

David P. Schippers, RIP

Douglas Hackleman

Perhaps once a decade Hollywood produces a genuinely worthwhile movie. In 1966 it was Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*—one of the best ever. And it *still* won six academy awards.

In his play adapted for the screen, Bolt's protagonist was renaissance man Sir Thomas More—a sixteenth-century scholar, lawyer, ambassador, Lord Chancellor and sometime friend of the British monarch, Henry VIII.

Probably for both political appearances and to salve his stinging conscience, King Henry wanted Thomas More to approve his divorce from Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn. Eventually More's approval of the marriage was demanded of him in a context that required that he affirm—under oath—something to which he was strenuously opposed. For refusing to swear his approval of the marriage, More was condemned to death for treason.

“On any day up to that of his execution,” wrote Playwright Bolt, “had [More] been willing to give public approval to Henry's marriage with Anne Boleyn, he could have gone on living.” But More's words to his daughter, Margaret, during a prison visit scene, illuminate his refusal to perjure himself:

“What is an oath then but words we say to God?”
“When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again.”

Fast forward from 1535, and a man who was beheaded because he refused to lie under oath, to 1998 and a United States president who refused to tell the truth under oath. For today's Christians,

even more discouraging is a public that doesn't seem to understand or to care what is at stake. But in the midst of this moral reticence there was raised recently—on Capitol Hill—a solitary, clear, articulate voice.

In an historic moment, in the well of the Senate, David P. Schippers, the House Judiciary Committee majority's lead counsel, a life-long Democrat, presented the fifteen criminal charges against William Jefferson Clinton. At the conclusion of this somber recital Schippers made a brief personal statement:

I am speaking . . . as a citizen of the United States who happens to be a father and grandfather. To paraphrase Sir Thomas More, [in] Robert Bolt's excellent play, *A Man For All Seasons*, ‘The laws of this country are the great barriers that protect citizens from the winds of evil and tyranny. If we permit one of those laws to fall, who will be able to stand in the winds that follow?’

Schippers' concern for the integrity of our legal system was transparent. But he went on to warn the Judicial Committee members of an invisible audience—an audience Thomas More would have taken for granted. “Fifteen generations of Americans,” he said, “many of whom are reposing in military cemeteries throughout the world, are looking down . . . and judging what you do today.”

Scandalized by this perfidious president, the public yawn and our reluctant representatives, Christians need to pray, lobby, educate, vote and remember David Schippers—the kind of man desperately needed, for these impeachable times.
