“We are Christians only, not the only Christians.”

“Speak where the Bible speaks, be silent where Bible is silent.”

“Let Christian unity be our polar star.”

“The Church is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.”

“In faith unity, in opinions liberty, in all things love.”

This was a movement led by many leaders who did not call believers in other denominations unchristian, but recognized there were Christians in all the denominations. They did however call on all Christians not to exclusively denominate themselves as the only

Christians, but instead to recognize there was only one Church, and to pursue the unity of all believers in Christ. It was a noble vision.

In time, however, the movement, in a tragic irony, fell victim to the same plagues of controversy, division, and party spirit that had so divided Christians in the past.

Born in protest of denominations that demanded agreement on long lists of issues about which good and honest brethren can and will disagree, many came up with their own list of issues that they insisted believers had to agree upon. Consequently, multiple new groups of separate Christian fellowships

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The View From the Hill

were created, holding various combinations of positions on contentious issues, each one usually claiming to be the only right one and thus the only true Church.

Instead of Christians engaging in honest controversy and reasoned discourse, trying to help one another interpret God’s word, too often believers “de-Christianized” other believers, declaring them not to be truly members of the Church, or not as faithful as were they themselves.

Standing on the Hill

These are some of the thoughts that came to me as I stood on top of the hill at Arlington cemetery, thoughts

about the Christian faith, church history, and my own historical heritage in that history as I have described it.

Atop that hill, I was again

“Atop that hill, I was reminded of how important it is for us to ascend that other hill to regain perspective.”

reminded of how important it is for us to ascend that other hill, if we want to climb out of the confusion of all the competing religious divisions and try to regain a perspective found, not at the foot of a great

cemetery’s hill, but the view from the foot of Christ’s cross.

That view enables us to discern the difference between the enduring monuments which stand at the center of our faith from generation to generation, from the ever-changing structures each individual generation builds

The View From the Hill

to discern how to live out that faith in their particular time and place.

Standing at the foot of the hill, our focus is clouded by our differences.

Standing at the foot of the cross on top of the hill, silhouetted by the shadow of God's mercy and love, we all look pretty much the same, and I hope we recall the prayer of our Lord that expressed his

heart's desire just before he was led to that cross.

"I pray that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

Much blood has been spilt over more than two hundred

years preserving the union we call the United States. The hills of Arlington Cemetery are a sobering and enduring reminder of the cost of that uneasy union.

But the blood spilt from a single man on a single hill called Calvary some 2,000 years ago is a far more sobering and far more enduring reminder that the uneasy union of God's Kingdom

is not accomplished by our righteousness, or our correctness, or our goodness, but only by our faith in Christ, and in the singular work done by him on a hill called Calvary.

May we never make the unity for which Christ prayed more complicated than that.



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 **Jesus**
John 17

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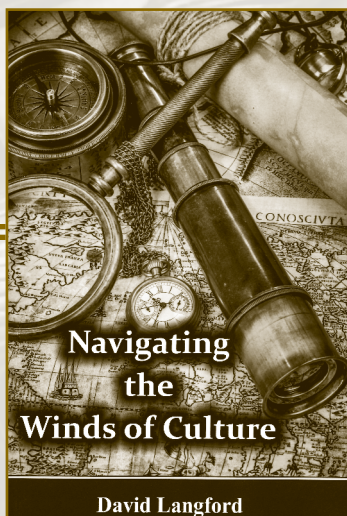
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