

Global Food Crisis Hits Home

Happy with your grocery bills these days? Do those gasoline pump meters seem to whir like Vegas slot machines, except you never hit the jackpot?

The two issues are not unrelated and they're affecting pocketbooks and bellies at home and around the globe. Some Westerners might react with detached shock to stories of food riots in places like Haiti, India, and Cameroon. But when your local Costco and Sams Club start limiting rice purchases (as recently reported), reality creeps in.

Americans seem worried. A USA TODAY/Gallup poll found 73 percent of US consumers concerned about food inflation; almost half said it caused their households hardship. Eighty percent expressed concern about energy prices.[{1}](#)

Food price increases that may cause inconvenience or hardship in affluent nations can be devastating for families in the developing world. Recent food riots in Haiti cost the prime minister his job. *The New York Times* reports that spiraling prices are turning Haitian staples like beans, corn and rice into closely guarded treasures. Some Haitians eat mud patties containing oil and sugar to silence their grumbling stomachs.[{2}](#)

Silent Tsunami

Economist and special United Nations advisor Jeffrey Sachs says of the global food problem, Its the worst crisis of its kind in more than 30 years. There are a number of governments on the ropes, and I think theres more political fallout to come. [{3}](#)

The UN World Food Program says skyrocketing food prices could create a silent tsunami turning 100 million people toward

hunger and poverty. Executive director Josette Sheeran called for large-scale, high-level action by the global community. [{4}](#) British Prime minister Gordon Brown asserts, “Tackling hunger is a moral challenge to each of us and it is also a threat to the political and economic stability of nations.” [{5}](#)

World Vision, one of the worlds largest relief and development agencies, announced serious cutbacks, saying they are able to feed 1.5 million fewer people than last year. The well-respected Christian humanitarian organization appealed for international donors, citing swelling food prices and increased food need. Rising fuel costs boost fertilizer and food transportation costs. Corn diverted to make biofuels cannot become lunch, [{6}](#) though some feel biofuel is a misplaced whipping boy. [{7}](#)

Your Strategies

Of course folks in the developed world, not threatened with devastating hunger, can employ multiple strategies to stretch their resources. Careful shopping and research is one. (Holy Coupon Clipping, Batman! Just look how much we can save if we time our grocery shopping to the sales rather than our impulses!) Diet adjustment, portion control, and budgetary belt-tightening are others.

And while youre trying to be sure your outgo doesnt exceed your income lest your upkeep become your downfall—may I suggest another wise move? If possible, share some of what you have with the desperately needy. World Vision founder Bob Pierce had as his life theme, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you! [{8}](#)

Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively fight poverty and hunger. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas

Kristof says, Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices. {9} I would add World Relief and the Salvation Army to the list. Your local house of worship may be a good place to start.

As another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, Blessed are those who help the poor. {10}

Notes

1. Sue Kirchhoff, Poll: Food costs a major worry for consumers, USA Today, April 22, 2008; at www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2008-04-22-food-costs-rise-poll_N.htm, accessed April 25, 2008.
2. Marc Lacey, Across Globe, Empty Bellies Bring Rising Anger, The New York Times, April 18, 2008; at tinyurl.com/6hhcsx, accessed April 25, 2008.
3. Ibid.
4. World Food Crisis a 'Silent Tsunami,' Agence France-Presse, The New York Times, April 23, 2008; at tinyurl.com/59asm6, accessed April 25, 2008.
5. CTV.ca News Staff, World Vision needs urgent help as millions starve, April 23, 2008; at tinyurl.com/5y4wy5.
6. Aid group to cut food ration to millions, CNN.com, April 22, 2008; at www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/04/22/food.program.cutback, accessed April 25, 2008. Editor's Note: "Page not found" error at this address while processing article. Try typing title of article into CNN.com search engine.
7. Bad policy, not biofuel, drive food prices: Merkel, Reuters, April 17, 2008; at www.reuters.com/article/environmentNews/idUSL1721113520080417. accessed April 25, 2008.
8. [Proverbs 19:17 NLT](#).
9. Nicholas D. Kristof, Bush, a Friend of Africa, The New York Times, July 5, 2005; at <http://tinyurl.com/y8wwoj>; accessed

April 25, 2008.

10. [Proverbs 14:21 NLT](#).

2008 Rusty Wright

Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

“How Sweet the Sound”

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound),” Newton wrote, “That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”^{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.[{2}](#) My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.[{3}](#) Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."[{4}](#) At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."[{5}](#) He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.[{6}](#)

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.[{7}](#) Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high

hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.”{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. “We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied.”{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, “to pass away the time”—an edition of Thomas à Kempis’ classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, “What if these things were true?” Dismayed, he “shut the book quickly.” {12} Newton called himself a terrible “blasphemer” who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”{15}

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we’ll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity. [{16}](#)

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship. [{17}](#)

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. [I concluded](#) that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable." [{18}](#)

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising. [{19}](#)

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.[{20}](#) Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.[{21}](#)

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.[{22}](#) Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.[{23}](#) His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.[{24}](#)

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with

Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.^{25} During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, “trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him.”^{26}

Newton’s biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me,” he wrote, “that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”^{27} His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.^{28} Jonathan Aitken says, “Newton’s testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause.”^{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered “many dangers, toils, and snares” on his life’s voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"[\[30\]](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."[\[31\]](#)

Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[\[32\]](#)

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[\[33\]](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[\[34\]](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[\[35\]](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's

inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."[\[36\]](#)

Notes

1. From *Olney Hymns*, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.

2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.

3. Aitken, op. cit.

4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

10. Newton, op. cit., 60.

11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.

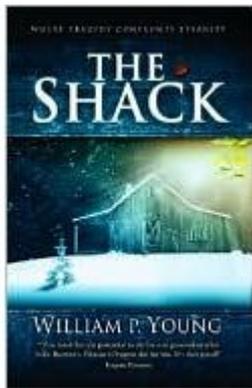
12. Newton, op. cit., 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.

14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.
16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.
17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.
18. Ibid., 112.
19. Ibid., 125-126.
20. Ibid., 127-137.
21. Ibid., 140-141.
22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.
23. Ibid., 304.
24. Ibid., 299-308.
25. Ibid., 310 ff.
26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.
27. Ibid., 319.
28. Ibid., 319-328.
29. Ibid., 319.
30. Ibid., 243.
31. Ibid., 347.
32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
33. Newton, op. cit., 23.
34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.
35. Ibid., 85.
36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

Response to “The Shack”



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel, [{1}](#) for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read [“Is The Shack Heresy?”](#) by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It’s a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It’s signed “Papa,” his wife’s favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*, [{2}](#) where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character’s questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of “How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?”

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don't read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn't have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my "wisdom journal," a book I've been adding to for years with wisdom from others that I didn't want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn't. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about "doing Christianity." It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

Fresh Insights

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

- God is warm and inviting
- He collects our tears in a bottle
- Jesus was not particularly handsome
- God is one, in three Persons
- The Holy Spirit is a comforter
- There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
- God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation

- God values what is given from the heart
- God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God
- God is compassionate toward the anguished question, “How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?”
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ
- The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled
- There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
- How good triumphs over evil
- The nature and purpose of the Law
- The healing nature of God’s love
- Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
- God’s omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
- In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as “a large, beaming, African-American woman” (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa’s reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

“Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both

genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning."

She leaned forward as if to share a secret. "To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes."

. . . She looked at Mack intently. "Hasn't it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you've been through, you couldn't very well handle a father right now, could you?"

He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful. (pp. 93-94)

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack's heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of "God is our Mother" garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

Deep Ministry

On his personal [website](#), the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So

is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to “kill our independence” (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God’s love looks like. I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn’t just love me, He *likes* me.

An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

“We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. . . What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense to us.” (p. 122)

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

“We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.” (p. 145)

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *servicing*. God submitting to His creation? I don't think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack*, one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, "If you'll let me, I'll be the Papa you never had." (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God's eyes when they meet face to face, who can't give themselves

permission to rest from their “hamster treadmill” for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ’s bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant, grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God’s heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only “Christianity from the neck up,” but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*. Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that “boys express affection aggressively.”

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best “take-away” of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people’s hostility toward the book isn’t about what it actually says, it’s about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like “heresy” and “dangerous” to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to

millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it's important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife's urging, "You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God." He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young's "out of the box" theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a "slice of God," so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul's view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—"Gandalf with an attitude," as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for

relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking “What is the author using this imagery to portray?” is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the [heart of El-Shaddai \(“the breasted one”\)](#). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father’s and the Spirit’s hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul’s children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn’t know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

The Shack presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and

character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise seminarian told me, "We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy."

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people's understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It's a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree. In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that's important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. "Controversies don't bother me," this wise believer said. "I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis, time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it."

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals', and it troubled me. As I prayed, "Lord, what's up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective," I believe He answered me: "He doesn't get everything right." Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn't get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don't know what our blind spots are and we don't know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with "getting your

theological beliefs right.” And not “getting everything right” is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this “heretical” book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is that He knows Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and He’s using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there’s something to be said for that.

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Castro’s Staying Power

“I threw a rock at Castro!” my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain’s queen and Thailand’s king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. [\[1\]](#) Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following

year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching [JFK demand](#) the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel...and humanity...survived.

Several years later my parents' airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on." [{2}](#)

What reflections are in Castro's future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life's finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one's thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, "I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ)." [{3}](#)

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it's hard to envision the one who said "You will know the truth, and the

truth will set you free”{4} jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably... This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.{5}

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.”{6}

Fidel Castro’s physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

Notes

1. Reuters, Weird and wonderful: the facts about Fidel Castro, The Independent tinyurl.com/24yqvn, accessed February 19, 2008.
2. Reuters, Text of Fidel Castro’s Announcement, New York Times, February 19, 2008; at www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-cuba-castro-text.html, accessed February 19, 2008.
3. Reuters, FACTBOX-Quotes from Cuba’s Fidel Castro, February 19, 2008; at in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-32028720080219, accessed February 19, 2008.
4. [John 8:32 NIV](#).

5. Andrew Buncombe, When Castro believed in God: letters from prison reveal atheist leader's spiritual side, The Independent, 26 February 2007; at tinyurl.com/36xnrs, accessed February 20, 2008.

6. [John 11:25-26 NLT](#).

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What's Happening to Our Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, [The Last Christian Generation](#), where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, (www.youthtransitionnetwork.org) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak “Christianese” to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1)

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They don't feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They're not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don't feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. That's a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can't name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don't know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don't believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, don't believe in Satan and don't believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not

new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long [Mind Games Conference](#) will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more fruitful:

- www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.
- www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.
- collegel0lseminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.
- [Conversations CD](#) this information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.
- www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.
- TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

As Long As it Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else – A Biblical Critique of Modern Ethics

Rick Wade considers a common idea behind the ethical thinking of many people. He identifies the inconsistencies in this approach and compares it to a biblically informed ethical system. As Christians, we should bring a Christ centered perspective to our ethical decisions.

What ethical principle guides our society these days? Clearly the Bible isn't the norm. What is?

As I see it, people generally don't try to justify their actions. We want to do something, so we do it. And if we're criticized by someone else, how do we respond? The one justification I hear over and over again is, "I can do whatever I want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else."

Do a quick search on the Internet using the phrase "hurt anyone else." Here's a blog by a motorcycle rider who says it's no one else's business whether he wears a helmet because it doesn't hurt anyone else.[{1}](#) Here's another one where the topic is some kind of staph infection that seems to be spreading among gay men. The writer says he or she's a "big gay rights supporter and definitely [believes] that a person should be true to their own sexuality (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else)." The writer goes on to raise a question about whether certain sexual activity is okay from a public health perspective.[{2}](#) Now there's a dilemma.

“As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else.” On the surface, that looks like a pretty good rule. I can think of things we’d all agree are morally acceptable that we should avoid if others could be hurt. There’s nothing wrong with swinging a baseball bat around, unless you’re in a roomful of people. In Scripture we’re admonished to give up our freedoms if necessary to save the conscience of weaker believers (1 Corinthians 8).

Problems with the Rule

As a fundamental rule of life, “as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else” is a pretty skimpy ethical principle. There are several problems with it.

First, if there are no concrete ethical principles that apply across the board, how do we measure hurt? Some things are obvious. Swinging a bat in a roomful of people will have immediate and obvious negative consequences. But physical hurt isn’t the only kind. We need to know what constitutes “hurt” in order to apply the “as long as” principle. So, one question to ask a person who touts this approach to life is, How do you decide whether something is hurtful or not? Without concrete ethical norms, the “as long as” rule is empty.

Second, this rule faces a problem similar to one faced by utilitarian ethics. *Utilitarianism* seeks to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But how can a person predict the outcome of an action? It’s difficult to work out a greatest good calculus. The “as long as” rule doesn’t even go as far as utilitarianism. The latter at least seeks the good of others (in principle, anyway). The former only seeks to avoid harming them. So the question becomes, How can you predict who will be hurt or how?

Here’s another thought. Consider the influence others have had on *you*, including those who did what they wanted “as long as it didn’t hurt someone else.” What about the young man who was just enjoying his high school prom night with a little

partying and wrecked his car, killing someone's daughter? Or how about the couple who had a sexual relationship apart from the responsibilities of marriage, and then parted over jealousy or a changed mind and carried the scars of that relationship into others? Maybe you've had to deal with the ramifications of such experiences, yours or your spouse's. Maybe you've had to try to learn on your own how to behave like a grownup because your dad never buckled down in the serious business of life but just had fun, forgetting that he was teaching you by word and example how to live.

When hearing this rule espoused, I can't help wondering how many people even *try* to figure out the effects of their actions on others. I mean, we might give a moment's thought to whether something will hurt anyone in the immediate setting or within a short period of time. But do we think beyond the immediate? How do our actions as young people affect our children not yet born? Or what does it mean for parents if their teenage daughter engages in a hard night of partying and winds up in a coma because of what she's imbibed? Such things do happen, you know?

One more objection before giving a thumbnail sketch of biblical teaching on the matter. When a person speaks of not hurting others, what about that person him- or herself? Is it acceptable to hurt ourselves as long as we don't hurt others? I'm not talking about taking measurable risks that we are confident we can handle. I'm talking about the array of things people do and justify with the "as long as" principle: doing drugs, engaging in "safe" sex apart from marital commitment, cheating on taxes, spending years following childish dreams without giving serious thought to the future, even living a very shrunken life.

That last one is important to note because ethics isn't just a set of rules given to prevent harm; it also has to do with guiding us into fulfilled lives. The "as long as" rule can justify a seriously diminished life. Most of us have

encountered people (maybe our own teenagers!) who could be doing so much better in life than they are, and when challenged they respond, “What does it matter? I’m not hurting anybody else.” Maybe not, but they’re sure hurting themselves.

A Biblical Ethic

What does the Bible say about these things? Scripture calls us to put others ahead of ourselves. We aren’t to cause others harm. More than that, we’re to seek others’ good. We’re given the ultimate example of sacrifice in Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing” for our benefit ([Philippians 2:6-8](#)). We’re told to give up things we can legitimately enjoy if they hurt other people ([1 Corinthians 8](#)).

Furthermore, we’re given real ethical content: Don’t steal. Don’t murder. Don’t take someone else’s wife. Do good to others. Feed the hungry. Practice justice grounded in the righteousness of God.

Then there’s the matter of our own lives. Is the “as long as” principle sufficient to encourage us to develop and use the abilities God has given us? A couch potato might truly not be hurting anyone else, but he’s living a small life. Just seeking to do good to others can be a motivation to get up and get busy and do ourselves some good as a result.

The “as long as” rule pushes personal liberty almost to the limit. It puts me at the center of the world. I can do whatever I want, and furthermore, you’d better not do anything that I find hurtful. I stated the rule in the first person in the opening paragraph (“I can do whatever I want”) deliberately. For some reason we don’t apply it as liberally to others as we do to ourselves!

Without ethical content, however, it gives no direction at

all. It really has no place in the Christian life. Our lives are to be governed by an ethics grounded in the nature and will of God which takes into account a biblical view of human nature, a biblical call to protect others and seek their good, and the divine project of redemption that seeks to save and build people up in the image of Christ, including ourselves.

This vision of life makes the “as long as” rule look rather paltry, doesn’t it? We can do better.

Notes

1. TheLedger.com, (see: tinyurl.com/34m9mf).
2. MyFolsom.com (see: tinyurl.com/2jp32o).

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See Also:

[“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”](#)

The Mitchell Report: Christian Response to Steroids in Sports

Heather Zeiger considers the question of how Christians should respond to the revelations regarding steroid use in sports. The Mitchell report is one example accompanied by many others

such as the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency report on cyclist, Lance Armstrong. Heather takes a biblical worldview perspective on this issue taking into consideration their impact on our bodies, our perception of the world, and the perception of young people on what is acceptable in our society. As a Christian, there are numerous reasons not to take steroids and not to glorify the accomplishments of those who do.

Former Senator George Mitchell was charged to investigate and document the prevalence of steroid and human growth hormone use in Major League Baseball. The objective of the report was not only to bring to light the steroid problem, but to offer solutions to help eradicate its use and abuse. Senator Mitchell specifically wanted “the media to focus less on names and more on central conclusions and recommendations of the report.”[\[1\]](#)

Later this month and in February, hearings before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform will be held to determine if stronger penalties for steroid use and more rigorous testing are appropriate. The committee will also investigate whether certain athletes are guilty of using performance enhancing drugs. This has brought the topic of steroid abuse in sports to the forefront of the media, providing an excellent opportunity for discussion.

Sport is an important part of life. The Apostle Paul wrote about running and boxing, and used it as an analogy for the Christian walk.[\[2\]](#) And unlike the Gnostics who despise the body, we honor it as part of our *imago dei* or being created in God’s image (for more information see [Bodybuilding: Edifying Thoughts About Our Bodies](#) by Michael Gleghorn). So as Christians, we embrace playing sports and exercise. But like so many things, there is a way to play sports that is consistent with a Christian worldview and a way that is not. There are both physical and biblical reasons why steroid use is dangerous and unethical.

What are Steroids?

The first reported use of performance enhancers was in 776 B.C. {3} when athletes would eat sheep testicles to increase their testosterone levels. Today athletes don't use sheep, but the intention is still to increase their testosterone beyond natural levels. Steroids are chemicals that are either a form of testosterone or a testosterone precursor. *Anabolic androgenic steroids* (AAS) {4} increase muscle mass and muscle recovery by producing five to thirty times the testosterone that the typical male body produces. {5} Athletes who abuse steroids do see an increase in muscle mass and/or speed, and at first, will see improvements in their performance. ESPN's *The Dope on Steroids* reports that steroids can make the body as much as 50 percent more muscular than is possible without them. {6}

Using steroids to increase muscle strength is illegal, but there are many forms of steroids that remain undetectable in drug tests making it difficult to regulate their use. Furthermore, players have also abused another illegal, undetectable drug called *human growth hormone*, which is not a steroid, but is often used in conjunction with steroids to make a player bigger and to speed injury recovery. {7} Random drug testing creates controversy over privacy violations, and announced tests are easy to beat. By using water-based steroids, it only takes a couple of weeks for players' bodies to dilute the chemicals to undetectable levels.

While steroids do produce short-term results, the side effects and long-term effects can be devastating.

The Problem

Side-Effects

Physical side-effects from steroid use include increases in cholesterol, acne on arms and back, increase in blood

pressure, stiffening of heart tissue, increased production of body hair yet decreased production of scalp hair, stunted growth, hypogonadism (diminished hormonal or reproductive functioning in the testes or the ovaries), sexual dysfunction, and increased risks for both strokes and heart attacks. Psychological side effects include aggressiveness, depression, and addiction/dependence. See [Dangers of Steroid Abuse](#) for a more detailed look at these and other possible side-effects to steroid abuse.

Influence on Teens

Athletes are role models for kids, and some studies indicate that athletes are second only to parents in their influence on teen choices. I remember watching track and field as a child and later as a teenager and being captivated by the runners. They had this combination of grace and strength that I admired, so I eventually took up running.

Kids turn to athletes for inspiration all the time, but the problem is they also believe that the athletes are successful because they use steroids. Take this testimonial from www.steroidabuse.com as an example:

For me, taking steroids was a natural move. I was an athlete in high school and got a college scholarship to play football at a major university. Between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college I started my first cycle because I thought I needed to be faster. I took injectable testosterone and winstrol. I figured that winstrol must be good because it's what Ben Johnson got busted using. I wanted to be fast like him.

I was getting stronger at every workout and feeling great. I had heard that steroids can make your joints weaker but I figured Ben Johnson didn't have that problem, so it was probably just a rumor. {8}

Another testimonial discusses how a parent's obsession with his son, Corey, and his athletic success eventually lead him to administering steroids to Corey when he was only 13. He thought this was how the pros compete. In the end, Corey, now 18, comments about his steroid experience:

As Corey tries to scrounge together enough money to get his own place, one point still gnaws at him: He firmly believes he could have been a champion without pharmacological enhancement.

Soft-spoken and reserved, Corey wavers among embarrassment, regret and awe when he reflects on his fractured teenage years and his experiment with steroids. "People make it sound like these medications are only performance-enhancing, but they have a huge mental impact as well," he says. "By the time I was done, I was a wreck..."[{9}](#)

And as the Mitchell Report stated, "After the Associated Press reported Mark McGwire was using androstenedione (a testosterone precursor)...sales of that substance increased by over 1000%."[{10}](#) Athletes have a strong influence on people, especially teens.

The Christian Worldview

When the news of Barry Bonds' alleged steroid use broke last summer, *Newsweek* commentator George Will observed that "Athletes who are chemically propelled to victory do not merely overvalue winning, they misunderstand why winning is properly valued... In fact, it becomes a display of some chemists' virtuosity and some athlete's bad character." He later adds that "the athlete's proper goal is to perform unusually well, not unnaturally well."[{11}](#) We have a moral foundation for these points in God's word.

First of all, steroids cause the body to be enhanced beyond

what it was designed to do. We believe that God has designed us with his purposes in mind, and he has gifted people with different talents and abilities. From an engineering perspective, he put the parts together with a particular design in mind, so when a steroid user becomes stronger than that for which he was designed, the rest of the parts, his joints, tendons, and ligaments, become damaged.[{12}](#)

Secondly, steroids are often taken for cosmetic reasons—usually by men obsessed with acquiring a certain physique. As we see from Scripture, this is a disproportionate view of the human body. The Bible tells us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices.[{13}](#) And as we see in Luke 12:22-34, Jesus tells us not to worry over what we will eat or drink and what to wear, that He will provide what is necessary. This puts the body in its proper perspective as something to care for, but not something to obsess over.

Lastly, there is a character issue here. Consider the Apostle Paul's view of weakness, which we could apply to physical weakness as well:

So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, and that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, ESV).

As Christians, we believe in being good stewards of our health, but there is a difference between "therapeutic" and "enhancement." Therapeutic medical advancements alleviate the

effects of the fall of man, such as death and suffering. Enhancements involve man trying to become what he deems as “better” than how God made him, which essentially was the very cause of the fall. Obviously, there is gray area here, but this helps us make some distinctions. As we see from Paul’s statements, the human idea of weakness is not necessarily God’s idea of weakness. God’s view is that in our weakness Christ is glorified.

Notes

1. Mitchell, George L. “Report to the Commissioner of baseball of an independent investigation into the illegal use of steroids and other performance enhancing substances by players in major league baseball,” Dec. 13, 2007, Office of the Commissioner of Baseball, pg. SR 35-37.

2. [1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#) (ESV)

3. www.steroidabuse.com

4. *Anabolic* = metabolic process of building larger muscles from smaller ones, *Androgenic* = production of male traits

5. Mitchell, pg. 7. The complete Mitchell report can be viewed at Major League Baseball’s official site: mlb.mlb.com/mlb/news/mitchell/index.jsp

6. sports.espn.go.com/specialdesign/steroids/window.html

7. Both Anabolic steroids and human growth hormone (HGH) are legal when used for prescribed medical reasons. Muscle growth or cosmetics is not an FDA approved medical use for either of these drugs.

8. www.steroidabuse.com/true-stories-of-steroid-abuse.html

9.

sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2008/magazine/01/15/sins.of.a.father.0121/index.html

10. Mitchell, pg. 16.

11. George Will, *Newsweek*, May 21, 2007, www.newsweek.com/id/34762

12. [Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13-16, Proverbs 16:4](#) (ESV)

13. [Romans 12:1,2](#) (ESV)

Voting and Christian Citizenship

Applying a biblical worldview to your voting choices is an important part of your role as a citizen. Byron Barlowe looks at how Christians should exercise their right to vote and make biblically informed decisions in the voting booth.

Summary

It is both a sacred duty and privilege for Christians to serve as citizens who salt (preserve) and light (illuminate) our culture. Americans have inherited a government system based solidly on a biblical worldview, but one that also tolerates and protects other viewpoints. Truly humble, tolerant political engagement does not equal spiritual compromise. Christians found out how seductive political power can be in the 1980s and need to resist the pull of compromise. God doesn't take sides; we need to make sure we're on His side.



Although a strongly biblical candidate may be ideal, that's not often a realistic option. Instead, we must use our sanctified minds to prayerfully choose between imperfect candidates—who are *not*, after all, seeking *pastoral*

positions. Believers have a duty to vote our values. How else would we vote? Our calling: not to force those values on others in a free society, but to honor the privileges of citizenship, including legitimate political influence, and to vote our convictions.

Christian Citizenship: A Duty and Privilege

One pundit wrote fifteen months before the 2008 election, "If you're not already weary of the 2008 presidential campaign . . . you must be living in a cave... The campaign began the day after the 2004 election, making this the first non-stop presidential campaign in history. The media, desperate to sustain interest in the horse race, pursue such earth-shattering stories as: 'Which candidate owns the most pets?'" [\[1\]](#)

Then, a new kind of Internet-age debate featured Democratic presidential candidates responding to home-grown videos posted to *YouTube.com* by members of the public. Among them: two Tennesseans dressed like hillbillies and a snowman, ostensibly concerned about global warming!

Hard to take politics seriously given all of the theater, isn't it? But political engagement—including voting—is a God-given, blood-bought right that Christians must take seriously. We are called by the Lord Jesus to be preserving salt and illuminating light in our culture. And it's not just presidential races that matter.

Kerby Anderson, in an article entitled "Politics and Religion," wrote, "Christian obedience goes beyond calling for spiritual renewal. We have often failed to ask the question, 'What do we do if hearts are not changed?' Because government is ordained of God, we need to consider ways to legitimately use governmental power. Christians have a high stake in making sure government acts justly and makes decisions that provide

maximum freedom for the furtherance of the gospel.”^{2} Some believe we have a *cultural mandate* to redeem not only men’s souls, but the works of culture including politics.

Yet, Christians remain on the sidelines in alarming numbers.

According to one poll before the 2004 elections, “only a third of evangelical Christians—those who ought to be most concerned with moral values—[said they would] actually vote.” But the Bible says a lot about believers’ duties as citizens. “When Moses commanded the Israelites to appoint God-fearing leaders, he wasn’t just talking to a handful of citizens who felt like getting involved... And modern Christians are under the same obligation to choose leaders who love justice... Today, in our modern democracy, free citizens act as God’s agents for choosing leaders, and we do it by voting.”^{3}

As believers, we’re citizens of two kingdoms: one temporal and earthly, the other eternal and heavenly. We are called to participate in both the culture and politics of The City of Man, as this world was called by Augustine, while primarily focusing on the Kingdom of God.

The longevity and value of these dual kingdoms ought to serve as crucial guides to how invested we become in them. Eternal issues matter more than temporal ones. To allow politics and social issues to overtake our commitments to the everlasting is to risk idolatry, while losing ground in both realms.

Flipping the usual focus of candidates’ qualifications onto the electorate, one Christian columnist wrote, “Those who make critical decisions for America (its voters, I mean) should come up to some minimal standards before leaving the house on Election Day. Voters should be able to tell the difference between worldviews... Voters should be free of regionalism and other types of ‘group-think’... Vocations, unions, ethnic groups and age groups that vote in lockstep are not behaving as free people. Citizens whose consciences are ruled by others

should not govern a free nation... Voters should value their vote, but not sell it." {4}

It didn't take Albert Einstein to say it, but he did say "It is the duty of every citizen according to his best capacities to give validity to his convictions in political affairs." {5}

Chuck Colson, convicted Watergate felon, said, "All you have to do is lose the right to vote once, and you would never again find any excuse for not going into the voting booth... Be a good citizen: Exercise the greatest right a free people have [sic]." {6}

God's will and Kingdom will not be thwarted, and we cannot ultimately control outcomes, even as a voting bloc. As Christian citizens in America, we need to offer due diligence in voting and other political activities, trust God with the results, and keep spiritual concerns first.

Puritan Roots, Pluralism & Practical Politics

In 2007, for the first time a Hindu priest opened Senate deliberations with prayer. I asked a group of Christian homeschool parents gathered to discuss America's political system if they could justify forbidding this, and no one could answer satisfactorily. Pluralism—when a culture supports various ethnic backgrounds, religions and political views—is a practical and, understood correctly, appropriate reality.

Americans—believers and non-believers alike—have inherited a system of governance based solidly on the Bible, but allowing for a plurality of beliefs or even unbelief. The Puritans who first colonized this land "saw themselves as the new Israel, an elect people." {7}

The architects of our political arrangement, many of them professing Christians, were deeply influenced by the Puritan's

positive cultural impact and the Scriptures to which they appealed. Daniel Webster said, "Our ancestors established their system of government on morality and religious sentiment."[{8}](#) John Quincy Adams said, "The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity." George Washington, a devoted Christian, left room for others: "While just government protects all in their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support."[{9}](#)

Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum points out the realism of the founders in mitigating the imperfections of people even as they self-rule. "Again, we can see the genius of the American system. Madison and others realized the futility of trying to remove passions (human sinfulness) from the population. Therefore, he proposed that human nature be set against human nature. This was done by separating various institutional power structures."[{10}](#) This was based on a biblical understanding of man, a proper anthropology.

So, how can such a firmly entrenched Judeo-Christian political heritage be reconciled with a culture increasingly full of Mormons, Hindus, Muslims, humanists, and other unbelievers living alongside Christians?

The Constitution and Bill of Rights justly allows for religious and political diversity. Nineteenth-century theologian Charles Hodge of Princeton regarding immigrants said:

All are welcomed; all are admitted to equal rights and privileges. All are allowed to acquire property, whatever their religious feelings, and to vote in every election, made eligible to all offices and invested with equal influence in all public affairs. All are allowed to worship as they please, or not to worship at all, if they see fit... No man is required to profess any form of faith... More than

this cannot reasonably be demanded. [{11}](#)

Theologian Richard J. Mouw explored the possibility of evangelical politics that doesn't compromise and at the same is time highly tolerant of other views. Not "anything-goes relativism," but rather confidence that comes from God's guidebook for life, tempered by fair-minded ways of dealing with people. He wrote, "This humility does not exclude Christians advocating social and political policies that conflict with the views and practices of others. It does mean we should do so in a way that encourages reasonable dialogue and mutual respect." [{12}](#)

Believers need to consider the words of Bernard Crick: "Politics is a way of ruling in divided societies without undue violence... Politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good." Kenyans victimized by recent mob killings that erupted after disputed elections could testify that when the political process fails it can be devastating.

The founders, even as they envisioned pluralism, did not themselves have to deal deeply with it. It requires a keen worldview for voting and activism in today's truly pluralistic America. Our nation is based on an unmistakable Christian foundation, but that of course doesn't mean you *have to* be a Christian or even believe in God to participate.

Political Might and the Religious Right: Does God Take Sides?

Ever since Jimmy Carter ran for President based partly on his evangelical faith in the 1970s, and then the Moral Majority took the nation by storm in the '80s, there has been a non-stop discussion in America surrounding faith and politics.

Political power's seduction blinded believers, claim former movers and shakers like Ed Dobson. "One of the dangers," he

said, “of mixing politics and religion is that you begin to think the only way to transform culture is by passing another law. Most of what we did in the Moral Majority was aimed at getting the right people elected so that we would have enough votes to pass the right laws.”[{13}](#)

In those days, Christians seemed to believe they could legislate and administrate God’s kingdom into full flower. However, core issues like gay unions and abortion remain largely unchanged or even worse today.

“History has shown us we can’t rely totally on laws,” continued Dobson.[{14}](#) A good example is Prohibition. The harder the government cracked down on alcohol, the more ways people found to get around the law. One result was increased crime. Laws don’t change hearts; they are meant to restrain evil.

Sidling up to political power brokers even for commendable causes can prove disillusioning. Recently, conservative Christians hoped for fair and full consideration from the administration of the boldly evangelical George Bush. According to former White House deputy director for faith-based initiatives David Kuo, administration operators used and mocked evangelicals who were trying to do compassionate work partly funded through the government. But as Kuo asks, “What did they expect from politicians?” Good question for all of us. Jeremiah the prophet warned, “Cursed is the man who trusts in man.”[{15}](#) That would seem to include man’s politics.

Committed evangelical Bill Armstrong shared prophetically as a Senator back in 1983, “There is a danger when believers get deeply involved in political activity that they will try to put the mantle of Christ on their cause . . . to deify that cause and say, ‘Because I’m motivated to run for office for reasons [of] faith, a vote for me is a vote for Jesus’.”[{16}](#)

Ed Dobson often joked about God not being a Democrat or

Republican—but *certainly not* a Democrat. But, he asked, “Is God the God of the religious and political left with its emphasis on the environment and the poor, or is he the God of the religious and political right with its emphasis on the unborn and the family? Both groups claim to speak for God.”[{17}](#)

The Lord appeared to Joshua before a battle. He discovered that the issue wasn't whether God was on his side or his enemy's, but whether the people were on *God's* side. The religious and political Left casts itself as champion of the poor and the environment while the Right emphasizes the unborn and the family. Both say they speak for God. Seeking God's priorities and using His wisdom for our particular times is critical. However, “God's side” is not always easy to find.

So what's a Christian citizen's role? Armstrong and others believe Christians have been commanded by Christ to be involved. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's” means more than paying taxes. Some basic biblical principles:

- *All political power comes from God;*
- *Government has a God-ordained role to play in society;*
- *Christians have a God-ordained responsibility to that government: to pray, submit to and honor government leaders and, of course, to pay our taxes.*[{18}](#)

The late Christian political activist, pastor, and author D. James Kennedy warned in the heady early days of “the Reagan Revolution” not to trust in the man Ronald Reagan but in God. “After victory,” he writes, “many people give up the struggle and later discover they had won only a battle, not the war. Are you working less, praying less, giving less, trusting less? Maybe there is a bit of the humanist in all of us.”[{19}](#) He continues, “The government . . . should be a means to godly ends. Ronald Reagan is but a stone in the sling, and you do

not trust in stones; you trust in the living rock, Jesus Christ.”[{20}](#)

Thus, voters, campaigners *and* officeholders need to heed the humility of experience in a fallen world and the understanding of the Founders that power corrupts and should be divided up, placing final trust in the Almighty.

Should We Elect a Christian When Given the Chance?

Talk show host Larry King asked pastor and author Max Lucado if religion should matter in an election campaign. I love his answer: “Well, genuine religion has to matter. We elect character. We elect a person’s worldview. Faith can define that worldview... [Within the] American population 85 percent of us say that religion matters to us. 72 percent of us say that the religion of a president matters.”[{21}](#) Polls show that Americans would sooner elect a Muslim or homosexual than an acknowledged atheist.[{22}](#)

Philosopher and early church father Augustine dealt with a culture war among the Romans. In his classic book *The City of God* he taught that “The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.”[{23}](#) Of course, a Christian will want to vote for a citizen of God’s city if there is a clear choice between him and a rank sinner. That choice is seldom so clear in elections. But understanding this dual citizenship of the Christian voter herself in the City of Man and The City of God is essential to dissecting complicated, sometimes competing priorities.

In the tangled vines surrounding campaign messages, it’s not

so simple to discern a candidate's worldview and decide who best matches our own, but that's what wisdom and good stewardship require (and as recent scandals like Senator Larry Craig's alleged homosexual improprieties shows, a politician's stated views and behavior don't always match). Seems like the Christian citizen's top priority, then, is to have a biblical worldview to start with (something that Probe can help with greatly).

Given that, how does the average Christian voter decide on parties, platforms, and candidates? They do it based on principles of biblical ethics, godly values, simple logic and a discerning ear.

Remember, America is a republic, not a democracy. And in a republic we are to elect representatives who will rise above the passions of the moment. They are to be men and women of character and virtue, who will act responsibly and even nobly as they carry out the best interests of the people. No, we don't want leaders we can love because they remind us of our own darker side. We want leaders we can look up to and respect. [{24}](#)

Should we elect a person who claims to be a Christian, like former pastor Mike Huckabee? It depends. Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney received a standing ovation when said, "We need a person of faith to lead the country." A contributor to the blog run by Left-wing evangelical Jim Wallis responded, "But that statement is nearly meaningless, for even Sam Harris is a person of faith. Strident, angry, atheistic faith." [{25}](#) Good point: all have faith, but *faith in what or who?*

On the other hand, former Senator Bill Armstrong states, "God was able to make sons of Abraham out of stone. Certainly that means he can make a good legislator out of somebody who isn't necessarily a member of our church or maybe not even a Christian or maybe an atheist. So I don't think we ought to

limit God by saying ‘only Christians’ deserve our support politically.”[{26}](#)

The politically influential Dr. James Dobson caused a stir when he critiqued one candidate for not regularly attending church. Dr. Richard Land responded that this is not a deciding factor for him. He said that as a Baptist minister he would never have voted for the church-attending Jimmy Carter but did vote twice for the non-attending Ronald Reagan. This, like so many others, seems to be an issue of individual conscience for voters.

Evangelical Mark DeMoss writes in support of Romney, a devout Mormon. “For years, evangelicals have been keenly interested to know whether a candidate shared their faith. I am now more interested in knowing that a president represents my values than I am that he or she shares my theology.”[{27}](#) After all, we’ve worked together on issues like abortion, pornography, and gambling. Can’t we be governed well by someone who shares most of our values, he reasons? As columnist Cal Thomas says, I care less about where the ambulance driver worships than if he knows where the hospital is.

Taking the high road of choosing good candidates, not necessarily ones whose theology one agrees with all down the line, makes voting and party affiliation complex for believers. We’d prefer a clean, easy set of choices. But, it appears that even voting and civic engagement is under the “sweat of the brow” curse of Genesis—nothing comes easy.

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias reminds us that we’re NOT electing a minister or church elder. He said:

I think as we elect, we go before God and [choose] out of the candidates who will be the best ones to represent [sanctity of life] values and at the same time be a good leader . . . whose first responsibility [is] to protect citizens.

What we want is a politician who will understand the basic Judeo-Christian worldview, and on the basis of that the moral laws of this nation are framed, and then run this country with the excellence of that which is recognized in a pluralistic society: the freedom to believe or to disbelieve, and the moral framework with which this was conducted: the sanctity of every individual life.[{28}](#)

Vote your conscience. Many issues are disputable matters, as the Apostle Paul put it. Avoid the temptation to *unreflectively* limit your view to a few pet issues. If over time you prayerfully believe that stewardship of the environment is critical, balanced against all considerations, vote accordingly. If sanctity of life issues like abortion and stem cell research are paramount to you, by all means vote that way. However, realize that trade-offs are inevitable; there won't be a perfect candidate who falls in line on all our values and priorities.

Politics, Religion, and Values

As the old saw goes, "never talk about politics and religion." That may be wise advice when Uncle Harry is over for Thanksgiving dinner. But as a rule of life, it breeds ignorance and passivity in self-government. "Only if we allow a biblical worldview and a biblically balanced agenda guide our concrete political work can we significantly improve the political order," according to a statement by the National Association of Evangelicals.[{29}](#) That means dialogue, and that's not easy.

Some prefer a public square where anything goes *but* religion. That would be wrong. Likewise, a so-called "sacred public square," with religious values imposed on everyone, would be unfair. Christians should support a "*civil* public square" with open, respectful debate.[{30}](#)

But, you often hear people make statements like, “Christians shouldn’t try to legislate morality.” They might simply mean you can’t make people good by passing laws. Fair enough. But *all law*, divine and civil, involves imposing right and wrong. Prohibitions against murder and rape are judgments on good and bad. The question is not whether we *should* legislate morality but rather, “*What kind of morality we should legislate?*”[{31}](#)

Yet tragically, as *iVoteValues.com* discovered, “many believers don’t even consider their values when voting,” often choosing candidates whose positions are at odds with their own beliefs, convictions, and values. A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study found that *nearly two-thirds* of Americans say their faith has little to do with their voting decisions![{32}](#) Many believers are missing a chance to be salt and light to the watching world.

What about when the field of candidates offers only “the lesser of two evils”? Like when only one candidate is anti-abortion yet she holds to other troubling positions? That requires thoughtful distinctions. If the reason you vote for candidate X is only to avoid the graver consequences of voting for candidate Y, you’re not formally cooperating with evil. In this case, whatever evil comes from the anti-abortion candidate you helped elect due to your convictions would be unintended. Same as if you were a bank teller and the robber demanded, “Give me all the money or I’ll blow this guy’s brains out.” You cooperate to avoid the greater evil, but your intent was not to enable the robbery.[{33}](#) It’s hard to argue against this reasoning in a fallen world where even God allows evil for greater purposes.

What about cases when the field of candidates offers only “the lesser of two evils”? For instance, you can’t decide between the more pro-abortion candidate who’s otherwise highly qualified *and* the anti-abortion person who has some real flaws.

Some believe that if you vote for the pro-abortion person for other important reasons, then you are not responsible for abortions that might result, as briefly illustrated above. Others see a necessary connection—vote for a “pro-abort” and you are guilty. Study and pray hard on such issues as God gives freedom of conscience.

Sometimes it comes down to choices we'd rather not make. Only rarely, perhaps, can we say that to abstain from voting is the only way. Notable Christian author Mark Noll believes this is such a time for him.[{34}](#)

Others warn that this only helps elect the candidates with unbiblical values. One commentator wrote, “Voters should not spend their franchise on empty gestures... No successful politician is as strong on every issue as we would like. Our own pastors and parents can't pass this test in their much smaller contexts. Rather than striking a blow for purity, we risk giving up our influence altogether when we follow a man with only one or two ‘perfect’ ideas.”[{35}](#)

Hold this kind of issue with an open hand. Many change their minds as they age and lose unrealistic youthful idealism. But if God gives a clear conviction, again, stick with that value or candidate. Only seek the difference between legalism and God's leading.

Some more left-leaning evangelicals like Ron Sider and Jim Wallis value helping the poor and dispossessed through government, while critics claim that as the Church's exclusive role. The retort: the Church is failing in its duty and it's a fulfillment of the Church's duty to advocate for government intervention. Others focus on sanctity of life issues not only as a higher priority, but as part of the government's biblically mandated task of protecting its citizenry. What is your conviction? Best be deciding if you don't know yet.

The purple ink-stained fingers of Iraqi citizens who voted at

their own risk for the first time in decades testify to the precious privilege of voting in a free society. Americans gave blood and treasure to free them. Don't let the same sacrifice made by our ancestors on our behalf go to waste. Inform yourself. "Study to show yourself approved" not only regarding Scripture, but as a citizen of The Cities of Man and of God.

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Debt and Credit

Introduction

We will be discussing the subject of debt from a biblical perspective. But before we begin looking at biblical principles concerning economics and finances, we need to put the problem of debt in perspective.

You cannot overemphasize the impact of debt on our society. It is the leading cause for divorce and also the reason for many more troubled marriages. It is also one of the causes for depression as well as suicide. People in debt didn't start out to ruin their lives and the lives of their families, but the consequences are often devastating.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about money, and a significant part of these financial warnings concern debt. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender." When you borrow money and put yourself in debt, you put yourself in a situation where the lender has significant influence over you.

Many other verses in Proverbs also warn about the potential danger of debt (Proverbs 1:13-15; 17:18; 22:26-27; 27:13). While this does not mean that we can never be in debt, it does warn us about its dangers.

Romans 13:8 is an often misunderstood verse because it says, "Owe nothing to anyone."

Although some theologians have argued that this verse prohibits debt, the passage needs to be seen in context. This passage is not a specific teaching about debt, but rather a summary of our duty as Christians to governmental authority. We should not owe anything to anyone (honor, taxes, etc.).

The Bible is filled with passages that provide guidelines to lending and borrowing. If debt was always wrong, then these passages would not exist and there would be a clear prohibition against debt. But the implication of Romans 13:8 seems to be that we should pay our debts off as quickly as possible.

At this point, it would be good to make a distinction between debt and credit. Often in our society, the two words are used interchangeably. To put it simply, debt is something that is owed. The Bible does not prohibit borrowing, but it certainly does not recommend it. Credit is the establishment of mutual trust between a lender and borrower.

At the outset, let me acknowledge that some people end up in debt due to no fault of their own. They may have been swindled in a business. They may have made a good faith attempt to start a business but were unsuccessful because their competitors or suppliers cheated them. They may have been unfairly sued in court. The reasons are many.

The Consequences of Debt

What are the consequences of debt? The Bible describes debt as a form of slavery. Proverbs 22:7 says: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender." The borrower becomes a servant (or slave) to the person who is the lender.

If you look in the Old Testament, you will notice that debt was often connected to slavery. For example, both debts and slavery were cancelled in the years of Jubilee. Sometimes people even put themselves in slavery because of debt (Deut. 15:2, 12).

Today we may not be in actual slavery from debt, but it may feel like it some times. We have all heard the phrase, "I owe, I owe, so it's off to work I go." If you are deep in debt you

know that there may be very few days off and perhaps no vacation. Someone in debt can begin to feel like a slave.

How can you know if you are too far in debt? Here are a few questions to ask yourself. Do you have an increasing collection of past-due bills on your desk? Do you drive down the road hoping you will win the lottery? Do you feel stress every time you think about your finances? Do you avoid answering the phone because you think it might be a collection agency? Do you make only minimum payments on credit cards?

One of the consequences of debt is we often deny reality. In order to realistically deal with the debt in our lives we need to get rid of some of the silly ideas running around in our heads.

For example, you are *not* going to win the lottery. Your debt problem is *not* going to go away if you just ignore it. And a computer glitch in your lender's computer is *not* going to accidentally wipe out your financial records so that you don't have to repay your debt.

Another consequence of debt is a loss of integrity. When we cannot pay, we start saying "the check's in the mail" when it isn't. We not only kid ourselves but we try to mislead others about the extent of our problem with debt.

Sometimes debt even leads to dishonesty. Psalm 37:21 says: "The wicked borrows and does not pay back." We should repay our debts.

A third consequence of debt is addiction. Debt is addictive. Once in debt we begin to get comfortable with cars, consumer goods, furniture, etc., all funded through debt. Once we reach that comfort level, we go into further debt.

A final consequence of debt is stress. Stress experts have calculated the impact of various stress factors on our lives.[\[1\]](#) Some of the greatest are death of a spouse and

divorce. But it is amazing how many other stress factors are financially related (change in financial state, mortgage over \$100,000). When we owe more than we can pay, we worry and feel a heavy load of stress that wouldn't exist if we lived debt free.

Credit Card Debt

To listen to the news reports, you would think that Americans are drowning in debt, but the story is not that simple. The latest economic statistics say that the average U.S. household has more than \$9,000 in credit card debt. The average household also spends more than \$1,300 a year in interest payments.

While these numbers are true, they are also misleading. The average debt per American household with at least one credit card is \$9,000. But nearly one-fourth of Americans don't even own credit cards.

An even more telling fact is that more than thirty percent of American households paid off their most recent credit cards bills in full. So actually a majority of Americans owe nothing to credit card companies. Of the households that do owe money on credit cards, the median balance was \$2,200. Only about 1 in 12 American households owe more than \$9,000 on credit cards.

The \$9,000 figure comes from CardWeb. It takes the outstanding credit card debt in America and divides it by the number of households that have at least one credit card. While the average is accurate, it is misleading.

Liz Pulliam Weston, writing for MSN Money, explains: "The example I usually give to illustrate the fallacy of averages is to imagine that you and 17 of your friends were having dinner with Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. The average net worth of a person at that table would be about \$5 billion. The

fact that everybody else's personal net worth was a lot less wouldn't affect the average that much because Bill and Warren are so much wealthier than the rest of us." {2}

Yes, Americans are in debt. And some Americans are really in debt. If you are one of those individuals, you should apply the biblical principles we are discussing to your situation. If you are not in debt, learn a vicarious lesson about what can happen if you don't pay attention to debt.

Here are some principles for dealing with credit card debt. First, realize that the problem is not the credit card in your hand. The problem may be with the person holding the credit card. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naïve go on, and are punished for it."

Second, never use credit cards except for budgeted purchases. Impulse shopping with credit cards is one of the major reasons people find themselves in debt.

Third, pay off your credit cards every month. If you cannot pay off your credit card bill, don't use your credit card again until you can pay your bill.

Home Mortgage

Most Christian financial counselors put a home mortgage in a different category than other debt. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, a home loan is secured by the equity in the home. After an initial down payment, a loan schedule (of principle and interest) is applied to the balance of the home expense. If a homeowner faces a financial crisis, he or she can sell the house and use that amount to retire the loan.

Second, a home is often an appreciating asset. In many housing markets, the price of a home increases every year. This makes

it an even less risky financial investment. But of course, what goes up can also go down. Some homeowners have seen the value of their home decrease significantly. That affects their ability to repay their home loan if they need to sell their house.

Third, a home mortgage is a tax deduction and thus provides a small financial benefit to homeowners that they would not have if they were renting. At the same time, eager home buyers shouldn't over-estimate the value of this and justify buying a home that is beyond their means.

Fourth, the interest in a home loan is usually within a few percentage points of the prime rate. This means that the interest rate in a typical home loan is about one third the interest rate of a typical credit card.

While a home mortgage may be different from other forms of debt, that doesn't mean there aren't dangers and pitfalls. As we have already mentioned, people buy homes assuming that they will appreciate in value. But many find that the house prices stagnate or even decline. After paying closing costs, they may owe more on their home loan than they received from the sale of their house.

Another concern about a home mortgage is that many homeowners end up buying more house than they can really afford. Just because they qualify for a particular house doesn't mean they should buy a house that will stretch them financially.

Changing financial circumstances may surprise a couple that qualifies for a house mortgage. For example, the wife may get pregnant and no longer be able to work and provide the income necessary to make the monthly mortgage payment. Either partner might get laid off from work and not provide the necessary income. And there are always unexpected expenses for homeowners (new furnace, hot water heater, etc.) that couples may not have budgeted for when they purchased a home.

One formula that is often used in considering a home mortgage is to buy a home that is less than two and a half times a family's annual gross income. Another is to consider what you can currently pay in rent and compare that amount to the home mortgage (plus the additional expenses such as insurance, taxes, etc.). The two amounts should be similar.

Getting Out of Debt

Let's conclude by talking about how to get out of debt. If you are already in debt, you need to break the debt cycle with discipline applied over time.

First, establish the right priorities. God owns it all. Unfortunately, we often believe that we own it all. We need to mentally transfer ownership of all our possessions to God (Psalm 8). This would also include giving the Lord His part and honoring Him with your giving (even if it is a small amount).

Second, stop borrowing. If a pipe broke in your house, the first thing to you would do is shut off the water before you started to mop up the water. Before you do anything else, "shut off" the borrowing. Don't use your credit card. Don't take out a bank loan.

Third, develop a budget. This is something you might do by yourself or with the help of many online ministries and financial services that provides guidelines. Or you may consult with a financial expert who can give you guidelines.

You would begin by making a list of all of your monthly expenses (mortgage or rent, utilities, groceries, car payments, credit card bills, etc.). Then you need to establish a priority for the loans that you have that are outstanding. This should include information about the amount owed and the interest rates. Then you need to set aside a realistic budget that allows you to have enough money to pay off the loans in a

systematic way.

Write to each creditor with a repayment plan based upon this realistic budget. It might be good to even include a financial statement and a copy of your budget so they can see that you are serious about getting out of debt.

Fourth, begin to retire your debt. If you can, pay extra on the debts with the highest interest rates. If all of them have comparable interest rates, you might instead pay extra on the smallest balance. By paying that off first, you will have a feeling of accomplishment and then free up some of your income to tackle your next debt.

Fifth, develop new spending habits. For example, if you generate extra income from working overtime or at an extra job, use that to retire your debt faster. Don't assume that because you have some extra discretionary income you can use that to spend it on yourself.

Before you buy anything, question yourself. If an item isn't in your budget, ask yourself if you really need it and how much use you will get out of it. We often spend because we are used to spending. Change your spending habits.

Debt is like a form of slavery. Do what you can to be debt free. If you follow these steps faithfully, that can take place in a few years. Debt freedom will reduce your stress and free you up to accomplish what God intends for you to do.

Notes

1. The Holmes-Rahe Scale, www.geocities.com/beyond_stretched/holmes.htm.
2. Liz Pulliam Weston, "The big lie about credit card debt," MSN Money, 30 July 2007, tinyurl.com/33zrut.

The Golden Compass: Pointing in the Wrong Direction

The Golden Compass is the opening gambit in Phillip Pullman's all out-attack on the religious faith of his readers. The film version is scheduled for wide release in theaters on December 7th following a massive marketing campaign. The movie may be more subtle than the book, but it is still opening the door to the full anti-God message of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Since the intended audience for these books is children and young adults, Christian parents need to be prepared to respond to the advertising hype and peer group pressure associated with the upcoming movie release. You want to be able to explain why a PG-13 movie is not appropriate for adolescents.

Just in case you don't have time to read this entire article, I am going to summarize my recommendations:

1. **Don't be put on the defensive.** Pullman is not the first to try to glamorize atheism and, although his fantasy is intriguing and well written, it does not introduce any new arguments into the discussion. If a friend has read it, consider this a great opportunity to make a defense for the hope that is within you. Since his books are allegorical fantasy, you don't need to rebut the books. Simply explain why you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

2. **Don't reward evangelistic atheists financially for their efforts.** Unless you need to answer specific questions for someone who needs help dealing with *The Golden Compass*, you don't need to read the books or see the movie. Let's send the message that freedom of expression is accompanied by the

freedom to choose *not* to pay to read or see it. If you do need to read it, check it out of the library or purchase a used copy.

3. Don't allow your children to enter this world without a chaperone (i.e. you as their parent). It is not only anti-Christian; it is also contains elements which should be deeply disturbing to children (e.g. a father murdering his daughter's best friend; a prison camp for torturing children). Even though I think their time would be better spent reading other things, some parents may want to go over Pullman's key themes with their older children to prepare them for their classmates who have seen the movie or read the book. If you have older teenagers, you could check these books out of the library and use them to dissect Pullman's worldview, helping them understand that it does nothing to undermine the historic truths of Christianity.

The Message of *His Dark Materials*

I have read the complete trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, of which *The Golden Compass* is the first volume. In my opinion, this trilogy is both well written and well crafted. Well-written in that the primary characters have some depth and I found myself caring about them. Well-crafted in that the fantasy world (actually an infinite number of parallel worlds) and plot are reasonably self-consistent and continue to be fleshed out as the trilogy unfolds. However, even if this were simply a classic allegory of good vs. evil, some of the events and imagery are too dark for anyone younger than late teens. So the problem is not that it is poorly written pulp, but that it is well written with a clear intention on the part of the author to promote a worldview that considers Christianity a bane rather than a benefit.

The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis and *His Dark Materials* are both allegorical fantasy series written by British authors. However, while *The Chronicles of Narnia* overtly

promotes the message of Christianity, *His Dark Materials*, promotes the message that the God of Christianity is a fraud and the organized church is an evil blight preventing mankind from reaching our fullest potential. This contrast is no accident considering Pullman's criticism of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and of monotheism:

Morally loathsome, he called it. One of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read. He described his own series as Narnia's moral opposite. That's the Christian one, he told me. And mine is the non-Christian.

Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him, he once said.[{1}](#)

Pullman sets out to counter the impact of C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien by creating his own fantasy world in which God is ultimately unmasked as a fraud. The trilogy includes an alternate garden of Eden story, ushering in the Republic of Heaven where people are free to reach their full potential without the oppressive effects of God or organized religion. With over 15 million copies of his books in print, Pullman has had some success with his objective to influence others with his atheist worldview. *His Dark Materials* has been the recipient of numerous literary awards, most of them for children's literature.[{2}](#) (This categorization of his work is unfortunate since his books are definitely not suitable for children.) However, prior to the movie release, he had not achieved the notoriety he had hoped for:

Four years ago Pullman wondered why his books hadn't attracted as much controversy as the Harry Potter series(since) he was saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God.[{3}](#)

One interesting feature of the trilogy is the progressive unmasking of Pullman's worldview. After reading *The Golden Compass*, one may be equally disturbed with the actions of those representing the Church and those rebelling against it. The intended meaning of the allegorical elements is still fuzzy. However, by the time the reader reaches the climax of the trilogy where the Ancient of Days and his minions are defeated in their battle with the fallen angels, Pullman's objective becomes abundantly clear. He invites the readers to embrace his vision of a Republic of Heaven; a Republic where individual self-awareness and self-fulfillment replace the need for truth and a relationship with our creator.

How Does the Movie Compare to the Books?

Of course, we have not seen the movie yet. However, anyone who has ever gone to see a movie version of one of their favorite books knows that Hollywood does not feel bound to stick to the original plot, much less the message. As the release date for the movie nears, many reports are surfacing that New Line Cinema has chosen to obscure the anti-religion message of the books.

In the end, the religious meaning of the book was obscured so thoroughly as to be essentially indecipherable... The movie's main theme became, in one producer's summary, One small child can save the world. With \$180 million at stake, the studio opted to kidnap the book's body and leave behind its soul.

[{4}](#)

Even if this is true, I recommend that Christians avoid this movie for several reasons:

- 1. An adolescent who enjoys the movie may well be interested in reading the books where the message is very clear and compelling.*
- 2. If this movie is a success, the studio will begin*

production on the next book in the trilogy. It will be much harder to obscure the anti-God message of the second and third volumes of the trilogy. In fact Pullman is attempting to rein in his vitriol against Christians because he wants to make sure that all three books are made into movies.

3. If Christians patronize this film, we are financially rewarding Phillip Pullman for his attack on Christianity and encouraging the studios to produce more anti-Christian propaganda than they already do.

Conclusions

Please go back to the opening of this article for a summary of my conclusions. Join me in praying that while the movie is a financial disaster, many Christians will be motivated to share their faith with people who want to discuss the movie and the underlying books.

Addendum: Post-Viewing Assessment of Film's Departure from the Book

Now that I have viewed the movie, I wanted to add a short update addressing the differences between the book and the movie. There are three primary differences that are worth noting.

***Theology-Lite Version**As reported above, theology and any mention of God are almost completely removed from the movie version. Clearly, the Magisterium represents a powerful church that is condoning horrific experiments on children for the greater good of mankind, but in this parallel universe the movie does not indicate that the Magisteriums beliefs relate directly to any actual religions. One could argue that the historic Catholic Church is presented in a much more unfavorable light in the film Luther than in The Golden*

Compass. As a stand-alone movie, The Golden Compass would not be much different than many movies that promote a humanist message of individual dignity and choice versus an authoritarian system. Even with theology-lite, this movie has a strong worldview message that should be discussed with any young people who view the movie.

Chilling Ending Truncated*The movie ends before the corresponding end of the book. The last three chapters of the book are not covered at all. This definitely leaves the door open to use the last three chapters as the opening for a sequel based on the next book in the trilogy. I suspect these chapters were left out because they contain the most disturbing images in the book (e.g., Lyra's father murders her best friend in front of her to further his scientific work) and an explanation of the relationship between dust and Adam and Eve. Even without those chapters, this movie earns its PG-13 rating and is not suitable for children.*

Significant Modifications for the Silver Screen*The screenplay plays fast and loose with the order of events in the books and creates new storylines to shorten the build-up to key transitions in the plot. All of the major events of the book (excluding the last three chapters) are retained, but the order in which they occur and the details of how they play out are significantly modified.*

None of the differences noted above cause me to change the recommendations above. I still would encourage you not to reward Phillip Pullman or the movie producers financially. Pullman is very candid that his objective is to influence people to view belief in Christianity as misguided and damaging. Financial success will encourage them to make movies of the other books in the trilogy which entail much more direct attacks on God and religion. It will also provide Pullman with resources to support his crusade. We should keep in mind that most young people who read these books will

identify strongly with the protagonists and their mission to free people from Gods authority *and* will not have parents who will sit down with them and discuss the worldview implications of these books.

Involved Christian parents could certainly review this material with their children as a way to better equip them to deal with contrary worldviews. However, I would encourage you to do it in ways that do not financially reward the cause of atheism.

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Notes

1. Hana Rosin, "How Hollywood Saved God," *The Atlantic*, Volume 300 No. 5, December 2007
2. The awards include but are not limited to: Whitbread Award-Best Children's Book and Best Book 2001, Carnegie Medal (England), American Library Association Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults, A Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon book, A Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year, Children's ABBY Honor
3. Hana Rosin, "How Hollywood Saved God"
4. Ibid

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