



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 22, 2012

Charles Colson, Watergate Figure, Christian Leader, Dies at 80

“Evangelical Christianity lost one of its most eloquent and influential voices today with the death of Charles W. ‘Chuck’ Colson,” [Prison Fellowship](#), the ministry he founded in 1976, said in a statement. The announcement went on to note that throughout his life after Watergate, Colson “won the respect of those who disagreed with his religious and political views thanks to his tireless work on behalf of prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. Colson maintained that the greatest joy in life for him was to see those ‘living monuments’ to God’s grace: Prisoners transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.”



Born on October 16, 1931 and raised in Boston, Colson turned down a full-ride scholarship to Harvard (something an admissions officer told him no one had ever done before), graduating instead from Brown University and George Washington University law school. He then served in the Marines, worked for Republican politicians, and had a successful private law practice before signing on with the Nixon administration.

Had it not been for Colson’s own high-profile prison stint, the life of the one-time Special Counsel to President Nixon could have turned out much differently. “Colson once famously said he’d walk over his grandmother to get the president elected to a second term,” recalled the Associated Press of his role in Nixon’s [Committee to Re-elect the President](#) — specifically his underhanded efforts to collect intelligence on the Democratic Party. In 1972 the *Washington Post* referred to Colson as “one of the most powerful presidential aides, variously described as a troubleshooter and as a ‘master of dirty tricks.’”

While the arrest of James McCord, the re-election committee’s security head, and four others in a break-in at Democratic National Committee offices in 1972 touched off “Watergate” and led to Nixon’s resignation two years later, “it was actions that preceded the actual Watergate break-in that resulted in Colson’s criminal conviction,” reported AP. “Colson pleaded guilty to efforts to discredit Pentagon analyst Daniel Ellsberg. It was Ellsberg who had leaked the secret Defense Department study of Vietnam that became known as the [Pentagon Papers](#).”

The campaign against Ellsberg — including a break-in at his psychiatrist’s office in an effort to find evidence to discredit his anti-war efforts — became one of the major focuses of the Watergate investigation, and led to Colson’s 1974 guilty plea for obstruction of justice.

But in 1973, before serving his seven-month prison sentence, Colson came to faith in Christ, a decision that would change the course of his life. “I shudder to think of what I’d been if I had not gone to prison,” Colson said in a 1993 interview. “Lying on the rotten floor of a cell, you know it’s not prosperity



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or pleasure that's important, but the maturing of the soul."

[CBN News](#) recalled that in 1974, as he walked out of Maxwell Federal Prison Camp after serving his sentence, Colson promised his fellow inmates that he would not forget those behind bars. "I thank God now, Pat, that I went through it," he told CBN founder Pat Robertson, "because I carry with it a heavy burden for the men and women who are in prison."

In 1976 Colson acted on his promise by founding Prison Fellowship, an outreach that offers spiritual mentoring to inmates and support to their families. Over 35 years later Prison Fellowship serves inmates in more than 100 countries, combining highly successful Christian-based rehabilitation programs with initiatives aimed at humanitarian prison reform.

"With the prison population exploding and with the crime rate just soaring, we're not dealing with the root causes of crime," Colson explained about the ultimate goal of his ministry. "We're just putting men in cages. We're treating them like animals, and we expect them to come back and be rehabilitated." He emphasized that "there's one way" to true and lasting change, "and that's when a man turns his life over to Jesus Christ."

[Charisma News](#) noted that his 1983 founding of Justice Fellowship "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."

Throughout his life Colson made time in his busy schedule to stay connected to the men and women incarcerated in prisons all over the world. "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," *Charisma* reported.

In addition to his prison ministry, Colson became an oft-quoted spokesman on the Christian faith, penning some 30 books and producing his daily "[Breakpoint](#)" radio commentaries, addressing how Christians could impact an increasingly secularized culture. "It won't do for us to just sit around in our sanctuaries, entertain ourselves, sing our 'happy clappies' and feel good about ourselves," Colson challenged fellow evangelicals. "This is a time for the church to engage the world, and it has to be done through the church."

One of his most impacting books, 1987's [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 centrist evangelical voice for balanced Christian political activism," reported *Charisma*. "Although not as visible as others in the frontline 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."

Among the many honors and awards Colson received for his efforts on behalf of prisoners and the Christian faith was the [Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion](#) in 1993. As he did with all the royalties for his books and speaking engagements, he donated the \$1 million prize to Prison Fellowship.

In February 2005, Colson was named one of *Time* magazine's "25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America." The AP noted that *Time* "commended Colson for helping to define compassionate conservatism through his campaign for humane prison conditions and called him one of 'evangelicalism's more thoughtful public voices.'"



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In 2008, President George W. Bush awarded Colson the [Presidential Citizens Medal](#), the second highest honor to a U.S. citizen, for his Prison Fellowship work. "Through his strong faith and leadership, he has helped courageous men and women from around the world make successful transitions back into society," the White House said in a statement about the honoree. "The United States honors Chuck Colson for his good heart and his compassionate efforts to renew a spirit of purpose in the lives of countless individuals."

Reaction to Colson's death was almost universally filled with praise for the positive impact he had on faith and values in America and beyond. "Today the world lost a Christian statesman, a dedicated servant of prisoners, and a powerful example of God's ability to transform a life," said Lamar Vest, president and CEO of the [American Bible Society](#), one of the nation's leading distributors of Scripture.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R- Ky.) said that Colson's powerful story was "a constant and necessary reminder to those of us in and out of public office of the seductions of power and the rewards of service. His famous redemption story and tireless advocacy on behalf of the marginalized and the outcast have called all of us to a deeper reflection on our lives and priorities."

[Heritage Foundation](#) president Edwin Feulner noted that "America is the land of second chances — and few men have made more of theirs than Chuck Colson did. For in addition to loving and serving his country, the former Marine captain and 'President's hatchetman' came to love and serve a God of second chances."

In a statement Prison Fellowship CEO Jim Liske said that while family, friends, and associates grieved the loss of Colson, "we rejoice that Chuck is with Jesus, we rejoice as we reflect on his life and legacy and that we could be a part of that, and we rejoice when we think of all the redeemed in heaven who will greet him and thank him for the role he played in their salvation."

Not long before his death, Charles Colson looked back on his life and accomplishments, reflecting that "whatever good I may have done is because God saw fit to reach into the depths of Watergate and convert a broken sinner. Everything that has been accomplished these past 35 years has been by God's grace and sovereign design."

Photo of Charles Colson: AP Images



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