

Prison Fellowship Founder Chuck Colson Dies at 80

Evangelical Christianity lost one of its most eloquent and influential voices today with the death of Charles W. "Chuck" Colson.

The Prison Fellowship and Colson Center for Christian Worldview founder died at 3:12 p.m. ET Saturday at the age of 80.

After a brief illness, Colson passed away at a northern Virginia hospital with his wife, Patty, and family at his bedside. On March 30, Colson became ill while speaking at a Colson Center for Christian Worldview conference in Lansdowne. The following morning he had surgery to remove a pool of clotted blood on the surface of his brain, and doctors determined he had suffered an intracerebral hemorrhage.

Though Colson remained in intensive care, doctors and family were optimistic for a recovery as he showed some signs of improvement. However, Tuesday (April 17) Colson became gravely ill when further complications developed.

A Watergate figure who emerged from the country's worst political scandal, a vocal Christian leader and a champion for prison ministry, Colson spent the last years of his life in the dual role of leading Prison Fellowship, the world's largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families, and the Colson Center, a research and training center focused on Christian worldview teaching. Colson has been a central figure in the evangelical Christian community since he shocked the Washington establishment in 1973 by revealing his new Christian commitment in the midst of the Watergate inquiry.

In later years Colson would say that because he was known

primarily as Nixon's "Hatchet Man," the declaration that "'I've been born again and given my life to Jesus Christ' kept the political cartoonists of America clothed and fed for a solid month." It also gave new visibility to the emerging movement of "born-again" Christians.

In 1974 Colson entered a plea of guilty to Watergate-related charges; although not implicated in the Watergate burglary, he voluntarily pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice in the Daniel Ellsberg Case, which was prosecuted in the acutely sensitive Watergate atmosphere.

He entered Maxwell Federal Prison Camp in Alabama in 1974 as a new Christian and as the first member of the Nixon administration to be incarcerated for Watergate-related charges. He served seven months of a one- to three-year sentence. Colson emerged from prison with a new mission: mobilizing the Christian church to minister to prisoners. He founded Prison Fellowship in 1976; this would become perhaps his greatest contribution to the church and the world. Although many local churches had ministered in nearby prisons for many years, most observers would affirm that Colson and Prison Fellowship truly put prison ministry on the agenda of the church in a substantial way.

Colson's personal prison experience and his frequent ministry visits to prisons also developed in him new concerns about the efficacy of the American criminal justice system. His founding of Justice Fellowship in 1983 helped make Colson one of the nation's most influential voices for criminal justice reform.

His call for alternative punishments for non-violent offenders was often effective because Colson's conservative credentials enabled him to line up conservative legislators in support of what had traditionally been seen as a liberal set of reforms. That passion and sense of obligation to God's calling and to his fellow inmates took Colson into prisons several times a year. He visited some 600 prisons in the U.S. and 40 other

countries, and built a movement that at one time extended to more than 50,000 prison ministry volunteers.

Often, particularly in the early days of Prison Fellowship, he was vocal in his disgust over the terrible conditions in the prisons and the need for more humane conditions and better access to religious programs. Colson's advocacy for prisoners' religious rights took an additional form in the late 1990s when he and Justice Fellowship were at the forefront, lobbying legislators to support the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), both nationally and state by state. Colson's and Justice Fellowship's work to bring an end to the national scourge and shame of prison rape culminated with the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act in 2003.

His 1987 book, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, was a best-selling directive to the Christian community on the proper relationships of church and state, and it positioned Colson as a centrist evangelical voice for balanced Christian political activism. Although not as visible as others in the front-line battles, Colson provided counsel to many of the most-evident activists and had a strong influence on Christian politicians who went to Washington in the '80s, '90s and into the new millennium.

In recognition of his work among prisoners, Colson received the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1993, donating the \$1 million prize to Prison Fellowship. In perhaps his most eloquent and well-known speech, "The Enduring Revolution," given at acceptance ceremonies at the University of Chicago, Colson encouraged the church in the face of troubling times: "For history's cadence is called with a confident voice. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob reigns. His plan and purpose rob the future of its fears.

"By the cross He offers hope, by the resurrection He assures His triumph. This cannot be resisted or delayed. Mankind's

only choice is to recognize Him now or in the moment of ultimate judgment. Our only decision is to welcome His rule or to fear it.”

Colson’s other awards included the Presidential Citizens Medal (2008, the second-highest U.S. civilian honor), Humanitarian Award from Domino’s Pizza Corporation (1991), The Others Award from the Salvation Army (1990), several honorary doctorates from various colleges and universities (1982-1995), and Outstanding Young Man of Boston from the Chamber of Commerce (1960).

Recognized as a champion for historic orthodoxy, Colson ignited a controversy in the Protestant world in the mid-1990s with his initiative to declare common ground with conservative Roman Catholics in two documents called *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.

The evangelical-Catholic issue was just one in which Colson brought intellectual vitality to popular evangelicalism in the last three decades. Many considered him a prophetic voice for the evangelical community and, perhaps, an intellectual successor to theologian/sociologist Francis Schaeffer.

Perhaps in open recognition of that legacy, his magnum opus was titled *How Now Shall We Live?* after Schaeffer’s *How Then Shall We Live?* In all, Colson wrote more than 30 books, which have sold more than 5 million copies. His autobiographical book, *Born Again*, was one of the nation’s best-selling books of all kinds in 1976 and was made into a feature-length film.

His last book, *The Faith*, is a powerful appeal to the church to re-embrace the foundational truths of Christianity. Colson was one of the Christian community’s most sought-after speakers, but he resolutely refused to establish a speaker’s fee. Perhaps anticipating criticism of any appearance of self-enrichment by a former Watergate figure, Colson donated all speaking honoraria and book royalties to the ministry and

accepted the salary of a mid-range ministry executive.

In 1991 Colson launched *BreakPoint*, a unique radio commentary that provides a Christian perspective on today's news and trends. *BreakPoint* was aired weekdays on more than 1,400 outlets nationwide with an audience of 8 million listeners. But his heart was ever with the prisoner. He clearly never forgot the promise he'd made to his fellow inmates during his brief stay in prison that he would never forget those behind bars. In his later years, Colson focused full-time on developing other Christian leaders who could influence the culture and their communities through their faith.

The capstone of this effort was The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview, a research and training center launched in 2009 for the promotion of Christian worldview teaching. In addition to a vast library of worldview materials, the Colson Center provides online courses and serves as a catalyst for a growing movement of Christian organizations dedicated to impacting the culture.

In 2009, Colson was a principal writer of the Manhattan Declaration, which calls on Christians to defend the sanctity of human life, traditional marriage and religious freedom.

More than half a million people have signed the Manhattan Declaration. Collaborating with other Christian leaders, Colson aimed to launch other ecumenical grass-roots movements around moral and ethical issues of great concern. Colson was born in Boston in 1931 and received a scholarship to Brown University. He went on to earn his law degree at George Washington University in Washington. He served in the Marine Corps from 1953-1955, becoming what was at the time its youngest captain.

He began his political career in 1956, when he was the youngest administrative assistant in the Senate, working for Massachusetts Senator Leverett Saltonstall. Although God

worked through Colson to encourage Christians around the world and serve many whom society would often neglect, his greatest love and focus were his family. Colson is survived by his wife of 48 years, Patty; three children, Wendell, Christian and Emily; and five grandchildren.