

# Coddling of the American Mind

*Drawing on the book The Coddling of the American Mind, Kerby Anderson examines the insanity on college campuses where students cannot handle ideas and people they disagree with.*

In this article we will talk about what is happening on college campuses, and even focus on why it is happening. Much of the material is taken from the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.{1}



Greg Lukianoff was trying to solve a puzzle and sat down with Jonathan Haidt. Greg was a first amendment lawyer working with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). He was trying to figure out why students (who used to support free speech on campus) were now working to prevent speakers from coming on campus and triggered by words or phrases used by professors.

Greg also noticed something else. He has suffered from bouts of depression and noticed some striking similarities with some of the comments by students. He found in his treatment that sometimes he and others would engage in “catastrophizing” and assuming the worst outcome. He was seeing these distorted and irrational thought patterns in students.

After a lengthy discussion they decided to write an article about it for *The Atlantic* with the title, “Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions.” The editor suggested the more provocative title, “The Coddling of the American Mind.” The piece from *The Atlantic* was one of the most viewed articles of all time and was then expanded to this book.

That book used the same title: *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Jonathan was on *Point of View* last year to talk about the book. The authors believe that these significant psychological changes that have taken place in the minds of students explain much of the campus insanity we see on campus today.

They point out that two terms rose from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are small actions or word choices that are now thought as a kind of violence. Trigger warnings are an alert the professors now must use if they may be discussing a topic that might generate a strong emotional response.

Before we talk about some of the insight in the book, it is worth mentioning that though there is a psychological component to all of this insanity, there is also an ideological component. When the original article appeared, Heather MacDonal asked if “risk-adverse child-rearing is merely the source of the problem. For example, why aren’t heterosexual white males demanding safe spaces?”{2} They all had the same sort of parents who probably coddled many of them.

It would probably be best to say that the mixture of psychological deficits also with the liberal, progressive ideological ideas promoted on campus have given us the insanity we see today. We have had liberal teaching on campuses for a century, but the problem has become worse in the last decade because of the psychological issues described in the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

## Three Untruths (Part 1)

The book can easily be summarized in three untruths that make up the first three chapters of the book. The first is the “Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Weaker.” Nietzsche’s original aphorism was, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” The younger generation has turned this idea on its head.

It is true that some things are fragile (like china teacups), while other things are resilient (and can withstand shocks). But they also note that some things are *antifragile*. In other words, they actually require stressors and challenges to grow. Our muscles are like that. Our immune system is like that. And university education is supposed to be like that. Students are supposed to be challenged by new ideas, not locked away in “safe spaces.”

Unfortunately, most young people have been protected by a culture that promotes what they refer to as “safetyism.” It has become a cult of safety that is obsessed with eliminating threats (whether real or imagined) to the point where fragility becomes expected and routine. And while this is true for the millennial generation (also called Generation Y), it is even truer for the iGen generation (also called Generation Z) who are even more obsessed with safety.

Part of the problem in these untruths is what they call “concept creep.” Safety used to mean to be safe from physical threats. But that has expanded to the idea that safety must also include emotional comfort. In order to provide that comfort, professors and students a few years ago introduced the idea of creating “safe spaces” for students. And in order to keep those students emotionally safe in the classroom, professors must issue “trigger warnings” so these students don’t experience trauma during a classroom lecture or discussion.

The second untruth is the “Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings.” You can get yourself in some difficult circumstances quickly if you always trust your emotions. It is easy in this world to get frustrated, discouraged, and even depressed. Psychologists have found that certain patients can get themselves caught in a feedback loop in which irrational negative beliefs cause powerful negative feelings. We are seeing that on college campuses today.

Psychologists describe “the cognitive triad” of depression. These are: “I’m no good” and “My world is bleak” and “My future is hopeless.” Psychologists have effective ways of helping someone break the disempowering feedback cycle between negative beliefs and negative emotions. But very few adults (parents, professors, administrators) are working to correct mistaken ideas.

## Three Untruths (Part 2)

In a college classroom, students are apt to make some sweeping generalization and engage in simplistic labeling of the lecture or reading material. In that case, we would hope that a professor would move the discussion by asking questions or even challenging the assertion.

Instead, many professors and colleges go along with the student comments. In fact, many even argue that any perceived slight adds up to what today are called “microaggressions.” In many cases, slights may be unintentional and actually wholly formed from the listener’s interpretation.

Here is how it develops. First, you prevent certain topics from being discussed in class. Next, you prevent certain speakers from coming to campus because they might present a perspective that aggrieved students believe should not be discussed. In the book is a chart illustrating how many speakers have been disinvited from universities. Five years ago, the line jumps up significantly.

The third untruth follows from that assumption. It is the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People.” The authors argue that “the human mind is prepared for tribalism.” They even provide psychological research demonstrating that. But that doesn’t mean we have to live that way. In fact, conditions in society can turn tribalism up, down, or off. Certain conflicts can turn tribalism up and make them more attentive to signs about which team a person may be on. Peace and prosperity usually turn tribalism down.

Unfortunately, in the university community, distinctions between groups are not downplayed but emphasized. Distinctions defined by race, gender, and sexual preference are given prominence. Mix that with the identity politics we see in society, and you generate the conflict we see almost every day in America.

The authors make an important distinction between two kinds of identity politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. epitomized what could be called “common-humanity identity politics.” He addressed the evil of racism by appealing to the shared morals of Americans using the unifying language of religion.

That is different from what we find on college campuses today that could be called “common-enemy identity politics.” It attempts to identify a common enemy as a way to enlarge and motivate your tribe. Their slogan sounds like this: Our battle for identity and survival is a battle between good people and bad people. We’re the good guys and need to defeat the bad guys.

## **An Example: Evergreen State College**

One good example of how these untruths play out can be found at what happened on a college campus in Olympia, Washington. The entire story is described in chapter five but also is featured prominently in the opening chapter of the book *No Safe Spaces* and in the movie with the same title.

Just a few years ago, Evergreen State College was probably best known as the alma mater for rapper Macklemore and Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*. That all changed with an email biology professor Bret Weinstein sent.

In the past, the school had a tradition known as the “National Day of Absence.” Usually, minority faculty and students leave the campus for a day to make a statement. But in 2017, the college wanted to change things and wanted white students and faculty to stay away from campus.

Professor Weinstein argued in an email that there is a difference between letting people be absent and telling people “to go away.” And he added that he would show up for work. When he did, he was confronted by a mob of students. When the administration tried to appease the demonstrators, things got worse.

Weinstein has described himself as a political progressive and left-leaning libertarian. But his liberal commitments did not protect him from the student mob. The campus police warned him about a potential danger. The next morning, as he rode his bike into town, he saw protesters poised along his route tapping into their phones. He rode to the campus police department and was abruptly told: “You’re not safe on campus, and you’re not safe anywhere in town on your bicycle.” Weinstein and his wife eventually resigned and finally received a financial settlement from the university.

The Evergreen students and faculty displayed each of the three great untruths. The Untruth of Fragility (What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker) came from a faculty member who supported the protesters and addressed some of her faculty colleagues in an angry monologue. She warned, “I am

too tired. This [blank] is literally going to kill me.” A student at a large town hall meeting verbalized her anxiety and illustrated the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (Always trust your feelings). She expressed, “I want to cry. I can’t tell you how fast my heart is beating. I am shaking in my boots.”

And the whole episode illustrates the Untruth of Us Versus Them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people). The students and faculty engaged in common-enemy identity politics by labeling a politically progressive college and liberal professors as examples of white supremacy. One student (who refused to join the protest) later testified to the college trustees, “If you offer any kind of alternative viewpoint, you’re the enemy.”

## **What Can We Do?**

The book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, identifies many disturbing trends on college campuses that are beginning to spill over into society. What can we do to stem the tide?

Obviously, the long-term solution to the insanity on campus and in society is to pray for revival in the church and spiritual awakening in America. But there are some practical things that must be done immediately.

First, college administrators must get control of their campus. The riots at some of these universities resulted in violence and property destruction. Often the campus police and even the local police failed to take action. Sadly, the university administration rarely took action afterwards.

Some form of deterrence would have prevented future actions on the University of California, Berkeley campus. Instead, the inaction established a precedent that likely allowed the conflict at Middlebury College. Students not only shut down the lecture, but they assaulted one of the campus professors. Once again, no significant action was taken against the students and outside agitators. The problem will get worse if there is no deterrence.

Second, professors must get control of their classrooms. Students cannot be allowed to determine what subjects cannot be taught and what topics cannot be discussed. The authors of this book are concerned about the tendency to encourage students to develop extra-thin skins just before they enter into the real world. Employers aren’t going to care too much about their feelings. Students don’t have the right not to be offended.

Third, we need to educate this generation about free speech. One poll done by the Brookings Institute discovered that nearly half (44%) of all college students believe that hate speech is NOT protected by the First Amendment. And since many students label just about anything they don’t like as hate speech, you can see why we have this behavior on college campuses. More than half (51%) of college students think they have a right to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. A smaller percentage (19%) of college students think it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

Finally, the adults need to make their voice heard. We pay for public universities through our tax dollars. Parents send their kids off to some of these schools. We should not tolerate the insanity taking place on many college campuses today.

The authors have identified certain concerns that colleges and universities need to address. They remind us how hostile the academic world has become, not only to traditional Christian values, but also to mere common sense. We need to pray for what is taking place in the college environment.

Notes

1. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, et al., *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York City: Penguin Press, 2018.

2.  
[www.thecollegefix.com/heres-the-9-best-takeaways-from-heather-mac-donalds-new-diversity-delusion-book/](http://www.thecollegefix.com/heres-the-9-best-takeaways-from-heather-mac-donalds-new-diversity-delusion-book/)

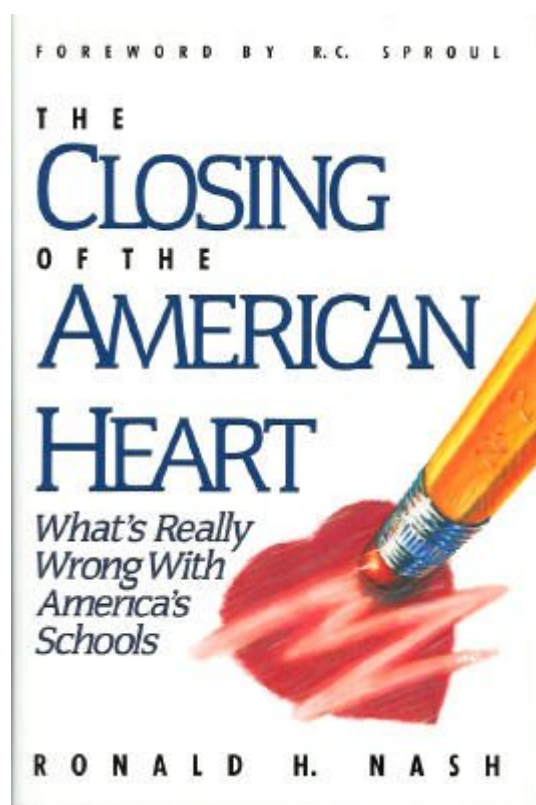
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## The Closing of the American Heart

*Using Ronald Nash's book as a starting point, Don Closson looks at the philosophical foundations of modern education in America and how they have contributed to low performance.*

Every once in a while a book is written that shakes things up. *The Closing of the American Mind*, written by the now-deceased University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom in the late 1980s, was just such a book. You can tell that a book strikes a sensitive societal chord when numerous books follow with similar titles. Some experts hated it, others loved it. And it seemed that everyone was talking about it. What made this book so interesting was that it was written for a very small audience of academicians, and yet it attracted the attention of millions and became a bestseller. Even more amazing, it's a book about education.



Dr. Bloom's book reignited a long and important discussion about the content and purpose of education. Here at Probe, we felt that both the book and the topic it discussed were so important that we needed to add to the conversation with a book of our own. The result was a book titled *The Closing of the American Heart*. We asked Dr. Ronald Nash, also now deceased, who taught philosophy at the University of Kentucky, to write it for us. I had the privilege

of providing some of the research for the book.

Both books are an attempt to uncover the root causes of the many problems facing our public schools. In this article we will consider the critiques given by the two authors as well as their proposed solutions. One concept that runs throughout both books is that ideas have consequences. Allan Bloom writes that “a serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, Using Ronald Nash’s book as a starting point, Probe’s Don Closson looks at the philosophical foundations of modern education in America and how they have contributed to low performance. thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear.”<sup>{1}</sup> This statement relates directly to the educational enterprise. Someone must decide what it means to be an educated person and consequently what students should know and believe when they are graduated from our schools.

Nash argues that this decision—about what it means to be educated—will be based on an educator’s worldview. One’s worldview is built on answers to life’s big questions, answers that might be informed by traditional religious beliefs or by modern secularism. However, since everyone has a worldview, education can never be neutral regarding the “deep” things of life or life’s ultimate concerns. Nash goes one step further by asserting that all public policy is shaped by the ultimate concerns of those holding power in our culture. In other words, worldviews shape institutions and policies, which directly affect how children are educated.

Bloom and Nash agree that one worldview dominates our nation’s schools and universities. In what follows we will investigate the nature of that worldview and how these two men believed we should respond to it.

## **Education’s Ills**

Allen Bloom’s highly influential book *The Closing of the American Mind* begins with the dramatic observation that “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Relativism is the view that truth is unknowable and that universal moral virtues do not exist. Bloom’s now famous (or infamous) description of American students rests on his observation that a single way of thinking has come to dominate our campuses. He adds that relativism has left us with only one acknowledged virtue, the virtue of tolerance or openness.

According to Bloom, this assurance that truth does not exist has gutted education and left our students with little desire to seek knowledge. The search for truth has been replaced by an “unsubstantial awareness that there are many cultures.” Since cultures have different values, truth must not exist. From this they derive the maxim that we should just get along with one another, and that no values are superior to others or worth defending. Students are left with a gentle egotism and the desire for comfort. The end result of all this is that books are no longer read as part of a hunger for truth; books have lost their significance.

Nash generally agrees with Bloom, but describes the situation a little differently. His book focuses on three areas of illiteracy among our students: functional illiteracy, cultural illiteracy, and moral illiteracy.

*Functional illiteracy* is the inability to understand the written word well enough to thrive within our modern culture. The National Assessment of Educational Progress test in 2007 found that thirty-

three percent of fourth graders and more than a quarter of eighth graders scored below basic levels in reading.{3} What makes this distressing is the fact that per pupil expenditures have more than doubled since 1970 while achievement has remained flat.

The problem isn't just in our primary and secondary schools. Poet and university professor Karl Shapiro writes that "What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities."{4} It's also estimated that 30 million America adults can be considered to be functionally illiterate.{5}

Bloom and Nash argue that the prevailing functional illiteracy and the loss of interest in books is not a chance occurrence. Nash believes that it is the result of a change in the way the West thinks about truth and human nature, as well as the abandonment of a Christian worldview.

## **Education's Ills cont.**

In addition to students who can't read, or functional illiteracy, there are those who can read but are unable to interpret the meaning of the material because they lack the necessary background information. E. D. Hirsch is the best known author on what has become known as *cultural illiteracy*.

In his book *The Schools We Need*, Hirsch argues that "just as it takes money to make money, it takes knowledge to make knowledge."{6} He contends that those children who begin school with an adequate level of intellectual capital have a framework upon which further learning may be built. But those who lack the necessary educational experiences and sufficient vocabulary tend to fall further and further behind. Not just any information serves as intellectual capital. According to Hirsch, the knowledge taught and learned must be of a type that "constitutes the shared intellectual currency of the society," or put another way, "intellectual capital has to be the widely useful and negotiable coin of the realm."{7}

Nash agrees with Hirsch and charges that modern educational theory deserves much of the blame for causing cultural illiteracy. Hirsch argues that educators often believe that "a child's intellectual and social skills will develop naturally without regard to the specific content of education."{8} Educators are more interested in *how* children learn rather than *what* they learn. Because of this, children fail to store away enough information to become culturally literate.

Some educators will grudgingly admit to the problems of functional and cultural illiteracy, and even assume some of the blame, but they are proud of the decline in what Nash calls *moral illiteracy*. Nash sees the problem of moral illiteracy as a conflict between those who are religious and support traditional values and those who are secular and advocate anti-traditional or modernist values. Those in the midst of the battle understand this conflict, while the typical American often does not.

John Silber, past president of Boston University writes,

In generations past, parents were more diligent in passing on their principles and values to their children, and were assisted by churches and schools which emphasized religious and moral education. In recent years, in contrast, our society has become increasingly secular and the curriculum of the public schools has been denuded of almost all ethical content. As a result universities must confront a student body ignorant of the evidence and arguments that underlie and support many of our traditional moral principles and practices.{9}

## Three Philosophies

Nash describes three distinct philosophical ideas that have resulted in the decline in functional, cultural, and moral literacy in America.

The first of these ideas is *relativism*, which we mentioned earlier. It describes the conviction that there is no such thing as truth. This idea is almost universally accepted among both students and teachers on our campuses. It's often defended with the argument "that might be true for you, but it isn't for me." As Nash points out, this kind of thinking is the result of confusing the veracity of a proposition with one's personal judgment regarding that truth claim. Nash writes, "We may differ in our judgment about what is true, but that does not affect the truth of the matter itself." {10} Relativism itself is making a truth claim about knowledge which is self-defeating. Are we to accept the relativist's statement that there is no truth to be "really true?"

The second idea is *positivism*, an arrogant, quasi-religious devotion to the scientific method. A positivist argues that any belief that cannot be tested by science is irrational. Positivism relegates all of theology and most of ethics to mere opinion or personal preference. However, as philosopher J. P. Moreland has argued, faith in science itself must be defended on a metaphysical basis and cannot be proven scientifically. "The aims, methodologies, and presuppositions of science cannot be validated by science. One cannot turn to science to justify science any more than one can pull oneself up by his own bootstraps." {11}

Positivism often turns out to be based on hidden assumptions, assumptions that make up the third idea (or set of ideas) Nash blames the current state of American education on. This third movement has sometimes been labeled the *bootleg religion* of American education; a mixture of secularism, naturalism, and humanism. The assumptions of this faith include (1) the absence of a transcendent God, (2) the non-existence of anything outside of the physical universe, and (3) the acceptance of the self-actualization of each human being— complete autonomy—as the purpose of life. What makes this set of ideas especially dangerous is that they are presented as being neutral and not in violation of separation of church and state sensitivities.

As a result, some educators consider their students maladjusted or worse if they hold to a worldview that conflicts with these principles. On some campuses, especially at the university level, the monopoly that these ideas enjoy has resulted in Christian thought being systematically filtered out of the curriculum.

## Two Solutions

Allen Bloom makes one major recommendation to combat the relativism that is destroying the desire for knowledge in our schools, he writes:

[T]he only serious solution is the one that is almost universally rejected: the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them—not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read. {12}

Bloom argues that even when these books are read today they are often viewed through the radical



lenses of feminism or Marxism. Everything is deconstructed, every idea is neutralized.

Nash agrees that the Great Books are valuable and contribute to a complete education, but he argues that the array of ideas contained in them will baffle students unless they have an over-arching philosophy to guide them through the maze. Although Bloom acknowledges the necessity for individuals and schools to make the hard choices about the big questions in life, he himself fails to do this in regards to a curriculum. Should teachers treat all of the Great Books equally? Since the authors disagree intensely on basic issues regarding the nature of reality and humanity, are we not promoting a new relativism in place of the old? For instance, do we accept Augustine's *Confessions* and his views on the sinfulness of mankind, or Rousseau's *Confessions*, which assumes that humans are naturally good?

Nash contends that one condition of being an educated person is that he or she develops a single, consistent worldview, something not found in the Great Books. From a Christian perspective, only Christian theism can accomplish the task adequately.

Human beings are never neutral concerning the nature of God, and what people believe to be true about God will ultimately affect their view of education. Although Bloom talks about how modern education has impoverished the souls of today's students, he leaves us without any indication of how those souls should be fed or what connection should be made between knowledge and virtue.

Nash believes that education would greatly benefit from true educational choice. This would empower parents to have their children educated under the worldview assumptions that correspond to their own. Putting more power into parents' hands, thereby increasing local control of education, is one step to re-opening the American heart.

## Notes

1. Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), 227.
2. *Ibid.*, 25.
3. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Reading Report Card, at [nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2007/r0001.asp](http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2007/r0001.asp) on 8/29/2009.
4. Nash, Ronald, *The Closing of the American Heart* (Probe Books, 1990), 46.
5. National Center for Education Statistics, "2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy," U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, at [nces.ed.gov/naal/index.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/naal/index.asp) on 8/29/2009.
6. Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.
8. Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart*, 50.
9. *Ibid.*, 53.
10. *Ibid.*, 63.

11. Ibid., 66.

12. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 344.

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## Educational Choice

*Don Closson surveys the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.*

What does the idea of educational choice have to do with a Christian worldview? Quite a lot, actually. As Christians we are called to be concerned about justice, about the poor, about the weakest individuals in our society. We also have an interest in having a population educated well enough to read and understand the Bible. It is about “loving our neighbors as ourselves” and “doing unto the least of these” in the society around us.



I must admit that during my twelve years of teaching and administrating in public schools educational choice wasn't a burning issue. I admit that personal interest convinced me to become a supporter. Vouchers made sense as I experienced the difficulty of paying taxes for local public schools even though my children were being home-schooled or were attending private schools. Back then, supporters of vouchers were either fans of free-market economist Milton Freeman or were philosophically opposed to the “one-best-system” approach of government-provided schooling. They were a small but vocal minority.

Times have changed. Today, supporters of educational choice are often people who are shocked by the failure of our inner city schools to educate children in any meaningful sense of the word. A rising number of urban leaders have concluded that the current model of schooling just hasn't worked for many of our children.

What is meant by the term “educational choice”? One definition says, “...it means letting every parent send their child to the school of their choice regardless of where they live or income. Parents choose schools based on their child's needs, not their address.”<sup>{1}</sup> The desire for educational choice over the last couple of decades has found expression in the creation of voucher plans, charter schools, private scholarship programs, and personal tax credits or deductions. Since each state is responsible for establishing its own educational policies, there have been multiple variations on each of these categories along with endless court battles to affirm or deny the constitutionality of each plan.

Those who support educational choice begin with the assumption that increased competition is almost always a good thing. Its proponents argue that when schools must compete for students, they

generally work harder at providing a better service. They believe in bottom-up reform, letting parents choose what educational methods and content is best for their children rather than a top-down approach that is guided by a centralized government or teachers' union.

In this article we survey the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.

## **Publicly Funded Vouchers**

In 1955 economist Milton Friedman argued that America's public school system was not achieving the goals that it was created for. As a government operated monopoly it was failing in its mandate to educate all of our children equally regardless of race or class. In fact, it was a highly segregated system that was failing our most needy students in our inner city schools. His solution was to open up education to market forces by issuing vouchers to parents who could then choose where to spend their education dollars. He wrote, "In the end, the goal of education is to ensure learning and guarantee a free society and stable democracy. These goals are better met when all parents are free to choose the school that works best for their child."

For decades, Friedman was a lone voice, but in the early 1990's Milwaukee Wisconsin began a voucher program with 337 students who could use their publicly funded vouchers to attend religious or non-religious private schools in the city. This program is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year and is approaching its legislatively set cap of 15% of the districts students. In the 2007-08 school year over 18,000 students participated, attending 122 different private schools. {2} Voucher programs have been established in Cleveland Ohio, Colorado, Florida and Washington D.C., only to be met with an onslaught of legal challenges.

In 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that voucher programs are not a violation of the religious establishment clause of the First Amendment. Although that issue has been settled, state courts have whittled away or restricted these programs at every turn. Teachers' unions have also spent millions of dollars to fight voucher program legislation and to campaign against them in statewide referendums.

It appears that limited voucher programs aimed at poor inner-city students who are trapped in dysfunctional schools now have the best chance of succeeding. While middle-class evangelicals seemed supportive of vouchers early on, they now perceive them to be a threat to the independence of the many private religious schools that have sprung up in the last 20 years. Most middle class suburbanites already have the power of school choice because of their financial ability to move into districts with better schools.

Tax supported vouchers are still popular among the many free market conservatives who argue that competition in the educational marketplace would be good for children and for the public schools. They have also garnered grass root support from the African-American and Hispanic communities in the last decade. There are other ways to inject choice into our educational system, but it is clear to many that choice is needed now, especially for our most needy students.

## **Why Educational Choice?**

Giving inner city parents a choice in where they send their children to school is critical if we hope to solve the crises in our cities' schools. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings puts it this way:

“Despite our best efforts, there are still vast inequities within our education system. In too many of our cities, the reality faced by minority and low-income kids is shocking. As you’ve heard, 15% of our high schools produce more than half of our dropouts. Of these dropout factories a majority of the students trapped in them are minorities, and their high school experience looks vastly different from what most kids encounter. They go to schools where trash litters the floors, where graffiti decorates the walls. . . where most freshmen enter unable to read or do math at an eighth grade-level, and where graduation is a 50/50 shot, or worse.”{3}

Why do many reformers believe that educational choice has the greatest potential to solve our nation’s education problems? Referring to legislation passed in 2004 that provided the first federally funded choice scholarships for low income students in Washington D.C., Secretary of Education Rod Paige explained that:

“Educational choice is important for two reasons. First, it extends civil rights and social justice. Second, it enhances school effectiveness. The introduction of opportunity scholarships in the District comes fifty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. It comes 40 years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded a full measure of the American promise. Opportunity scholarships help remove the chains of bureaucracy. They free low-income students to obtain a better education in a school of their choosing.”{4}

Studies have shown how dramatic changes can occur in cities that allow its parents choice. Writing about the longest voucher program in the nation, the *Wall Street Journal* declares:

“There’s no question the program has been a boon to the city’s underprivileged. A 2004 study of high school graduation rates by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute found that students using vouchers to attend Milwaukee’s private schools had a graduation rate of 64%, versus 36% for their public school counterparts. Harvard’s Caroline Hoxby has shown that Milwaukee public schools have raised their standards in the wake of voucher competition.”{5}

Educational choice works because it puts power into the hands of the people who care most about our nation’s children, their parents. It works because it increases the autonomy of school administrators so that they can provide the kind of education that the public wants. It works because it encourages learning communities of like-minded adults to work together to provide the best learning environment possible.

## **Private Vouchers and Tax Credits**

Although the press has focused on the legal battles surrounding the use of tax-supported educational vouchers to pay tuition at private religious schools, there is another type of voucher program that is helping thousands of children and continues to grow without legal controversy. There are now more than two dozen *private* voucher programs in cities across the United States. Millions of dollars are being raised by private citizens in order to offer vouchers to less fortunate children so that they can attend better schools.

In that late 1990’s, John Walton of Wal-Mart fame, and Theodore Forstmann of Forstmann Little &

Company decided to offer 1,000 scholarships to low income students in Washington D.C. With very little publicity they received over 8,000 applications. Sensing a real need, in 1998 they together donated \$100 million towards a national program that would fund 40,000 scholarships inaugurating the Children's Scholarship Fund.<sup>{6}</sup> That got people's attention. Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, Martin Luther King III, General Colin Powell, and numerous C.E.O.'s from some of America's best known corporations have served on the organization's board.

By September of 1998 the fund grew to \$170 million. Eventually, the Children's Scholarship Fund received applications from 1.25 million children from 22,000 cities and towns in all fifty states.

Mr. Forstmann concluded that:

The parents of 1.25 million children put an end to the debate over whether low-income families want choice in education: They passionately, desperately, unequivocally do. Now it is up to the defenders of the status quo to tell them, and the millions they represent, why they cannot have it.<sup>{7}</sup>

In 2007, the Children's Scholarship Fund gave vouchers to 29,000 students. The families receiving these scholarships earned an average of around \$27,000 a year, and supplemented the scholarship with an additional \$2,000 per student. These low income families have a strong desire to remove their children from their current schools and are willing to make a significant sacrifice to acquire a good education for their children.

State-sponsored tax credits are another alternative to tax-funded vouchers. They are popular because of they are simple to administrate; they have a relatively long history and a settled legal status. They have limited scope because not all states have an income tax and often it is the families who need help the most who do not benefit from tax credits because of their low tax liability.

Advocates of educational choice agree that it will take many different tactics to provide the freedom parents need to get the best education possible for their children.

## **Educational Freedom**

In 2001, the Manhattan Institute released an interesting study concerning the idea of educational freedom. The study suggested a strong relationship between the amount of freedom a state gives parents in directing their children to a school of their choice and the level of academic achievement accomplished by those children.

Since education is primarily governed at the state level, it makes sense to measure educational freedom by state. In the study, a state's ranking is determined by how much freedom parents are given by its laws regulating vouchers, charter schools, home-schooling, choice within existing public schools, and tax credits allowed for education expenses.

According to the study, the most educationally free state is Arizona. It gets the top spot because of its wide selection of charter schools and its tax credits for private school expenses. The least educationally free state is Hawaii. Hawaii scores lowest on the index because it has one large school district for the entire state, no charter schools, and it highly regulates home-schoolers. Utah is second to last because gives no assistance to those sending their children to private schools, has few charter schools, and has large centralized school districts.

The study concludes that "For many years education reformers have advocated strengthening

accountability systems and expanding educational freedom. Our statistical models suggest that such reforms, where implemented, have yielded the academic improvements that reformers predicted.”{8} For instance, a one-point increase in a state’s freedom index would predict a 4% increase in that state’s math test results indicated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Educational freedom received another boost in a study released in October 2007 by the Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation. The research concludes that “A large body of top-quality studies consistently shows that school choice produces higher academic achievement for the students who have the opportunity to use it. On this issue, the evidence supporting school choice is as strong as the evidence on any social policy question whatsoever.”{9}

Freedom makes a difference in education. Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute writes, “Simply providing families with additional options in the education of their children has a larger independent effect on student achievement than increasing education spending or reducing class size... the magnitude of the benefit of education freedom for student learning is comparable to the benefit of significantly increasing median household income.”{10}

Christians are called upon to love their neighbors, and their neighbors’ children, as themselves. If we are serious about helping our underprivileged neighbors, especially in our inner-cities schools, educational freedom through greater choice is a policy we can and should endorse.

## Notes

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4. [www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01282004.html](http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01282004.html). Accessed on 12/14/2007.
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## Blessings and Judgment

Is God blessing America? Will God bring judgment against America? These are questions I often hear, and yet rarely do we hear good answers to these questions. Part of the reason is that Christians haven’t really studied the subject of blessings and judgment.



In this article we deal with this difficult and controversial subject. While we may not be able to come to definitive answers to all of these questions, I think we will have a better understanding of what blessings and judgment are from a biblical perspective.

When we think about this topic, often we are in two minds. On one hand, we believe that God is on our side and blessing us. After the attacks on 9/11, for example, we launched a war on terror and were generally convinced that God was on our side. At least we hoped that He was. Surely God could not be on the side of the terrorists.

On the other hand, we also wonder if God is ready to judge America. Given the evils of our society, isn't it possible that God will judge America? Haven't we exceeded what other nations have done that God has judged in the past?

In his book *Is God on America's Side?*, Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. We will look at these in more depth below. But we should first acknowledge that God through His prophets clearly declared when he was bringing judgment. In those cases, we have special revelation to clearly show what God was doing. We do not have Old Testament prophets today, but that doesn't stop Christians living in the church age from claiming (often inaccurately) that certain things are a judgment of God.

In the 1980s and 1990s we heard many suggest that AIDS was a judgment of God against homosexuality. In my book *Living Ethically In the 90s* I said that it did not look like a judgment from God. First, there were many who engaged in homosexual behavior who were not stricken with AIDS (many male homosexuals and nearly all lesbians were AIDS-free). Second, it struck many innocent victims (those who contracted the disease from blood transfusions). Was AIDS a judgment of God? I don't think so.

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, people called into my talk show suggesting this was God's judgment against the city because of its decadence. But then callers from the Gulf Coast called to say that the hurricane devastated their communities, destroying homes, businesses, and churches. Was God judging the righteous church-going people of the Gulf Coast? Was Hurricane Katrina a judgment of God? I don't think so.

In this article we are going to look at blessings and judgments that are set forth by God in the Old Testament so that we truly understand what they are.

## **Seven Principles (Part 1)**

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The first principle is that God can both bless and curse a nation. {1}

When we sing "God Bless America" do we really mean it? I guess part of the answer to that question is what do most Americans mean by the word "God"? We say we believe in God, but many people believe in a god of their own construction. In a sense, most Americans embrace a god of our civil religion. This is not the God of the Bible.

R.C. Sproul says the god of this civil religion is without power: "He is a deity without sovereignty, a god without wrath, a judge without judgment, and a force without power."<sup>{2}</sup> We have driven God from the public square, but we bring him back during times of crisis (like 9/11) but he is only allowed off the reservation for a short period of time.

We sing "God Bless America" but do we mean it? Nearly every political speech and every "State of the Union" address ends with the phrase, "May God bless America." But what importance do we place in that phrase?

Contrast this with what God said in the Old Testament. God gave Israel a choice of either being blessed or being cursed. "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

We should first acknowledge that Israel was unique because it had a covenant with God. America does not have a covenant with God. But it does still seem as if the principle of blessing and cursing can apply to nations today.

A second principle is that God judges nations based on the amount of light and opportunity they are given.<sup>{3}</sup> The Old Testament is a story of Israel. Other nations enter the story when they connect with Israel. Because Israel had a unique relationship with God, the nation was judged more strictly than its neighbors.

God was more patient with the Canaanites—it took four hundred years before their "cup of iniquity" was full, and then judgment fell on them. Likewise, Paul points out (Romans 2:12-15) that in the end time, God would individually judge Jews and Gentiles by the amount of light they had when they were alive.

A nation that is given the light of revelation will be held to greater account than a nation that is not.

## Seven Principles (Part 2)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The third principle is that God sometimes uses exceedingly evil nations to judge those that are less evil.<sup>{4}</sup>

Israel was blessed with undeserved opportunities, yet were disobedient. God reveals to Isaiah that God would use the wicked nation of Assyria to judge Israel. "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets" (Isaiah 10:5-6). In another instance, God reveals to Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans to march through the land, plundering, killing, and stealing (Habakkuk 1:5-11).

As I mentioned above, Christians are often of two minds when they think about America. On the one hand they believe America is a great country. We have been willing to rebuild countries after war or natural disaster. American missionaries travel around the world. Christians broadcast the gospel message around the world.

On the other hand, America is a decadent country. We are the leading exporters of pornography and movies that celebrate sex, violence, and profanity. We have aborted more than 50 million unborn babies. Our judicial system banishes God from public life. Will God use another nation to judge



America?

A fourth principle is that when God judges a nation, the righteous suffer with the wicked. {5} A good example of this can be found in the book of Daniel. When God brought the Babylonians against Judah, Daniel and his friends were forced to accompany them.

We also see a parallel to this in manmade and natural disasters. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a hurricane or tsunami, we see that believers and nonbelievers die together. We live in a fallen world among fallen people. These actions (whether brought about by moral evil or physical evil) destroy lives and property in an indiscriminate way.

A fifth principle is that God's judgments take various forms. {6} Sometimes it results in the destruction of our families. We can see this in God's pronouncement in Deuteronomy 28:53-55. When the Israelites were forced to leave their homes to go to foreign lands, the warnings were fulfilled. Today we may not be forced into exile, but we wonder if God is judging our families just the same. He is judging us for our immorality.

In Deuteronomy 28:36-37, "The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." When the ten tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria, they were assimilated into the pagan culture and never heard from again.

### **Seven Principles (Part 3)**

The sixth principle is that in judgment, God's target is often His people, not just the pagans among them. {7}

Yes, it is true that God judges the wicked, but sometimes the real purpose of present judgments has more to do with the righteous than the wicked. Not only do we see this in the Old Testament, we also see this principle in the New Testament. 1 Peter 4:17-18 says: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

This raises a good question. If judgment begins at the house of God, is the church today under judgment? Have Christians become too worldly? Have Christians become too political and thus depend on government rather than on God? Have Christians become too materialistic? Someone has said we should change the motto on our coins from "In God we trust" to "In gold we trust."

A seventh and final principle is that God sometimes reverses intended judgments. {8} We must begin with an observation. God's blessing on any nation is undeserved. There is always sin and evil in the land. When God blesses us, either individually or corporately, it is an evidence of God's grace.

Sometimes God calls for judgment but then spares a nation. A good example of that can be found in the life of Jonah. God called him to that city to preach repentance for their sins. He didn't want to go because it was the capital city of the Assyrians who had committed genocide against Israel. But when Jonah finally obeyed God, the city was saved from judgment.

God also used Old Testament prophets to preach to Israel. But the people didn't have a heart to care. Consider the ministry of Micah and Jeremiah. Actually, Micah preached a hundred years before Jeremiah and warned Judah that her "wound is incurable." A century later, Jeremiah is brought before the priests and false prophets who want him killed. After hearing him, they appeal to the

preaching of Micah (Jeremiah 16:19). King Hezekiah listened to Micah's words and sought God who withheld judgment.

Erwin Lutzer gives another example from eighteenth century England. The country was in decline, but God reversed the trend through the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning to the questions about whether God is blessing or judging our nation.

First, we must acknowledge that no nation can claim that God is on its side. In fact, there is a long and sorry history of nations that have claimed this. And the "God is on our side mentality" has done much harm throughout the history of the church.

Kim Riddlebarger: "Instead of letting God be God, our sinful pride leads us to make such pronouncements that are not ours to make. In these cases, God is not sovereign, he is a mascot."{9} As a nation, we must not claim that God is on our side.

This is also true in the political debates we have within this nation. Richard Land in his book, *The Divided States of America*, says: "What liberals and conservatives both are missing is that America has been blessed by God in unique ways—we are not just another country, but neither are we God's special people. I do not believe that America is God's chosen nation. God established one chosen nation and people: the Jews. We are not Israel. We do not have "God on our side." We are not God's gift to the world."{10}

This brings us back to the famous quote by Abraham Lincoln who was asked if God was on the side of the Union forces or the Confederate forces. He said: "I do not care whether God is on my side; the important question is whether I am on God's side, for God is always right."

Second, we should be careful not to quickly assume that a disease or a disaster is a judgment of God. Above I gave examples of people wrongly assuming that AIDS or Hurricane Katrina was a judgment of God.

We can take comfort in knowing that this isn't just a problem in the twenty-first century. Apparently it was even a problem in the first century. The tower of Siloam fell and killed a number of people. It appears that those around Jesus thought it was a punishment for their sins. He counters this idea by saying: "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

We should wisely refrain from too quickly labeling a disease or disaster as a judgment of God. But we should take to heart the words of Jesus and focus on our need for salvation and repentance.

## Notes

1. Erwin Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 11.
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4. *Ibid.*, 25.
5. *Ibid.*, 35.
6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. Ibid., 49.

8. Ibid., 65.

9. Kim Riddlebarger, "Using God," *Modern Reformation*, November/December 2007, 14.

10. Richard Land, *The Divided States of America* (Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 197.

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## A Christian Worldview Appraisal of Gun Control and the Second Amendment

In today's America, the Second Amendment invokes intense arguments regarding its meaning and application. Events like the Newton school, the Aurora movie theater, and the Tucson shopping center shootings bring sorrow to our minds and prayers to our lips. Some say the way to prevent these tragedies is to remove the right for individuals to own and carry firearms. Others argue that firearms carried by responsible individuals could have prevented much, if not all, the carnage of these mass shootings.



Any discussion of the Second Amendment should begin by making sure we are familiar with the wording and the original meaning of this part of our Bill of Rights. The Second Amendment states: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Although we can reasonably assume the authors of the Bill of Rights and the people of that day felt that this was an unambiguous statement, it is not the case today.

Some believe that the phrase "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms" creates an individual constitutional right. This view is referred to as the "individual right theory,"<sup>{1}</sup> that legislative bodies are precluded from prohibiting firearm possession. Others argue that the phrase "a well-regulated Militia" means that it was only intended to restrict Congress from legislating away a state's right of self-defense. This view is called the "collective rights theory."<sup>{2}</sup>

In all likelihood, the authors intentionally combined these two thoughts. The states could not muster a militia of their people unless the people were allowed to keep arms. This view is supported by people involved in crafting and/or approving the Bill of Rights. Samuel Adams wrote, "The said Constitution be never construed to authorize Congress to . . . prevent the people of the United states, who are peaceable citizens, from keeping their own arms."<sup>{3}</sup> Similarly, Noah Webster wrote, "Before a standing army can rule, the people must be disarmed; as they are in almost every kingdom in Europe. The supreme power in American cannot enforce unjust laws by the sword; because the whole body of the people are armed, and constitute a force superior to any band of regular troops that can be on any pretense, raised in the United States."<sup>{4}</sup>

Does a Christian worldview provide guidance for our views on the Second Amendment? The Bible does not talk about guns, but does it provide instruction on this issue? In 1 Peter, we learn that governments bear the sword to implement justice. Under our Constitution, we, the people, are ultimately the ones who bear the sword to ensure justice.

## **The Second Amendment: Why Was It Added?**

As discussed above, those responsible for the Second Amendment intended to ensure individuals could bear firearms legally. What concerns led to this original amendment to our constitution?

To understand, we should review the context for the introduction of the Bill of Rights. When the Constitution was sent to the states for ratification in 1787, two groups formed around adding a bill of rights to the Constitution, the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The Federalists supported the Constitution as written, believing that any attempt to list certain rights as remaining with individuals or states would be interpreted as making other rights subject to the federal government. The Anti-Federalists believed it was important to clearly state key fundamental rights over which the federal government would have no jurisdiction. Neither group was arguing against any of the Bill of Rights, but rather whether it was more effective to be silent or to list them explicitly.

The Federalists, who had the majority of delegates to the convention, were wrong in assuming that most people would agree with their hands-off approach. This situation led to many of the states ratifying the Constitution with the stipulation that a bill of rights be added. The right to bear arms was a common component of these stipulations. As James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers, "The advantage of being armed, which the Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation . . . forms a barrier against the enterprises of ambition . . . The several kingdoms of Europe . . . are afraid to trust the people with arms." {5}

When the first Congress met, James Madison presented a bill of rights before the members of the House. The first Congress converted these into twelve amendments which were sent back to the states for ratification in September of 1789. The language which would become the Second Amendment was essentially unchanged from that offered by Madison. On March 1, 1792, Thomas Jefferson announced the ratification of the United States Bill of Rights.

In Romans, Paul wrote, "But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for (governing authorities) do not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." {6} However, if government officials hold all power, those who would control us will seek that power by taking over the government. In our constitutional system, the people are the ultimate governing authorities and thus are given the right to bear arms to protect the nation against those who would take over for the practice of evil.

## **The Second Amendment: How Is It Applied Today?**

As noted previously, two different thoughts arose in interpreting the Second Amendment, namely the "individual rights theory" and the "collective rights theory." Which view is supported by the Supreme Court?

In the most recent ruling of 2008, the court ruled the amendment confers an individual right to possess a firearm for traditionally lawful purposes such as self-defense. It also determined that the clause concerning a well-regulated militia does not limit the part which clearly states an individual's right to keep and bear arms. Thus, the Court affirmed the "individual rights theory" of interpretation.

Remember, the framers of the Second Amendment were aware that guns held by individuals could be used for criminal activity. They felt that protecting individual liberty was more important than trying to create a perfectly safe environment. However, it should not be interpreted that everyone should have equal access to firearms. The Court has supported laws which 1) restrict those with mental problems or a criminal background in acquiring guns and 2) limit general access to specific types of weapons for mass destruction.

The difficult question is, when does the government cross the line into the realm of interfering with a person's rights? First, what is meant by arms; does it include tanks, RPGs, etc.? Second, what could legally preclude a person's right to bear arms? What type of personality or personality disorder makes it dangerous to others for you to carry a gun?

On the first question, the answer is not defined by what is needed for hunting or protection from thieves. From the perspective of the Founding Fathers, it needs to be weapons such that if a sufficient number of people possess them, the government is unable through the force of an army to impose any unconstitutional burdens upon the people. The Court's position is that rifles and handguns are sufficient and that the government has the right to control other types of weapons.

The second question is equally difficult: how does one determine who is sane enough to have the right to bear arms? The Court has allowed this to be defined in terms of mental deficiencies, mental problems and a criminal background.

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we are told to pray for those in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life with all godliness and dignity. Our Constitution indicates that we are to take up arms as necessary to protect a government supporting godliness and dignity. It is reasonable to preclude those without a sane concept of a quiet and peaceful life from accessing firearms, which would always be a small minority of the populace.

## **The Second Amendment: Should It Be Ignored?**

To this point, we have laid out the history and the status of our right to bear arms. We have three possible responses: 1) accept and obey this law, 2) ignore it as counter to God's greater law, or 3) work to repeal the law. Let us first consider the question, "Is this a law that we should ignore?"

As spelled out in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, Christians are to uphold the laws of our land. Although no specific governmental system is promoted in the New Testament, we appreciate a system that protects our ability

to worship God consistent with 1 Timothy 2:1-2. We support protecting the individual religious freedom offered by this country. At the same time, we want to limit robbery, murder and mayhem. How do these potentially conflicting desires relate to our view of the Second Amendment?

Remember, its underlying purpose is to ensure that our freedoms as individuals and as states are never trampled on by the federal government or others. The framers of the Constitution were worried about the tendency of large governments to attempt to consolidate their power at the expense of freedom. As Christians, we should desire to live in a society where we are free to worship God and share our faith with others.

In 1 Timothy 2:1-4, we see that we should pray for such a society because "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." As citizens of this nation, the Second Amendment makes it clear that we have a responsibility to protect our rights from those who would attempt to abuse their position, to maintain our freedoms including our freedom to live godly lives and share Christ freely.

In 2 Peter 2:13-14, we are to submit “for the Lord’s sake to every human institution,” whether to a king or his representatives. Within our structure of government, we submit to our Constitution and its principles. The Second Amendment calls for us (if needed) to be armed and ready as individuals to participate in a state militia or, in the absence of a militia, to act as individuals to protect our liberty. In 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that this also confers an individual right to possess a firearm for traditionally lawful purposes.

Clearly, the right to bear arms as defined in our Constitution and explained by Supreme Court rulings is not counter to biblical teaching. Therefore, we are to act in accordance with this amendment to our Constitution. Whether we should try to repeal this law is discussed below.

## **The Second Amendment: Should It Be Repealed?**

If the Second Amendment creates more harm than good, we can support repealing it. The main argument for this

position is that guns are used by some to harm the innocent. If guns are freely available to the citizenry, does the harm done outweigh the value envisioned by the Second Amendment?

Many innocent people have been killed by deranged individuals and criminals with guns; at the same time, we cannot remember a time when American citizens were called to the streets to protect our Constitution. Have we reached a point where the nature of today’s weapons and our society make the Second Amendment a detriment?

One group argues that if private ownership was illegal and strictly enforced, it would severely limit gun violence. An opposing view believes the problem is actually worsened by the lack of gun ownership by the public. If more law abiding citizens were armed and prepared to respond, the number of people killed would drop due to the deterrent effect.

What is the problem with repealing the Second Amendment? To have no guns among the citizenry, the government must be very proactive in removing guns from society as a whole. Guns must be removed from those not inclined to obey—a very difficult task as evidenced by the prevalence of alcohol during Prohibition. If accomplished, the government must assume unprecedented powers which may be fine as long as the Constitution is not usurped. But if a future government decides to do so, there will be nothing to stop it.

Swords were used to kill people in Jesus’ day. Did Jesus rail against the presence of swords and demand that no one but soldiers should carry them? No, in fact, he told His disciples that he who had no sword should buy one because of the troubled days ahead.<sup>{7}</sup> Peter was carrying his sword in the garden when Jesus was arrested.<sup>{8}</sup> While Jesus kept Peter from interfering with His arrest, Jesus did not use that situation to initiate a “sword control” campaign.

Perhaps a more sensible way to control gun violence would be to encourage law-abiding citizens to carry weapons, particularly in public areas. This approach creates a deterrent against the insane, the criminal, and a future government gone amok.

According to Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3, in the last days, swords will be beaten into plowshares and nations will no longer lift up the sword against other nations. We are clearly not in those last days now. Keeping the

Second Amendment in place highlights our commitment to a government “of the people, by the people and for the people,” while we wait for Christ’s bodily return.

## Notes

1. *Second Amendment*, Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School, [www.law.cornell.edu/wex/second\\_amendment](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/second_amendment)
2. Ibid.
3. Philip Mulivor, *Proclaiming Liberty: What Patriots and Heroes Really Said about the Right to Keep and Bear Arms*, Brightman Press, New York, 2011 quoting Samuel Adams, Amendment introduced on 6 Feb. 1788 in the Massachusetts ratifying convention, qtd. *In Debates and Proceeding in the Cnvention of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Held in the Year 1788*
4. Ibid., Noah Webster, “An Examination of the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution.” *Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States Published During Its Discussion by the People 1787-1788*.
5. Ibid., James Madison, “Paper 46,” *The Federalist Papers*.
6. Romans 13:4
7. Luke 22:35-38
8. John 18:10

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# Crimping Consciences: Texas City Railroads Pro-Gay Ordinance

*Byron Barlowe blogs about the his city's Anti-Discrimination ordinance intended to give full recognition to the LGBT community at the expense of those who disagree.*

## **New Anti-Discrimination Policy Approved**

According to the *Dallas Morning News Plano Blog*, “In a split vote Monday, the Plano City Council passed the controversial Equal Rights Policy [ERP] over the objections of many residents in the standing-room-only crowd.

The amendment to the city’s 1989 anti-discrimination policy extends protections from housing, employment and public accommodation discrimination to include sexual orientation, gender identity and other categories” like veterans. While no one objected to the inclusion of veterans, an overwhelming number of surprised and very lately aware (as in, the day of) citizens voiced strong opposition. These objections, while noted, seemed to make little to no difference to the city council and certainly to Mayor Harry LaRosiliere, who was so eager to vote for the statute that he went out of order during proceedings.

As a Plano resident who publicly urged the council to vote “No” on the measure, I offer some reflections on the issue—both local and larger—from a biblically informed worldview.

## **Good Intentions: Trying to Legislate Values *Directly***

Rather than seeking to legislate merely out of a set of values—an unavoidable reality—the Plano City Council clearly tried to impose a set of values directly onto the public by adopting this more expansive anti-discrimination ordinance. Such legislative overreach has become part and parcel of an increasingly politically correct polity known as the United States of America. Plano is now more PC. While this kind of ordinance is not only inadvisable because it cannot hope to work well, it also steps beyond the scope of a proper role of government.

### **IT CANNOT WORK BECAUSE . . .**

We often hear the phrase “You can’t legislate morality.” Well, yes and no. While the very nature of human law at its root is a delineation of and codification of right vis a vis wrong—that is, strictures or incentives administered by the state as a morally informed code of conduct—it is also true that government cannot successfully impose morality, *per se*, onto the consciences of their citizens.

Yet, that is precisely what such ordinances as Plano’s ERP seeks to do. Plano’s “out” regarding the problem of conscientious objection? City Attorney Paige Mims assures us that if anyone outside of the many exempted statuses has a moral or religious objection, they can go through a waiver process. This is, on its face, an undue imposition on businesspeople who don’t fall under exempted categories like education, non-profit or religious. Recent legal precedent (see Hobby Lobby case) makes clear that religious businesses do not somehow lay down their rights of conscience when they go into business.

### **ROLE OF GOVERNMENT. . .**

When government entities try to arbitrate motives, for example hate crimes laws that purport to regulate actions based on the attitudinal intent of the actor, it steps into a sphere where it does not, indeed it cannot, belong. In other words, it takes on a godlike sovereignty to righteously discern between this and that intention. Can’t be done. Not righteously. Not fairly.

People—including city legal departments and judges—are fallible humans who lack the innate ability to administer justice based primarily or solely on someone’s internal motivation. “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out” (Proverbs 20:5). Drawing out the “purposes” of a man’s or woman’s heart is certainly not a governmental role. But this is what it takes to know motives, a role only God claims full access to, and a role traditionally reserved for clergy, other spiritual advisers and psychologists.

Here is a pithy bunch of biblical worldview teaching on the role of government.

Biblically, the proper role of government is founded in limits primarily written in Romans 13. As I understand it, a biblical worldview on government’s role is limited to: fighting wars, passing and enforcing laws concerning public human interactions and that’s about it. Anything else falls under the jurisdiction of religious and social institutions. Government: stay out!

**I’m not arguing for such a state of affairs as an absolute in the real world**, but as a plumb line to measure when government has stepped over its proper boundaries. In the case of Plano’s ERP government has overstepped.

## **Progressivism on Parade**

The subtext of public deliberations on Plano’s ERP was plainly a progressive agenda. Why else would a city seek to get “ahead of the curve” on a social issue such as gender bias or sexual identity discrimination or whatever the euphemism is today? (Refer above to the value of limited role of



government, which was expressed repeatedly to the council by citizens of Plano.) The council, challenged that there are no known cases of such discrimination, seemed to shrug dismissively and invoke the need to “get ahead of” the issue.

“The issue of equality is a basic human rights issue and the choice for some to focus on a person’s sexuality is conflating the issue,” said the Mayor. Conflating what with what? Either the mayor misunderstands the term “conflating” (making things the same) or he’s basically accusing objectors of the very thing that has been foisted upon them—namely, making one’s sexual choices (not their true sexuality) the determiner of human rights. This is like watching someone start a fight over a piece of land and then accusing the one attacked of starting that same fight over that very piece of land!

Questioning the need for the statute was otherwise met with a not-so-veiled sense of accusation, an implication of inherent bias on the part of the objectors, despite an overall congenial atmosphere. So, if I question the veracity of the claim to need such a policy or ask for reasonable cause, I am automatically anti-gay? That’s patently false and unfair. Yet that was the sense of things in a politically correct undercurrent that is the zeitgeist of our day.

## **Worldview War**

This is the serious game begun back in the 1970s by Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen who spelled out the propaganda project of the gay lobby in a book titled *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear & Hatred of Gays in the 90s*. Now that their jamming (name-calling, guilt by association and other tactics) have worked so well, only an implicit inference need be made at such meetings as Monday night’s. It has a chilling—no—a virtual shutdown effect.

Yet, many citizens displayed aplomb when speaking on the Constitution and related matters. Businesspeople appealed to the unfairness of having to seek redress through a voucher system. One person well said in response: “The Constitution is my waiver.” First Amendment (or any other) rights do not require special permission. It’s government’s role merely to ensure them, which Plano may think it’s doing by elevating ever more special interests to protected status. That is an upside-down approach that’s illegitimate no matter how much case law exists or how many other cities and companies enact similar policies.

## **The “We’re Just Following” Fallacy**

An admittedly very arguable point I’d like to add: Mayor LaRosiliere and City Attorney Mims claimed that other major cities in Texas have such statutes on the books. Hence we are not, as implicated, “out front” taking legal risks, but rather are following others’ lead. This seems disingenuous.

Are we “out in front” of the issue or are we, as strongly emphasized by the Mayor, simply one in a fairly long line of municipalities trying to codify fair treatment to people of all lifestyles and segments? One could make the case that Plano is in the vanguard overall but not first in implementation. However, that is unsatisfactory to many. You can’t ultimately have it both ways: either you’re progressive on social issues (which does not truly reflect Plano well) or you’re just falling in line with current legal trends.

## **The “Gay Gene” at the Bottom of the Debate**

One thing is sure: *increased expansion of rights and privileges to previously unaddressed parties is the trend in our culture—and lots of it has to do with sexuality in a newly politicized way.* But we thought government was supposed to get out of our bedrooms?

Any claim to that distinction has been lost with the adoption of the near-universal belief in what amounts to a “gay gene”—that a person inherently possesses a sexual identity that may indeed be homosexual or of other varieties. This, over and against a mere proclivity or attraction to the same sex, which leaves room for choice, which is an ethical issue. Remove choice regarding homosexuality, you remove any basis of objection. Remove objection, you can run roughshod over any cultural restraints on the free and damaging expression of sexuality outside the bounds of its Inventor, God. Remove those restrictions, celebrate the lifestyle, then codify and impugn those who disagree, and the After the Ball agenda is a complete success.

Monday night’s meeting was an incremental victory toward this end, whether or not players on the city council or either side of the issue realized it. Regarding objectors’ motives, it’s one thing to care for individuals whose sexual identity is in question or those who act out a gay lifestyle and it’s another kind of thing entirely to exercise one’s rights to oppose codification of these choices and lifestyles. I and many of my friends there that night were doing one while we practice the other in private situations, too.

There is no cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy here—one can do both public square advocacy of conservative values and also outreach to individuals who struggle in a certain area of sin—namely other-than-heterosexual-wed sex. True Christlike love does not affirm that which the Bible condemns, but shows grace nonetheless.

### **There is a Precedent for Unintended Consequences and Abuse**

Plano’s ERP sets up the same oppression of religious objectors that has been seen already across the U.S. with cake bakers, wedding venue owners and others who—for reasons of conscience—refuse to do business with certain parties in select situations like gays getting married. Yes, exemptions were written into Plano’s ordinance, but does anyone seriously believe these will stand up under judicial scrutiny in this day and age? The erosion of rights continues—and saying so, again, is not to be confused with intolerance.

This brand of identity politics is rooted in the cultural adoption of the doctrine of a gay gene (“God or nature made me this way!”), which is at a worldview level, where most objectors to the statute were coming from. We object to the underlying presupposition that homosexuality is not utterly tied up with choice, which is so fundamental to opposition to the gay rights issue. (I almost come off as a throwback rube for even bringing it up in today’s enlightened culture—which furthers my point!)

### **The Condescension that Falsely Pits Feelings vs. Facts**

Monday night’s proceedings—at least from the point of view of the city council—were saturated with what has been called the Sacred / Secular Split. On this view, there are basically two levels of discourse: an area of public life informed largely by science but also by enlightened social values (invariably liberal / progressive / non-traditional ones) balanced unevenly by a lesser valued, private world of emotional / psychological / religious sentiments.

The former—where real knowledge resides—should supposedly be the domain of public policy. The latter—again, a private set of often closely held feelings and values that should have no sway in the public arena yet the existence of which are somewhat guarded by government and other institutions—are to be tolerated as inevitable but will hopefully catch up with social contracts like those being forged by the gay lobby and societal institutions across the waterfront. The notion is: “You have a right to your private opinion. Just don’t bring it into the public square.”

This attitude, this taken-for-granted starting place was most evident in closing remarks made by

several city council members—all of whom happened to vote for the policy. One council member waxed eloquent on his world travels, noting that the most advanced societies he'd run across made it a point never to discriminate. (I don't know where he's been, but perhaps his hotel's staff might beg to differ—just guessing.)

More poignantly, he and another council member who said that her Christian faith informed her "yes" vote, was only one more who joined a chorus of comments like:

"There were lots of strong feelings on the topic of discussion tonight" and

"This is a very emotional issue for many. . . ."

The plain inference was that objections were raised out of the private, sacred area of life, laden with "emotion" and "feelings" while effective debate occurred on the level of law, fact and agreed-upon societal norms (at least the evolving kind that our "City of Excellence" wants to be known for).

Pronouncements by a clergy woman (Disciples of Christ) who serves as an officer of a Plano Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender association, the mayor and at least one more gay advocate that the passage of the ERP was just "the right thing to do" obviously paints the vast majority of citizens as those who want to do the wrong thing. According to Mayor LaRosiliere, "Providing equal rights to everyone is the right thing to do." Rights to what? Rights in displacement of whose rights? The task in a pluralistic society is to find that fairest middle ground—and that failed Monday night.

Apparently bigotry, at least ignorance, was the only thing standing in the way of Plano's ERP. Thank you for the condescension. Which leads to my final point: the race card was deftly played by none other than Mayor LaRosiliere where it has no place. And the Mayor did precisely what he accused others of doing, that is . . .

## **. . . Conflating Race & Sexual Lifestyle**

Plano's Mayor ended deliberations (or nearly did) with a speech on the equivalency of historical human rights movements to the current push for special privileges for sexual identities and lifestyles. His well-written story arc was centered on the question, "Why are we doing this now?" In a series of juxtaposed historical references, he posed the question he deemed was being needlessly asked about Plano's Equal Rights Protection ordinance: **Why pass this now if there is no case on record of any discrimination?** In the case of the infamous Dredd-Scott Supreme Court decision that ruled blacks were 3/5 of a person one might ask, he said, "Why are we doing this now?"

"If we spoke in 1919," LaRosiliere continued, "to allow women to vote, the question would be, 'Why are you oppressing me and making me subject to this now.'" He went on to paint discrimination against the Irish in early 19th Century New York and segregation in the South in the 20th Century as morally equivalent instances comparable to the current situation—ostensibly oppression of gay, lesbian and transgender citizens.

Very cleverly devised rhetorical device, that. But it **presupposes a moral equivalency that a black man sitting beside me rejected outright.** This gentleman from Nigeria was so confused by the proceedings and the Mayor's speech capping them off that he was convinced the entire issue at hand was racism! When I asked him this question, he unequivocally answered "No!": "Do you think that homosexual identity is the same kind of thing as you being black or being from Nigeria?"

"No!"

And rightly, **my new African friend—who is a Christian—was bothered by the conflation of**

**the two and the use of such rhetoric to elevate a class of people based on their sinful behavior and identity to it as the basis to extend so-called human rights. *We all have the right to fair treatment as humans made in God's image. We do not have a right to socially engineer law to force the compromise of conscience that is being carried out by Plano's new ordinance.***

As I pleaded with the council not to allow, we will surely read about this case going to court, being found unconstitutional and otherwise unlawful and costing this taxpayer and all others unnecessarily.

Ideas, worldviews, do indeed have consequences.

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## **Gay Agenda in Schools - A Christian Worldview Perspective**

*Kerby Anderson summarizes the efforts currently underway to implement a gay agenda in our public schools, identifying some of the negative consequences. Looking at this initiative from a biblical worldview perspective, he suggests actions that Christians should take in response to these actions.*

### **Advancing the Gay Agenda in Schools**

Since the early 1990s gay activists and various homosexual groups have been using strategies that provide them with greater access to public schools. Usually the focus is upon making the schools a safer place for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual students, thereby justifying the introduction of topics and speakers on the subject of homosexuality. And the establishment of homosexual clubs on campus provides an ongoing program to continue to introduce homosexuality to students on campus.



Two key organizations are the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Both have been helpful in establishing a foothold for homosexual speakers, programs, and curricula.

Perhaps the most effective wedge used by gay activists to open the door to the public schools has been concern over student safety. Kevin Jennings, Executive Director for GLSEN, explained in a speech how the “safety” issue was a most effective strategy:

In Massachusetts, the effective reframing of this issue was the key to the success of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. We immediately seized upon the opponent's calling card—safety—and explained how homophobia represents a threat to students' safety by creating a climate where violence, name-calling, health problems,

and suicide are common. Titling our report “Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth,” we automatically threw our opponents onto the defensive and stole their best line of attack. This framing short-circuited their arguments and left them back-pedaling from day one.{1}

The strategy has obviously been successful because no one would want to be against making the schools a safer environment. It almost doesn't matter whether the allegations are true. Once you raise the concern of safety, most administrators, teachers, and parents quickly fall in line.

There is an irony in all of this. Many of the behaviors that are taught and affirmed in these school programs and clubs are unsafe in term of public health. For example, *Pediatrics* (Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics) reported on a Harvard study that found more than thirty risks positively associated with self-reported gay-lesbian-bisexual (GLB) orientation.{2} So it is indeed ironic that the idea of “safety” is often used as means to introduce teaching and discussion of behaviors that have been proven to be quite “unsafe.”

## **The Goals of GLSEN**

The mission statement of GLSEN is straightforward: “The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network strives to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.”{3} It is a growing, well-funded homosexual organization that promotes homosexual identity and behavior on campus. It has been very successful in gaining access on campus by working with such influential groups as the National Education Association.

Anyone who takes the time to read some of the materials recommended by GLSEN will quickly find that it condones sexual themes and information that would be disturbing to most parents. One researcher who has taken the time to review these materials and investigate various school programs came to the following seven conclusions:{4}

1. GLSEN believes the early sexualization of children can be beneficial. This means that virtually any sexual activity as well as exposure to graphic sexual images and material, is not just permissible but good for children, as part of the process of discovering their sexuality.
2. “Coming out” (calling oneself or believing oneself to be homosexual) and even beginning homosexual sex practices at a young age, is a normal and positive experience for youth which should be encouraged by teachers and parents, according to GLSEN.
3. Bisexuality, “fluid” sexuality and sexual experimentation is encouraged by GLSEN as a right for all students.
4. Meeting other “gay” and “questioning” youth, sometimes without parental knowledge, is a frequent theme in GLSEN materials. At these meetings, minors will come into contact with college-age people and adults practicing homosexuality.
5. In GLSEN material, the “cool” adults—parents, teachers and counselors—are those who encourage students to embrace homosexuality and cross-dressing. They also allow adult-level freedoms and let children associate with questionable teens or adults.
6. GLSEN resources contain many hostile, one-sided anti-Christian vignettes and opinions, as well as false information about Christianity and the Bible's position on homosexuality. This encourages

antagonism against biblical morality and increases the risk that youth will experiment with high-risk behavior.

7. The spirituality presented positively in GLSEN resources is heavily laced with occult themes and nightmarish images.

## **Goals of PFLAG and Gay Clubs**

PFLAG is a national organization of parents, families, and friends that “promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.”{5} It has been an active organization at the local level to promote its views of human sexuality into schools, churches, and various youth organizations. Although there is a strong emphasis on rights and tolerance, their message about sexuality would be disturbing to most parents.

One researcher who has taken the time to review their brochures and other materials came to the following five conclusions:{6}

1. PFLAG believes in total sexual license for people of all ages. For children, this means that virtually any sexual activity, as well as exposure to graphic sexual images and material, is not just permissible but good for children as part of the process of discovering their sexuality.
2. “Coming out” (calling oneself homosexual or cross-dressing) at a very young age, and even beginning early homosexual sex practices, is a desirable goal in the world according to PFLAG.
3. Bisexuality, fluid sexuality, and sexual experimentation is encouraged by PFLAG. The group believes it’s important for all students to learn about these options.
4. Meeting with other “gay” and “questioning” youth, usually without parental knowledge, is a frequent theme in PFLAG materials. At these community meetings, thirteen-year-olds will come into contact with college-age youth and adults practicing homosexuality.
5. PFLAG spreads false information about the Bible, religious faith, and restoration of heterosexuality through faith. This misinformation closes the door of change for many young people, and stirs up anti-Christian and anti-Jewish bias and hostility.

Another way the gay agenda is promoted in the public schools is through Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. In the mid-1990s, there were a few dozen Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs in U.S. high schools. Today there are 3,200 GSA clubs registered.{7}

These student-run clubs provides a meeting place for student talk about homosexuality and homosexual behaviors. It is also provides a platform for outside speakers to address various topics and for students to organize a “Pride Week” on campus. Once a year, many of the students in these clubs also participate in “The Day of Silence.” This is a day when students will remain silent all day as a way of acknowledging the silence induced by those who oppose homosexuality.

## **Legal Liability**

Is there any legal liability when schools permit and even promote the teaching of homosexual education the campus? One group (Citizens for Community Values) believes there is a potential liability. The group has published a manual documenting the potential liability that schools, administrators, and teachers might face. The following is a brief summary of much more information

that can be found in the document “The Legal Liability Associated with Homosexual Education in Public Schools.”{8}

**Life expectancy**—The *International Journal of Epidemiology* found that gay and bisexual men involved in homosexual behavior cut off years from their lives. One study showed that “life expectancy at age 20 years for gay and bisexual men is 8 to 20 years less than for all men.” They therefore concluded that if “the same pattern of mortality were to continue, we estimate that nearly half of gay and bisexual men currently aged 20 years will not reach their 65th birthday.”{9}

**Sexually transmitted diseases**—The danger of various STDs, including HIV infection in homosexual relationships, has been well documented through many studies. The Medical Institute for Sexual Health says that “Homosexual men are at significantly increased risk of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, anal cancer, gonorrhea and gastrointestinal infections as a result of their sexual practices. Women who have sex with women are at significantly increased risk of bacterial vaginosis, breast cancer and ovarian cancer than are heterosexual women.”{10}

**Other health risk behaviors**—A study by Harvard University of over four thousand ninth- to twelfth-grade students found that gay-lesbian-bisexual “youth report disproportionate risk for a variety of health risk and problem behaviors” and they found that they “engage in twice the mean number of risk behaviors as did the overall population.”{11}

**Mental health**—A study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* found those engaging in homosexual behavior have a much higher incidence of mental health problems. “The findings support the assumption that people with same-sex sexual behavior are at greater risk for psychiatric disorders.”{12}

Permitting and promoting homosexual activity through on-campus programs and clubs will certainly increase homosexual behavior among students. Administrators, teachers, and parents should reconsider the impact these programs, and the subsequent behavior, will have on the student body.

## **Biblical Response**

When we talk about the issue of homosexuality, it is important to keep two biblical principles in tension. On the one hand we must stay true to our biblical convictions, and on the other hand we should reach out with biblical compassion. Essentially this is the balance between truth and love.

On the one hand, it is crucial for us to understand how the homosexual agenda threatens to normalize and even promote homosexuality within the schools. Moreover, gay activists are pushing an agenda in the courts, the legislature, the schools, and the court of public opinion that will ultimately threaten biblical authority and many of our personal and religious freedoms. Christians, therefore, must stand for truth.

I have provided a brief overview of the groups and programs that are promoting the gay agenda in the public schools. I encourage you to find out what is happening in your community. We have also documented the potential legal liability associated with many of the behaviors that are encouraged by these programs. Often administrators and teachers are unaware of the potential dangers associated with homosexual education in the schools. Take time to share this information with them.

On the other hand, it is also important for us to reach out to those caught in the midst of homosexuality and offer God’s grace and redemption. We cannot let the hardened rhetoric of gay activists keep us from having Christ’s heart toward homosexuals. As individuals and as the church,

we should reach out to those caught in the sin of homosexuality and offer them hope and point them to Jesus Christ so that they will find freedom from the sexual sin that binds their lives.

It is important to remember that many in the homosexual lifestyle are there because of some emotional brokenness in their families. They may be trying to meet their emotional needs in ungodly ways. Youth in the public schools may be experimenting sexually and find themselves caught up in the homosexual lifestyle.

It is also important to remember that change is possible. The testimony of hundreds of former homosexuals is proof that someone can change their sexual behavior. So are the various studies that document these same behavioral changes. And, most importantly, the Bible teaches that change is possible. Paul, writing to former homosexuals in the Corinthian church, noted that "such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:11).

In addressing the issue of the gay agenda in public schools, it is crucial to stay true to our biblical convictions (and stand for truth) while we also reach out with biblical compassion.

### Notes

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## Capital Punishment: A Christian View and



# Biblical Perspective

*Kerby Anderson provides a biblical worldview perspective on capital punishment. He explores the biblical teaching to help us understand how to consider this controversial topic apply Christian love and biblical principles.*

Should Christians support the death penalty? The answer to that question is controversial. Many Christians feel that the Bible has spoken to the issue, but others believe that the New Testament ethic of love replaces the Old Testament law.

## Old Testament Examples

Throughout the Old Testament we find many cases in which God commands the use of capital punishment. We see this first with the acts of God Himself. God was involved, either directly or indirectly, in the taking of life as a punishment for the nation of Israel or for those who threatened or harmed Israel.

One example is the flood of Noah in Genesis 6-8. God destroyed all human and animal life except that which was on the ark. Another example is Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18-19), where God destroyed the two cities because of the heinous sin of the inhabitants. In the time of Moses, God took the lives of the Egyptians' first-born sons (Exod. 11) and destroyed the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exod. 14). There were also punishments such as the punishment at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13-14) or the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16) against the Jews wandering in the wilderness.

The Old Testament is replete with references and examples of God taking life. In a sense, God used capital punishment to deal with Israel's sins and the sins of the nations surrounding Israel.

The Old Testament also teaches that God instituted capital punishment in the Jewish law code. In fact, the principle of capital punishment even precedes the Old Testament law code. According to Genesis 9:6, capital punishment is based upon a belief in the sanctity of life. It says, "Whoever sheds man's blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man."

The Mosaic Law set forth numerous offenses that were punishable by death. The first was murder. In Exodus 21, God commanded capital punishment for murderers. Premeditated murder (or what the Old Testament described as "lying in wait") was punishable by death. A second offense punishable by death was involvement in the occult (Exod. 22; Lev. 20; Deut 18-19). This included sorcery, divination, acting as a medium, and sacrificing to false gods. Third, capital punishment was to be used against perpetrators of sexual sins such as rape, incest, or homosexual practice.

Within this Old Testament theocracy, capital punishment was extended beyond murder to cover various offenses. While the death penalty for these offenses was limited to this particular dispensation of revelation, notice that the principle in Genesis 9:6 is not tied to the theocracy. Instead, the principle of *Lex Talionis* (a life for a life) is tied to the creation order. Capital punishment is warranted due to the sanctity of life. Even before we turn to the New Testament, we find this universally binding principle that precedes the Old Testament law code.

## New Testament Principles

Some Christians believe that capital punishment does not apply to the New Testament and church age.

First we must acknowledge that God gave the principle of capital punishment even before the institution of the Old Testament law code. In Genesis 9:6 we read that “Whoever sheds man’s blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man.” Capital punishment was instituted by God because humans are created in the image of God. The principle is not rooted in the Old Testament theocracy, but rather in the creation order. It is a much broader biblical principle that carries into the New Testament.

Even so, some Christians argue that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus seems to be arguing against capital punishment. But is He?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not arguing against the principle of a life for a life. Rather He is speaking to the issue of our personal desire for vengeance. He is not denying the power and responsibility of the government. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to individual Christians. He is telling Christians that they should not try to replace the power of the government. Jesus does not deny the power and authority of government, but rather He calls individual Christians to love their enemies and turn the other cheek.

Some have said that Jesus set aside capital punishment in John 8 when He did not call for the woman caught in adultery to be stoned. But remember the context. The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus between the Roman law and the Mosaic law. If He said that they should stone her, He would break the Roman law. If He refused to allow them to stone her, He would break the Mosaic law (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). Jesus’ answer avoided the conflict: He said that he who was without sin should cast the first stone. Since He did teach that a stone be thrown (John 8:7), this is not an abolition of the death penalty.

In other places in the New Testament we see the principle of capital punishment being reinforced. Romans 13:1-7, for example, teaches that human government is ordained by God and that the civil magistrate is a minister of God. We are to obey government for we are taught that government does not bear the sword in vain. The fact that the Apostle Paul used the image of the sword further supports the idea that capital punishment was to be used by government in the New Testament age as well. Rather than abolish the idea of the death penalty, Paul uses the emblem of the Roman sword to reinforce the idea of capital punishment. The New Testament did not abolish the death penalty; it reinforced the principle of capital punishment.

## **Capital Punishment and Deterrence**

Is capital punishment a deterrent to crime? At the outset, we should acknowledge that the answer to this question should not change our perspective on this issue. Although it is an important question, it should not be the basis for our belief. A Christian’s belief in capital punishment should be based upon what the Bible teaches not on a pragmatic assessment of whether or not capital punishment deters crime.

That being said, however, we should try to assess the effectiveness of capital punishment. Opponents of capital punishment argue that it is not a deterrent, because in some states where capital punishment is allowed the crime rate goes up. Should we therefore conclude that capital punishment is not a deterrent?

First, we should recognize that crime rates have been increasing for some time. The United States is becoming a violent society as its social and moral fabric breaks down. So the increase in the crime rate is most likely due to many other factors and cannot be correlated with a death penalty that has been implemented sparingly and sporadically.

Second, there is some evidence that capital punishment is a deterrent. And even if we are not absolutely sure of its deterrent effect, the death penalty should be implemented. If it is a deterrent, then implementing capital punishment certainly will save lives. If it is not, then we still will have followed biblical injunctions and put convicted murderers to death.

In a sense, opponents of capital punishment who argue that it is not a deterrent are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the criminal rather than to the victim. The poet Hyman Barshay put it this way:

The death penalty is a warning, just like a lighthouse throwing its beams out to sea. We hear about shipwrecks, but we do not hear about the ships the lighthouse guides safely on their way. We do not have proof of the number of ships it saves, but we do not tear the lighthouse down.”(1)

If capital punishment is even a potential deterrent, that is a significant enough social reason to implement it.

Statistical analysis by Dr. Isaac Ehrlich at the University of Chicago suggests that capital punishment is a deterrent.(2) Although his conclusions were vigorously challenged, further cross-sectional analysis has confirmed his conclusions.(3) His research has shown that if the death penalty is used in a consistent way, it may deter as many as eight murders for every execution carried out. If these numbers are indeed accurate, it demonstrates that capital punishment could be a significant deterrent to crime in our society.

Certainly capital punishment will not deter all crime. Psychotic and deranged killers, members of organized crime, and street gangs will no doubt kill whether capital punishment is implemented or not. A person who is irrational or wants to commit a murder will do so whether capital punishment exists or not. But social statistics as well as logic suggest that rational people will be deterred from murder because capital punishment is part of the criminal code.

## **Capital Punishment and Discrimination**

Many people oppose capital punishment because they feel it is discriminatory. The charge is somewhat curious since most of the criminals that have been executed in the last decade are white rather than black. Nevertheless, a higher percentage of ethnic minorities (African-American, Hispanic-American) are on death row. So is this a significant argument against capital punishment?

First, we should note that much of the evidence for discrimination is circumstantial. Just because there is a higher percentage of a particular ethnic group does not, in and of itself, constitute discrimination. A high percentage of whites playing professional ice hockey or a high percentage of blacks playing professional basketball does not necessarily mean that discrimination has taken place. We need to look beneath the allegation and see if true discrimination is taking place.

Second, we can and should acknowledge that some discrimination does take place in the criminal justice system. Discrimination takes place not only on the basis of race, but on the basis of wealth. Wealthy defendants can hire a battery of legal experts to defend themselves, while poor defendants must rely on a court-appointed public attorney.

Even if we acknowledge that there is some evidence of discrimination in the criminal justice system, does it likewise hold that there is discrimination with regard to capital punishment? The U.S. Solicitor General, in his amicus brief for the case *Gregg vs. Georgia*, argued that sophisticated

sociological studies demonstrated that capital punishment showed no evidence of racial discrimination.(4) These studies compared the number of crimes committed with the number that went to trial and the number of guilty verdicts rendered and found that guilty verdicts were consistent across racial boundaries.

But even if we find evidence for discrimination in the criminal justice system, notice that this is not really an argument against capital punishment. It is a compelling argument for reform of the criminal justice system. It is an argument for implementing capital punishment carefully.

We may conclude that we will only use the death penalty in cases where certainty exists (e.g., eyewitness accounts, videotape evidence). But discrimination in the criminal justice system is not truly an argument against capital punishment. At its best, it is an argument for its careful implementation.

In fact, most of the social and philosophical arguments against capital punishment are really not arguments against it at all. These arguments are really arguments for improving the criminal justice system. If discrimination is taking place and guilty people are escaping penalty, then that is an argument for extending the penalty, not doing away with it. Furthermore, opponents of capital punishment candidly admit that they would oppose the death penalty even if it were an effective deterrent.(5) So while these are important social and political issues to consider, they are not sufficient justification for the abolition of the death penalty.

## **Objections to Capital Punishment**

One objection to capital punishment is that the government is itself committing murder. Put in theological terms, doesn't the death penalty violate the sixth commandment, which teaches "Thou shalt not kill?"

First, we must understand the context of this verse. The verb used in Exodus 20:13 is best translated "to murder." It is used 49 times in the Old Testament, and it is always used to describe premeditated murder. It is never used of animals, God, angels, or enemies in battle. So the commandment is not teaching that all killing is wrong; it is teaching that murder is wrong.

Second, the penalty for breaking the commandment was death (Ex.21:12; Num. 35:16-21). We can conclude therefore that when the government took the life of a murderer, the government was not itself guilty of murder. Opponents of capital punishment who accuse the government of committing murder by implementing the death penalty fail to see the irony of using Exodus 20 to define murder but ignoring Exodus 21, which specifically teaches that government is to punish the murderer.

A second objection to capital punishment questions the validity of applying the Old Testament law code to today's society. After all, wasn't the Mosaic Law only for the Old Testament theocracy? There are a number of ways to answer this objection.

First, we must question the premise. There is and should be a relationship between Old Testament laws and modern laws. We may no longer be subject to Old Testament ceremonial law, but that does not invalidate God's moral principles set down in the Old Testament. Murder is still wrong. Thus, since murder is wrong, the penalty for murder must still be implemented.

Second, even if we accept the premise that the Old Testament law code was specifically and uniquely for the Old Testament theocracy, this still does not abolish the death penalty. Genesis 9:6 precedes the Old Testament theocracy, and its principle is tied to the creation order. Capital punishment is to be implemented because of the sanctity of human life. We are created in God's

image. When a murder occurs, the murderer must be put to death. This is a universally binding principle not confined merely to the Old Testament theocracy.

Third, it is not just the Old Testament that teaches capital punishment. Romans 13:1-7 specifically teaches that human government is ordained by God and that we are to obey government because government does not bear the sword in vain. Human governments are given the responsibility to punish wrongdoers, and this includes murderers who are to be given the death penalty.

Finally, capital punishment is never specifically removed or replaced in the Bible. While some would argue that the New Testament ethic replaces the Old Testament ethic, there is no instance in which a replacement ethic is introduced. As we have already seen, Jesus and the disciples never disturb the Old Testament standard of capital punishment. The Apostle Paul teaches that we are to live by grace with one another, but also teaches that we are to obey human government that bears the sword. Capital punishment is taught in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

#### Notes

1. Hyman Barshay, quoted in "On Deterrence and the Death Penalty" by Ernest van den Haag, *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* no. 2 (1969).
2. Isaac Ehrlich, "The Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment: A Question of Life and Death," *American Economic Review*, June 1975.
3. *Journal of Legal Studies*, January 1977; *Journal of Political Economy*, June 1977; *American Economic Review*, June 1977.
4. Frank Carrington, *Neither Cruel nor Unusual: The Case for Capital Punishment* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington, 1978), 118.
5. Further discussion of these points can be found in an essay by Ernest van den Haag, "The Collapse of the Case Against Capital Punishment," *National Review*, 31 March 1978, 395-407.

A more complete discussion of capital punishment can be found in chapter 10 of *Living Ethically in the 90s* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1990), available from Probe Ministries.

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# Taking Religion Seriously

## Religious Neutrality and Our Schools

The last century has seen a purging of both religious influence and information from our classrooms. For many, this seems only natural and proper. They would argue that the Supreme Court has determined that government schools must be neutral regarding religion. Since the landmark *Everson v. Board of Education* case in 1947, the law of the land has been that "Neither a state nor the Federal government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another."<sup>{1}</sup> However, writing for the majority, Justice Hugo Black added that the state must be neutral in matters of religion in two specific ways. First, it must be neutral among the different religions, but it must also be neutral in how it treats religious belief and non-belief.<sup>{2}</sup>

This question of neutrality is at the heart of my thoughts in this article. We are investigating whether or not our schools are taking religion seriously; at least seriously enough to be considered neutral in

the sense of Supreme Court decisions. Excluding the topic of religion from our schools is not neutrality; it violates the second sense of neutrality given by Justice Black. And if our schools are not neutral regarding religion, they are privileging those who claim to have no religion. We will argue that this kind of education is actually a form of indoctrination into a secular perspective, or what is often called the worldview of naturalism.

There is an additional reason to ask the question, are schools taking religion seriously enough? It can be argued that without sufficient information regarding religion a person cannot be said to be truly educated. Religious ideas and perspectives permeate art and literature. Without knowledge of Christianity and the Bible, students will miss the meaning of key ideas embedded in both stories and pictures. They will only have a secular framework of interpretation for understanding literature and art.

Religion is also a crucial variable for understanding international affairs. Current relations between nations and between culture groups are often incomprehensible unless one understands the religious imperatives driving the people within them. To know little or nothing about the various religions of the world leaves one with a skewed view of why things happen and what might occur next.

Does religion still matter? To answer this question, we will look at the current state of teaching on religion in our schools and address possible changes that might need to be made. Finally, we will consider questions and concerns that arise if our proposed changes were implemented.

## **Religion Still Matters**

Religion still matters in our society, at least enough to make it an important topic in our schools. Numerous surveys indicate that the vast majority of Americans still claim belief in God. Only about 5% of Americans label themselves atheist or agnostic. Another 10% to 15% either refuse to answer the question or are indifferent to the topic; this leaves between 85% and 90% who still claim belief in a God of some kind.<sup>{3}</sup> Belief is also high among our well educated; a 2006 Gallop poll found that 77% of those with a postgraduate degree have little doubt that God exists.<sup>{4}</sup>

A large majority of us claim that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (77%), that there is a heaven (63%), and that religion is very important in their lives (57%).<sup>{5}</sup> Close to 80% of Americans still identify with a specific religious tradition, and 40% claim to attend religious services weekly. In 2005 they gave \$93.2 billion to religious organizations.

By any measure, America remains far more religious than its European neighbors. In his book *Does God Make a Difference?*, Warren Nord documents the considerable difference between our two cultures. According to a 2005 survey, only 52% of Europeans claim belief in God, although 27% believe in some sort of spirit or life force. Eighteen percent are atheist or agnostic. In a number of European countries fewer than 10% of the people attend church weekly.<sup>{6}</sup>

The rest of the world is closer to the U.S. than to Europe in its beliefs. About 85% identify with a religious tradition and there has been rapid recent growth in evangelical Protestantism in the Third World. Although it has been popular in recent years for academics to promote the thesis that the world is going through rapid secularization, it now appears that Europe is not necessarily the model for the future. That said, there does appear to be a trend in both the U.S. and Europe towards claiming to be spiritual “apart from churches, dogma and tradition.”<sup>{7}</sup>

So what does this mean? It tells us that a large majority of people in this country interpret reality

through a religious lens. Whether it's economics, ethics, science or art, many Americans continue to make sense of their world and make important decisions based on their religious faith.

The twentieth century experienced a relentless assault on religion from governments (Russia and its satellites and China) and ideologies (Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, existentialism), but considering its continued influence in the U.S. and the rest of the world, it still seems prudent to teach our students about it.

## **Religion Removed**

According to Warren Nord, students in American schools and universities learn very little about God and religion. His book reflects his study of national academic standards and high school textbooks in our public schools for history, economics, and science. Let's look at his results for history.

Information on religion makes up only about 10% of the *world* history standards and less than 5% of the *American* history standards.<sup>{8}</sup> History textbooks tend to do somewhat better, but Dr. Nord's conclusion is that both fall dramatically short of what should be included. To begin with, not enough material is presented for students to actually make sense of any particular religion, and most of what is found predates the seventeenth century. The topic of religion simply disappears after that. Information about the twentieth century tends to show religion in an unfavorable manner, often connecting it to violence and warfare.

Another deficiency is the tendency to freeze theological thinking in the past by neglecting to show how religious traditions have responded to modernity. The rise of influential theologians, religious movements, or the science-faith dialogue of the last hundred years are missing. When religious topics are covered in the material they are viewed through a secular framework or lens. Thinking about history through a religious lens is never considered. For instance, most texts mention that our dating system is dependent on Jesus Christ's birth date, but they fail to say why. None of them include Christianity's claim that Jesus was God incarnate.

Finally, all students are to learn eleven long-term patterns in world history. Not surprisingly, none of the patterns are religious ones. Unfortunately, the other academic fields fare even worse. For instance, the National Science Education Standards contains no discussion of the relationship of science and religion in its 262 pages.

How about religion in our universities? Nord estimates that "about 10 percent of undergraduates in public universities take a course in which religious ways of making sense of the world are taken seriously."<sup>{9}</sup> He goes on to write that "for the great majority of American students in secondary schools and universities, less than 1 percent of the content of their education will deal with religion."<sup>{10}</sup>

As a result he concludes that, "They will not be taught that God doesn't exist, but they will inevitably learn to interpret whatever they study in secular categories."<sup>{11}</sup> He adds that textbooks, the official curriculum, and the governing purposes of public education have become almost completely secular.

## **Real Education**

Dr. Nord, who taught philosophy of religion and education at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, makes his case with a completely secular argument. Let's start with his

statement of the problem and then look at some of the specifics. Dr. Nord writes, “Public education leaves students religiously illiterate, it falls far short of religious neutrality, and it borders on secular indoctrination (if only unintended).” He adds that “schools and universities teach students to accept secular ways of making sense of the world as a matter of faith.” {12}

Nord comes to this conclusion as part of his discovery that we no longer provide students with what has traditionally been called a liberal education. The word “liberal” here is not used in a political sense but rather as a label for a set of generally agreed upon educational goals. He argues that an essential aspect of a liberal education “requires that students be initiated into an ongoing discussion about how to make sense of the world—one in which religious voices must be included as live options.”

According to Dr. Nord there are four critical dimensions to a liberal education. First, education must be broad rather than narrow or highly specialized. Too narrow of a focus tends to end up more like indoctrination than like an education. Students need to consider alternate ways of interpreting the world if they are to be able to think critically about the problems that face us. Next, in order to understand different cultures and traditions students must have the opportunity to get inside them. In other words, they must hear arguments for a given position from people who actually believe them, not through a filter that merely reinforces our society’s current biases.

Another component of a liberal education is that it deals with things that really matter, issues that go to the core of one’s worldview. It should consider questions like, what is ultimate reality, what is our nature as human beings, and how does one know right from wrong?

Finally, all of this should be introduced to students in the form of a conversation about making sense of contending points of view. Our current form of instruction is mostly a series of narrowly focused monologues with little attempt to tie them together to other courses much less other cultures and traditions. It removes much of the conflict inherent in the discussion.

Nord argues that theology should be at the core of this conversation. The university should be a place where students are introduced to conflict, the most fundamental being moral and theological.

## **Concerns and Suggestions**

Nord sums up his concern this way: “Education is now deeply biased against religion. Indeed, it is unconstitutional.” {13}

When it is suggested that we take steps to remediate this situation, a number of concerns come to mind. The poor preparation of most teachers to handle the subject is most apparent. Often teachers are unaware of both their freedoms to teach the subject as well as legal limitations regarding how that teaching is carried out. This can be overcome by proper training.

Some have argued that religion is not intellectually respectable enough to warrant a place in the curriculum. Psychologist Steven Pinker argued against adding a “Faith and Reason” component to Harvard’s curriculum, writing that religion “is an American anachronism in an era in which the rest of the West is moving beyond it.” {14} This kind of thinking reflects what is sometimes called the secularization thesis that has come under much criticism of late. In fact, a good argument can be made that religion is actually becoming more important in much of the world.

Pinker and others argue that the need to understand religion has been replaced by the overwhelming need to think scientifically. In their view, the Enlightenment and modern science have



settled the case against considering a religious perspective of reality. However, this is not totally accurate. As Nord writes, “[U]niversities don’t impose scientific standards of respectability on philosophy, ethics, politics, literature, or art.” He adds, “What must be avoided is granting modern science the authority to define what is reasonable and respectable across the curriculum.”{15}

So what can we do about the current bias against knowledge of religions in our schools? In his book *Does God Make a Difference?* Warren Nord argues that every high school student and undergraduate should be required to take a year-long course in religious studies. Preferably, this would consist of one semester on the Bible and another on world religions. He would also require that all classes dealing with topics impacted by religious thought such as ethics, politics, philosophy, and art commit 5% of textbook space and class time to understanding the conflicts caused by different religious worldviews. Each perspective should be taught as a live option and represented by writings from people who actually believe in it.

The goal of these classes cannot be to indoctrinate or proselytize, but they could help to challenge the current monopoly that materialistic naturalism has on our curriculum.

## Notes

1. Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make A Difference?* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 156.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 21.
8. Ibid., 43.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid., 60.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 99.
13. Ibid., 188.
14. Ibid., 117.
15. Ibid., 118.

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# Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church’s Prophetic Role in Politics

*Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese answers a common question of a Christian view of politics and government: How would a biblical worldview inform us on being in the world of politics but not of it? “Dr. T” models a critical yet engaged distance in assessing the beliefs of Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.*

## **Christian Government**

During each new election season Christians ask, "What is a biblical view of government?" Does it teach Theocracy, Communism or maybe Democracy? The Old Testament does teach theocracy, which means the Priests ruled the people through the Mosaic Law. Later in its history Israel became a monarchy by its own decision under King Saul—a choice God was not very pleased with, but He accommodated Israel's demand (I Samuel 8).

The New Testament does not adopt theocracy because it applied only to the chosen nation of Israel; it gives no endorsement of any one form of government, but instead offers the Church a special role as a prophetic voice engaging any and all forms of government. There is no such thing as *Christian (civil) Government*, only *Christians in government*. Instead of creating a new system, the Church brings biblical principles to bear on all governments. {1} This position allows the Church everywhere to be actively involved in its particular political situation through maintaining its witness to Christ.

## **Israel and the Church**

The role of Israel and the Church are often conflated in Christian minds, especially during the political season. Many still believe that Christians should create laws or vote for candidates that will bring us closer to a "Christian America" ideal. This is a revised version of an old notion of Christendom that joins church and state going back to the Constantinian Church which espoused a Christian Roman Empire. Some of our Puritan forebears held that America was the New Jerusalem. America as a nation replaces Israel as the people of God and the Church becomes a political entity like Israel.

In approaching politics, it is essential that we keep in mind the differences between Israel and the Church. Israel was a national people with its own civil law and identity. It was closed to the rest of the world and had to live in strict separation from the Gentile nations. Their call was to isolation, to establish Theocracy and to drive the Gentiles out from Canaan, a goal they were never really successful at accomplishing (Judges 1: 19, 28, 32). Israel was one civil nation among many civil nations and it was usually at war with those neighbors.

Israel foreshadowed the Church. They prepared the world for the coming of the messiah and the Church. Their history and law serves as an example or model of instruction for the Church (Romans 15: 4 and I Corinthians 10: 6), but the Church is not obligated to adopt Israel's civil identity because this would violate her broader mission to reach all people (Acts 1: 8). The Church is called to political and cultural engagement with all systems and all people, not isolation. When the Church becomes a political or cultural system, it loses its message of grace through faith and reverts back to Law (Galatians 3). Faith cannot be legislated.

The Church could not be true to its universal calling if it was a political power like Israel because this turns its mission into one of war and conquest, such as the Crusades in the middle ages, rather than conversion through faith (John 18: 36). Islam is a good example of a religion that does follow Israel's kind of political identity in the establishment of Sharia Law. The Church is not one nation, but one people among many nations, cultures and systems. It cannot afford to be a nation with its own civil law and government, which sets itself against other governments and other people. When the Church establishes itself as a political power it compromises its prophetic mission and loses its unique contribution to politics. Instead the Church has a more complex role in any system it finds itself in.

## **In The World but Not of It**

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Jesus prayed that his followers will not be taken out of the world, but that they be sent into the world and kept from its evil (John 17: 15). The Apostle Paul argued similarly that we must maintain our association with people in the world, even immoral people—and not to isolate ourselves (I Corinthians 5: 9, 10). He says, “the form of this world is passing away,” an awareness that creates in us an “undistracted devotion to the Lord” in every area of life. We are to participate in the world, but not get too attached to it. We “should be as those who buy, but do not possess...and those who make use of the world as though they did not make full use of it” (I Corinthians 7: 31-35). We bring awareness of the temporal nature of the world.

## **The Prophetic Role of the Church**

The Apostle Peter states that the Church is a unique people of God, “a people for God’s own possession” or a “peculiar people” as the King James Version says, called to proclaim the truth. He exhorts Christians to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness...” and to keep our “behavior excellent” in the world. (I Peter 2: 9- 12).

The Church lives differently in society by setting an example. As God’s special people, the Church is called to witness His truth to the world, including to the government structures. This means that the Church works within various systems, something Paul accomplished effectively in his use of Roman Citizenship and with his appeal to Caesar (Matthew 17: 24-27; I Peter 2: 13-20, Romans 13: 1-7, Acts 16: 35-39; 23: 11; 24 and 25).

In preaching the Word the Church acts as prophet to “the world,” the societal structures arrayed against God (Romans 12: 2). This includes all political systems under satanic control (Luke 4: 5-8). A prophet brings a timely and meaningful message of relevance. He has insight to speak to a particular situation. For example when Nathan the prophet spoke the Word of the Lord to King David in confronting David’s sin of murder he held him accountable for his behavior (2 Samuel 12: 1-15). The Bible teaches us through this example that the political powers are not absolute. *The king is not God*, a radical statement in ancient times.

Prophets call people back to obedience to God. They were the conscience of the nation. Likewise, the Church acts as prophet through active participation, but with an attitude of critical distance.

## **Critical Distance**

*Critical distance* does not mean isolation or withdrawal where we go live in the woods and wait for the world to die. It means involvement in everything the world offers, especially politics, but with an approach from a *different perspective*, an eternal perspective. Criticism means Christians work from within society and offer a perpetual challenge to the status quo that reflects a Christian conscience; it never arrives at a final form of society in which it is completely comfortable. This is an important, albeit an uncomfortable, role to play. It can never endorse any system uncritically because this acceptance negates the fact of the inherent evil of the world and announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Church then is swallowed in the world’s identity. This reflects what happened in the Christian Roman Empire and in the Christian America ideal, which is often the ideology behind so called “Christian Conservative” political activism. The United States is identified with Christendom as “a Christian country.” Criticism in this sense does not simply entail a good word of advice, but active participation guided by an ethic of love (Matthew 5: 43-48; Romans 13: 8-10). This may manifest in working to repeal an unjust law or establishing a new law that meets certain needs in society, but especially the needs of the weakest members of society, who cannot speak for themselves and are powerless. This reflects a Christian conscience of concern for others,

rather than just ourselves. Laws must protect those who need the most protection, rather than empower those who make it. Law is the enforcement of the personal morality of its makers (hence, when people say you “cannot legislate morality,” that’s an absurdity).

Perhaps the greatest example in recent times of the Church’s prophetic voice in American politics was in bringing attention to the cause of the unborn in its efforts to stem the tide of abortion, both in its political activism and through nonpolitical work of advocating adoption as an alternative to abortion. Another good example was the American Civil Rights Movement when it spoke against racism and the unjust social structures in American society.

Just as the Old Testament prophets held the king accountable to the Law of God—*the king is not God*—so the Church reminds the world of its limitations, that its systems have flaws and must allow for improvement. *The world is not yet in the kingdom of God*. There is no perfect system any more than there are perfect people. There is always room for growth and change. Only in the kingdom of God does change and growth cease because it is no longer necessary in the final state of perfection (Revelation 21).

Democracy offers a better system for Christians than Communism or Theocracy because it reflects an ideal of freedom, the basis of love and faith. But it has flaws, such as the tyranny of the majority (de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*). Nor is democracy “the end of history,” a popular idea after the Cold War, arguing that democracy has emerged from the ideological struggles of history to become the greatest and final system. Nothing will succeed it. The post-Cold War world has reached the end of history, or the end of struggle and the end of change. {2}

There is every reason to consider that democracy will perish from the earth if its people grow complacent and do not defend it or practice it and any idea to suggest that it cannot perish on the basis of a metaphysical law of history will only contribute to that complacency. There is never a final system of society in which the Church refuses to adjure and criticize toward change because that entity would then be equal to the kingdom of God.

## **Romney vs. Obama**

We apply the same standard of *critical distance* in voting for our favorite candidate or party. Voting is often the choice of the lesser of two evils. This popular maxim expresses the same idea of critical distance as long as we understand that the choice of the lesser evil is still a far less than perfect choice. Critical distance includes self-criticism.

Most people choose a candidate who comes closest to their own position and then largely ignore their differences. Critical distance will not dismiss the differences because through it we hold ourselves accountable by seeing our blind spots and recognizing potential problems. We show humility and responsibility through admitting the limits of our own position and choices.

Many contrasts exist between Governor Romney and President Obama, not least of which is personal religious belief. Ironically, Evangelical Christians largely ignore this issue, though each candidate’s views represent a serious difference as compared to biblical Christianity. In the past, Evangelicals have stressed the importance of personal belief. After all, most people hold to a particular political and economic view because of their religious views, not despite them.

President Obama reflects Liberation Theology in his belief that government must act as champion of the people. This should be done, in his view, by elevating the condition of the disenfranchised into the middle class, mainly through economic redistribution, but also through religious pluralism, toleration of minorities, woman’s rights and gay rights. Liberation Theology adapts Christianity to a

socialist political agenda that uses government as a tool to free people from oppressive social structures such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy. There is a strong emphasis on social justice, radical equality and group sin, meaning the structure of a society is to blame for its problems rather than the individual, who is a victim.

Governor Romney styles himself as a stalwart defender of free enterprise informed by Mormon beliefs that reflect traditional American values of family, faith, and work ethic. Government must protect those values from its own encroachment in order to maintain the middle class. Although Mormonism is radically different from Evangelical Christianity in its doctrinal formulation, it accepts similar social values, which stress personal responsibility and initiative.

Although, no election can be reduced to one issue or to personal beliefs, these considerations' potential impact cannot be disregarded. Behind Obama stands a Liberation Christianity that has and will continue to benefit from his re-election. A Romney victory will lift the cultural status of Mormons in America from outsiders to the mainstream. In the past, the election to the Presidency of a member from a group struggling for recognition in mainstream America received a stamp of approval at the highest level of political office that gave them increased cultural recognition and cache . The election of one of your own to the Presidency is a sign of arrival. President Kennedy's election to office brought American mainstream acceptance to Roman Catholics, just as President Carter brought it to Evangelicals and President Obama brought the full acceptance of African-Americans, so a "President Romney" will create a greater cultural awareness and acceptance of Mormons.

The contemporary political logic of the American system says put your criticism out there during the primaries, but put it away once a candidate for your party is chosen. You're supposed to fall in line behind him or her. Christians often follow the same logic and refuse to entertain criticism of our chosen candidate because it suggests a preference for the opposing side. The lack of criticism generally continues through our chosen candidate's administration. Problems and faults are usually blamed on the other side and Christians become as politically polarized as the parties. This surrenders any critical distance gained and the Church loses its unique contribution for political advantage. It's like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25: 27-34). We can in good conscience choose a candidate that we do not completely agree with *if* we retain our criticism of him. We should participate, yet with reservations.

Critical distance can tolerate voting for someone of a different faith if he is a better choice than the alternative, but it cannot live with softening its differences in order to win an election or modifying its convictions for political gain. Evangelicals are faced with a difficult choice, not between Liberation Theology or Mormonism, but whether or not they will retain their doctrinal critique and rejection of Mormonism, when those differences threaten its economic and political interests.

Recently, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association dropped Mormonism from its cult list. And the language of "values" between Christians and Mormons grows indistinguishable, so that now "Christian values" are somehow equated with "Mormon values" and a vote for a Mormon is a vote for "biblical values." The greatest "value" for Christians is the deity of Jesus Christ, which most Mormons do not accept. Evangelicals and Mormons share a similar political agenda in preserving the free enterprise system and in protecting the traditional American family ideal, which they both consider preferable to the creeping socialism of the Obama administration. There is no need to drop the hard and fast differences between Christianity and Mormonism; Christians can work with anyone if we effectively practice *critical distance* at the same time.

So, it comes down to retaining our prophetic role as members of Christ's Body—not as much who we vote for, but why and how.

## Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, "A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action," *Mind Games Survival Course Manual* (Plano, Texas: Probe Ministries, 1998), [www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Politics/Gov1.htm](http://www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Politics/Gov1.htm)

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). The idea of the end of history here is really a Hegelian version of Christian America, just as the idea of progress, the foundation of Fukuyama's argument, reflects a secularization of the older notion of the idea of providence that founded "Christian America." Both identify either Christendom or the Western World with the kingdom of God, the final form of society. One is traditionally religious in its conception and the other secular.

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