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

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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Responding To President Obama's Same-Sex Approval

President Obama recently gave public support to gay marriage. How do we respond from within a biblical worldview?

Some Christians have used this news event to highlight the way the church is blowing it on the opportunity to be "Jesus with skin on" to the GLBT (gay | lesbian | bi-sexual | transgender) community. This sentiment is especially prominent among people under forty who often have good friends who identify as gay.

There are two different issues that need to be kept separate: how the church treats gay-identifying *people*, and the church's position on the culture-affecting issue of gay identity and so-called gay marriage. The first provides an opportunity to display a welcoming attitude of grace, which says, "We're glad you're here like the rest of us messed-up sinners who desperately need Jesus. He loves you and accepts you just the way you are, but He loves you too much to let you stay that way. Come embrace holiness with us as we learn it together." (And this message is just as true for drug and porn addicts, as well as Pharisaical holier-than-thou folks addicted to judgmental moralism.)

The other is about refusing to budge on what God has said about sexual sin, which does not change. Homosexuality is no

more right, holy or acceptable today than it ever was in Bible times. Neither is heterosexual fornication, adultery, or pornography-driven lust. It's not just that sex outside of God's plan for marriage (which is limited to one man and one woman, per the created intent in Genesis 1 and 2) breaks His law-His rules are given as a gift to keep us from breaking our hearts.

Jesus said He came to bring a sword (Matt. 10:34), and this issue is one of the areas of conflict He was bound to cause because His standard of holiness, and His call to live in it, is at odds with the human desire to do what we want regardless of what God thinks. Is homosexuality a sin? This is a simple question, but it needs a complex answer. Same-sex attraction (SSA) is usually not a choice; it's something people discover, usually with pain and horror. (Females, naturally more relational, can cultivate it and be emotionally seduced toward lesbianism, though, even with no previous leanings that way.)

But does it "fall short of the glory of God," one way Scripture defines sin (Rom 3:23)?

Certainly.

Same-sex attractions are a corruption of God's intention for healthy personal and sexual development, the result of the Fall and of living in a fallen world. I get this. I have lived with polio ever since I was six months old. I didn't choose this disability, but is it a sin? It certainly falls short of the glory of God, and polio is part of living in a fallen world. It's one of the ways I experience the infection of sin. I did not choose the fallen-creation consequence of polio, yet I have to deal with it. My *responses* to it can be sinful, just as those who experience unwanted SSA have to deal with the fallen-creation consequence of homosexuality, but their responses to it can be sinful.

(By the way, there is no evidence of a genetic cause for

homosexuality. The "born that way" myth cannot be supported biologically. But there are good reasons that many people end up with same-sex feelings; for more information, please read my articles in the homosexuality section of the Probe website, as well as articles on the Living Hope Ministries website at www.livehope.org.)

When people give in to the temptations of SSA and engage sexually with other men or other women, God's word has a very serious word for it: *abomination* (Lev. 18:22). But it's important to understand that the abomination is the act, not the people.

President Obama referred to the golden rule (treat others as you want them to treat you) as his rationale for supporting gay marriage:

> *[Michelle and I] are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others but, you know, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is, not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the Golden Rule, you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated. And I think that's what we try to impart to our kids and that's what motivates me as president and I figure the most consistent I can be in being true to those precepts, the better I'll be as a as a dad and a husband and, hopefully, the better I'll be as president.{1}*

In 2008, in defending his current position against same-sex marriage but for civil unions, he said concerning people who might find his position controversial, "I would just refer them to the Sermon on the Mount, which I think is, in my mind, for my faith, more central than an obscure passage in Romans." {2}

Two things strike me about this. First, he's not consistent about his application of the golden rule; he's pro-abortion-

but of course he doesn't want to be hacked to pieces without anesthesia, which is precisely what certain abortion procedures entail.

Second, choosing the golden rule over "an obscure passage in Romans" shows he doesn't understand that "the entirety of [God's] word is truth" (Ps. 119:160). Both the Golden Rule and the Romans 1 passage are true; it's not a choice between the two. Since he used to give lectures on Constitutional law at the University of Chicago, I doubt that he would ever use the term "an obscure phrase in the Constitution," because obscurity is about one's perception of importance, not the actual importance of a matter. To a Constitutional lawyer who respects the document, every phrase of the document is important. To a serious [true] Christ-follower, every word of His scriptures is important.

The issue of same-sex marriage isn't about people's right to live in committed relationships, to do life together. It's about demanding society's approval for "the façade of normalcy." It's about demanding approval for what God has called an abomination (the sexual act, not the people engaged in it).

Ryan Anderson wrote in the *National Review Online*,

> *"What's at issue is whether the government will recognize such unions as marriages – and then force every citizen and business to do so as well. This isn't the legalization of something, this is the coercion and compulsion of others to recognize and affirm same-sex unions as marriages."{3}*

American culture is definitely moving toward normalizing homosexuality, but from God's perspective it will never be normal or natural (Rom. 1:26-27). And it's God's perspective that matters.

Notes

1. www.dennyburk.com/president-obamas-scriptural-defense-of-gay-marriage/
2. www.wnd.com/2008/03/57975/
3. bit.ly/LGZ1z1

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Is Public School to Blame?

June 30, 2011

I was having a conversation recently about the reason so many students turn away from the church after high school, and it was suggested that it's because they don't get the proper biblical worldview/foundation in public school and only get an hour during the week at church.

It seems to me this is a big generalization since public school students can get a strong foundation in the home and Christian school and home school students don't necessarily get a good foundation (or it is a skewed perspective that actually turns them away from the church).

So I started thinking about the data that has been collected on this and wondered when the information is gathered and compiled if it takes into account what kind of schooling the student had – public, private Christian or homeschool. My guess is that the data wouldn't be significantly different if you did divide the three groups.

Also, does it make a difference if they go to a public college or a Christian college? I would hope that students who go to a Christian college are more likely to continue going to church and to have a more biblical worldview, but is that true?

Good question. Actually, studies show parents are the most influential in regard to the beliefs of young adults. So you're right, school really has little to do with it. As a kid who went to public school and loved it, I'm actually quite offended by this very unfair, very common stereotype about public school. Truth be told, public school forced me to know what I believed and why in a way a Christian environment couldn't have.

You're also right that going to a Christian college can be really helpful, but it depends on the college/university, and it depends on the person. I know going to a Christ-centered university where integration of faith (worldview) and learning was important was super-helpful for me. However, if I had gone to a public university, I know I would have been involved in a local church and a campus ministry; studies also show that such involvement significantly lowers the risk of faith abandonment during the college years. Community is key.

All that to say, public school, private school, home school… it doesn't really matter. When we grown-ups complain about the worldview issues of young adults, we really have no one but ourselves to blame because in both the home and the church, young people are watching how we walk the talk.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/06/30/is-public-school-to-blame/

Should Christians Respect

Obama?

Mar. 9, 2010

The email below titled “Should Christians Respect Obama?” was forwarded to me. Perhaps you’ve seen it too. (I have formatted the spacing to fit below; however, all emphases—bolds, italics, exclamation marks, words in all caps—are original.)

> **Dr. David Barton is more of a historian than a Biblical speaker, but very famous for his knowledge of historical facts as well as Biblical truths.**
>
> **Dr. David Barton – on Obama**
> Respect the Office? Yes. Respect the Man in the Office? No, I am sorry to say. I have noted that many elected officials, both Democrats and Republicans, called upon America to unite behind Obama. Well, I want to make it clear to all who will listen that I AM NOT uniting behind Obama !
>
> I will respect the Office which he holds, and I will acknowledge his abilities as an orator and wordsmith and pray for him, BUT that is it. I have begun today to see what I can do to make sure that he is a one-term President !
>
> Why am I doing this ? It is because:
> – I do not share Obama’s vision or value system for America ;
> – I do not share his Abortion beliefs;
> – I do not share his radical Marxist’s concept of re-distributing wealth;
> – I do not share his stated views on raising taxes on those who make $150,000+ (the ceiling has been changed three times since August);
> – I do not share his view that America is Arrogant;
> – I do not share his view that America is not a Christian Nation;
> – I do not share his view that the military should be

reduced by 25%;
– I do not share his view of amnesty and giving more to illegals than our American Citizens who need help;
– I do not share his views on homosexuality and his definition of marriage;
– I do not share his views that Radical Islam is our friend and Israel is our enemy who should give up any land;
– I do not share his spiritual beliefs (at least the ones he has made public);
– I do not share his beliefs on how to re-work the healthcare system in America ;
– I do not share his Strategic views of the Middle East ; and
– I certainly do not share his plan to sit down with terrorist regimes such as Iran .

Bottom line: my America is vastly different from Obama's, and I have a higher obligation to my Country and my GOD to do what is Right ! For eight (8) years, the Liberals in our Society, led by numerous entertainers who would have no platform and no real credibility but for their celebrity status, have attacked President Bush, his family, and his spiritual beliefs !

They have not moved toward the center in their beliefs and their philosophies, and they never came together nor compromised their personal beliefs for the betterment of our Country ! They have portrayed my America as a land where everything is tolerated except being intolerant ! They have been a vocal and irreverent minority for years ! They have mocked and attacked the very core values so important to the founding and growth of our Country ! They have made every effort to remove the name of GOD or Jesus Christ from our Society ! They have challenged capital punishment, the right to bear firearms, and the most basic principles of our criminal code ! They have attacked one of the most fundamental of all Freedoms, the right of free speech !

> Unite behind Obama? Never ! ! !
>
> I am sure many of you who read this think that I am going overboard, but I refuse to retreat one more inch in favor of those whom I believe are the embodiment of Evil! PRESIDENT BUSH made many mistakes during his Presidency, and I am not sure how history will judge him. However, I believe that he weighed his decisions in light of the long established Judeo-Christian principles of our Founding Fathers!!! Majority rules in America , and I will honor the concept; however, I will fight with all of my power to be a voice in opposition to Obama and his "goals for America ." I am going to be a thorn in the side of those who, if left unchecked, will destroy our Country ! ! Any more compromise is more defeat ! I pray that the results of this election will wake up many who have sat on the sidelines and allowed the Socialist-Marxist anti-GOD crowd to slowly change so much of what has been good in America !
>
> "Error of Opinion may be tolerated where Reason is left free to combat it." – Thomas Jefferson
> GOD bless you and GOD bless our Country ! ! !
> (Please, please, please, pass this on if you agree.)
> Thanks for your time, be safe. "In GOD We Trust"
> "If we ever forget that we're one nation under GOD, then we will be a nation gone under." – Ronald Reagan
> **I WANT THE AMERICA I GREW UP IN BACK…..**
>
> **In GOD We Trust……..**

Respectfully, I disagree. The person who wrote this email didn't say how to respect the office without respecting the person holding it. It may be possible to do so; however, I believe it is more important to respect people than positions. It sounds very noble to say, "I respect the office but not the man." It's like saying, "I respect my boss's position of authority over me, but I don't respect my boss." But in my experience, this attitude makes it very difficult to "do

everything without complaining or arguing." That habit derives only from love. And love is expressed by subordinates to their authorities largely through respect (Eph 5:21–6:8; note especially 5:33 and 6:5).

It is possible not to respect the positions the President holds and still respect the President as an Image-bearing human creation if nothing else. But this kind of generosity which derives from thinking Christianly (a Christian worldview) is not expressed in this email. The tone of this email conveys contempt, not respect. I'm particularly unnerved by the way the term "embodiment of Evil" was tossed out there. Calling liberals Satan incarnate is sensationalist at best and certainly doesn't portray the high view of human dignity that Christianity gives us.

A few other side notes to consider when viewing email forwards like this one:

- It is highly unlikely that a PhD wrote an email in such broad strokes with such inflammatory language, not to mention so many exclamation points. (In fact, I would be cautious of anything with this many exclamation marks, whether it claims to be from a PhD or not because when every sentence is exclaiming, that's a sign that the email is not trying to get you to think about the topic, but is only interested in goading an inordinately emotional reaction from you (as opposed to an emotionally passionate response tempered with thought-full-ness).)

- From Dad: "Dr. Barton's website does not have a record of this document – so, I doubt that it is from him. I sent an e-mail inquiry to wallbuilders.com asking them to comment on its authenticity." Thanks Dad!

- Thirdly, there are at least three of the President's views/positions that have been distorted and intentionally misrepresented in this email. Email forwards are notorious

for this, and there is very little that is less Christian than bearing false witness.

• Finally, I just want to comment that it is okay for Christians to disagree about most of the items in that list. This email implies that a Christian nation (whatever that means anyway) would resemble the exact set of beliefs behind this email; it implies that any good Christian would agree with this email wholesale.

So, should Christians respect President Obama? We, more than anyone, should—especially if you dislike him and/or disagree with his basic platforms. It is easy to love people we like: people who are like us, people with whom we agree. But Christ demands we love those who are irritating to us.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2010/03/09/respect-obama/

Hail the Conquering

Graduates!

June 10, 2009

I was asked to put together a few resources for the high school grads at church. I thought I'd share the wealth with the World Wide Web.

Below you'll find helpful and hopefully meaningful resources to guide you as you embark on adulthood. I especially recommend the two blogs. The most valuable resource of all, though, is people. Get involved in your own way on campus and in a local church. But don't just hang out with people your own age—that'll make you boring. Be sure to introduce yourself to your professors and tell them thank you (will likely turn that B+ into an A). I've been teaching and learning from college students for a really long time. So I know quite a bit about college stuff; and a decent amount about life stuff too—you can always ask me anything. The whole world is before you; but you never have to face it, with all its joys and hardships, alone.

Many congratulations and blessings.

Renea

Bookmark This

GoCollege.com

Here you'll find really good tips for getting the most out of the really (sometimes really, really) expensive education you're getting. Classroom lectures, writing assignments, and even exams can be a lot different in college than they were in high school. The tips on this website can help make the transition smoother.

Biblos.com

Biblos.com is this great website I've only recently discovered. It's a one-stop-shop for all your bible study tools including concordances, commentaries, maps, pictures, devotions, and of course the Bible itself in several different translations and languages.

EveryStudent.com

I'm really pumped about this website. It's a place where no question about God or life is out of bounds. When your friends have questions about God and Christianity, or when you have questions yourself, this website can help. In college you'll do a lot of exploring, discovering, and learning about yourself: what you think about God, Christianity, the way the world is, the way it should be. This website is designed to guide you on that journey. Be sure to check out Life Issues, which touches on topics such as sex, beauty, racism, and shame.

Probe.org

Curious about Genesis and evolution? Need help answering the tough questions your friends have about Christianity? Whether you want to learn more about your friend's religion, are struggling with questions like – Why do bad things happen to good people? – or you need a credible source for the paper you're writing, Probe.org is an excellent resource that can help you think through some really tough topics.

Blogs

Living Spirituality

Living Spirituality offers helpful, encouraging, and even sometimes convicting devotionals. It also provides a weekly discussion about real life stuff. These discussions are helpful as we try to live like Jesus in our everyday lives.

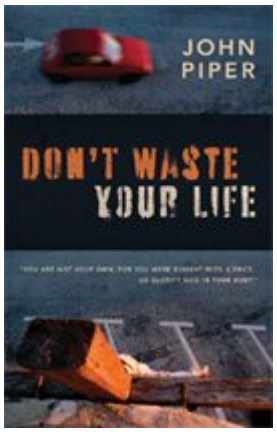
Surviving College Life

Surviving College Life is a really cool blog that's incredibly comprehensive. Not only will it be helpful as you prepare to arrive on campus. This will be something you'll find useful throughout your college years as you move from dorms to apartments, friendships to romances, and from major to major. The above link is a list of all the posts divided by topic. So whether you're looking for time management tips, study aids, roommate advice, financial aid resources, or fitness facts, *Surviving College Life* can help give you a heads up and point you in a good direction.

Book Buzz

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Romans 12:2

This brief list of books includes stuff I read in college that was really important to my Christian walk, as well as a few books I wish I had read in college. They're books I hope you will find helpful as you journey with Jesus and strive to think christianly. (Don't worry; they're not just "smart people" books. Most of these are very easy to read.)

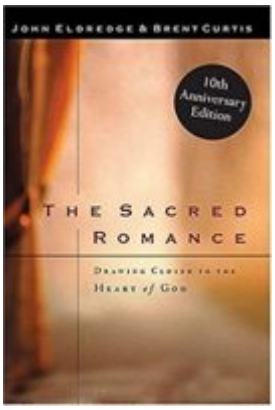


Don't Waste Your Life

—John Piper

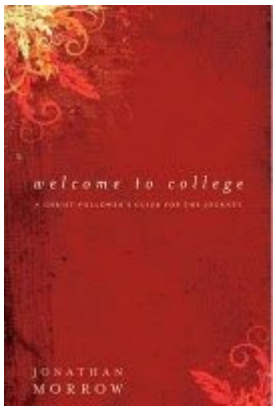
When Christ gave us real life, he gave our lives meaning and purpose. *Don't Waste Your Life* is about living on purpose a life passionate for God and people.

The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God



—Brent Curtis & John Eldredge

This is not a girly book; don’t let the title fool you. The Sacred Romance was a really important book for me when I was in college. It helped me understand the big picture of the Bible: the story of God and the story of my own life. It helped me understand the difference between living by the rules and living spiritually.

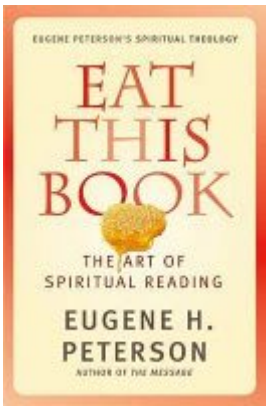


Welcome to College: A Christ-follower’s Guide for the Journey

—Jonathan Morrow

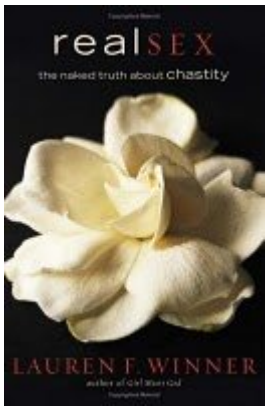
Welcome to College includes chapters on the problem of evil and suffering, Christology, ethics and much more. You will also find a broad collection of practical topics: health, sex and dating, finances, Internet use, alcohol. This book provides unique and much–needed help for navigating the head–spinning newness of college life.

Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading



—Eugene Peterson

This is a really helpful book about how to read and interpret and understand the Bible, how to let the Scriptures nourish and feed us, how to live the Scriptures as they are the Living Words of God.

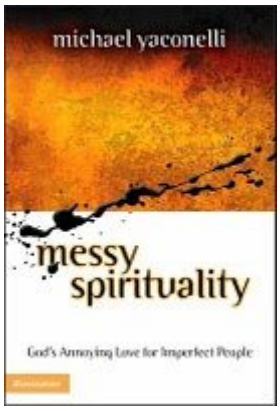


Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity

—Lauren F. Winner

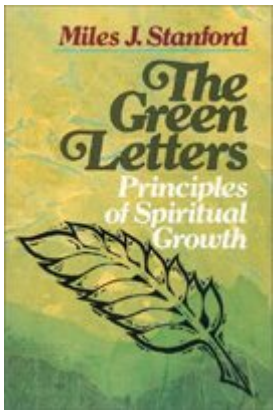
Winner talks about sex in a realistic way. She sorts through the confusing messages we hear about sex from both the world and the church, and helps us think about sex and romantic love within the big picture of God’s story. Real Sex provides biblical and practical guidance for unmarried Christians who desire to honor God with their sexuality and dating relationships.

Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People



– Mike Yaconelli

This small book says big things about what being a Christian looks like. It reminds us that we're all human in need of God's grace; that there's no such thing as the ideal Christian—there's no one-size-fits-all pattern of spirituality.

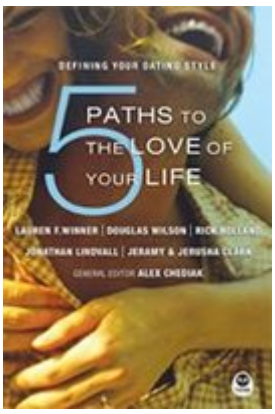


The Green Letters

–Miles J. Stanford

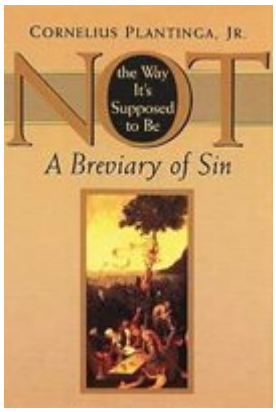
The Green Letters is about spiritual growth. It's one of those books you can pick and choose what you want to read by scanning over the Table of Contents; that is, the chapters don't necessarily have to be read in order. This book will challenge you to live less selfishly, or we could say, less as a self-follower and more as a Christ-follower.

5 Paths to the Love of Your Life: Defining Your Dating Style



—Alex Chediak

There are basically five different approaches to romantic love from the Christian perspective. This book gives you an overview of these five views, their advantages and disadvantages, and the logic and Scripture behind them. So you can decide for yourself which path you relate to most, which enables you to be intentional about biblical, christianly romance.



Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin

—Cornelius Plantinga Jr.

What is sin? What are the effects of sin? How do we think and talk about sin (if at all)? How do we deal with sin? These are some of the questions discussed in this small, but impactful

book on sin. You'd think a book all about sin would be depressing, but Plantinga understands that sin is only the distortion of something originally good; and that though things aren't the way they're supposed to be now, they will be one day soon when Christ returns.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2009/06/10/hail-the-conquering-graduates/

American Education: The Hundred Years War

On its surface, the process of educating our children appears to be fairly straightforward. First, you must determine what kind of person you want to produce at the end of their formal schooling. In other words, decide what it means to be an educated person. Then, you establish what knowledge and attitudes will accomplish this goal. Next, hire an administrator who has the ability to pull together all the necessary components; someone who knows the best, scientifically verified, teaching techniques and the best optimum environment for implementation. Finally, give the principal or headmaster the authority to hire gifted teachers who can successfully do the job or to fire teachers who cannot. There's only one problem with this simple formula: educators disagree on how to complete every one of these steps. To make matters worse, education is one of the most expensive responsibilities that our government fulfills.

In the last forty years, spending in the U.S. on K–12 education has more than doubled. In 1970 it was $221 billion; by 2008 it rose to $556 billion in constant dollars.{1} During that forty year period, enrollment has changed very little,

rising from about fifty–one million to fifty–three million students. So essentially, spending today is twice the amount we spent in 1970 on about the same number of students. Naturally, one would expect to see significant gains in learning for that money. However according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress Scores, not much has changed. For the last forty years scores have remained flat. Reading scores for seventeen–year–olds have remained at 285 out of 500, and mathematics scores went from 300 to 306, a minor improvement.{2}

Many argue that the reason we are not making progress in our schools is that we are using the wrong playbook. Because our educational leaders have bought into a philosophy of education based on a faulty view of human nature, they have endorsed techniques in the classroom that have marginal impact at best. This situation has not gone on without being contested. Historians of education point to a struggle going back to the beginning of the twentieth century between two factions that have very different ideas about what it means to be human and what the goal of education should be. Most Americans would be surprised to learn that there has been a century–long struggle between two distinct ways of thinking about how to educate our children.

In what follows we will look at the opposing worldviews of these two education camps and consider how their struggles have impacted our children. Join us as we look at the effect of what might be called the Hundred Years War in American education.

Progressive Orthodoxy

Education historian Diane Ravitch argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, America was facing two possible educational paths. One path led to an academic curriculum consisting of history, literature, science and mathematics,

language, and the arts for all high school students. The other path endorsed a vocational emphasis for most, and an academic training only for a few.

Criticism of the academic curriculum came from pragmatic business leaders and faculty members of our newly formed colleges of education that had recently sprung up across the nation. These so–called "progressive" educators felt that schools should be focused on the needs of society and students rather than centered on the traditional content of an academic curriculum. This emphasis on making school more practical and student–centered reflects the thoughts and writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is considered by many to be one of the most influential thinkers on educational philosophy in Western culture. His book *Emile*, written in 1762, offered an extremely child–centered educational method in response to the traditional content–focused curriculum of the day.

Rousseau's educational methods sprung from his faith in a particular worldview. One critical aspect of this worldview is that Rousseau believed that humans are "good" and that they naturally worship their Creator.{3} He also argued that all we need to know about God can be learned from nature; any other source, including the Bible, would be seeking man's opinion and authority which always turns out to be destructive. Rousseau thanked God for making him free, good, and happy like God himself.{4} Regarding education, it's not surprising that Rousseau valued freedom above all else. He wrote, "The truly free man wants only what he can do and does what he pleases. That is my fundamental maxim. It need only be applied to childhood for the rules of education to flow from it."{5}

The result of Rousseau's worldview is predictable. The child, rather than his teacher, knows best how to learn and what to learn. This student–centered approach leads Rousseau to a strong opinion about books and reading. He brags that, "At twelve, Emile will hardly know what a book is." He adds, "I hate books, they only teach one to talk about what one does

not know."{6} His Emile will learn from life itself but only when the need for such learning comes from within.

For Rousseau, *natural man* is always superior to *civil man* and love of oneself is always good. This focus on freedom and student centered learning would influence educators for centuries and would find a warm reception in the minds of American educators in the progressive education movement.

Rousseau's Disciples

It's ironic that the most prestigious college of education in America, Teachers College at Columbia University, began as the Kitchen Garden Association in 1880 with the goal of training young girls to work as cooks and housemaids. Later, carpentry was added to attract boys and, as a result, the name was changed to the Industrial Education Association. In 1887 it was renamed the New York College for the Training of Teachers, and five years later just Teachers College. The opening of Teachers College marked the birth of the progressive education movement in America.

If Teachers College was the birthplace of progressive education, John Dewey was its father. Dewey was probably the most influential of all American philosophers and had an immense effect on how we think about education as a nation. He saw schools as a tool for social reform, and the goal of this reform was to replace Christianity with a new secular religion of democracy. To accomplish this goal, schools should turn from the traditional curriculum that encouraged abstract thinking and handing down the best ideas of Western Civilization, and instead base their activities on the needs and experiences of children in the home and community. Children should study problems and processes that mean something to them. Shop work, sewing, and cooking were a greater need than ancient languages, mathematics, history, or theology. As a result, books were downplayed and projects

centering on vocational training become the mainstay of many public schools.

While Dewey saw the value of maintaining some of the traditional academic content, some of his disciples worked to have it removed completely. William Heard Kilpatrick took the mantle of leadership for the progressive education movement from Dewey as an immensely popular professor at Teachers College. His 1925 book *Foundations of Method* described an educational philosophy that, to this day, still controls much of American education. It argued that we should simply teach children—to be child—centered, not subject—centered—because knowledge is changing so quickly and today's subjects will be of no use tomorrow. It celebrated whole—language over phonics and critical thinking over rote learning, tests, and even report cards. His first opportunity to design an experimental class resulted in no set curriculum, no assigned reading, math or spelling work, and no tests.

Augustine and the Academic Tradition

For the last hundred years, the progressive education movement has promoted a child—centered curriculum as a necessary remedy against a dying books—and—content—centered form of schooling. This old order was often referred to as a "liberal education" or possibly the "academic tradition." Which worldview undergirds this academic tradition in schooling?

Progressives and traditionalists have very different views of human nature. Rousseau and the progressives argue that humans are created happy, free, and good while traditionalists see things more like the fourth century Christian Augustine of Hippo. Augustine believed that all humans are born with a sin nature and a tendency to do evil. There is a famous passage in his *Confessions* in which he describes an incident in his youth where he and his friends stole and destroyed fruit from a nearby orchard because, as he writes, "I became evil for no

reason. The only motive I had for this wickedness was the wickedness itself. It was disgusting, but I loved it."{7}

Augustine believed that wisdom did not come from within our fallen natures, but came from God and knowledge of his word. He argued that "we should be led by the fear of God to seek the knowledge of His will . . . it is necessary to have our hearts subdued by piety, and not run in the face of Holy Scripture."{8} While Augustine depended on God as a source for wisdom, he acknowledged that teachers need to use good methods if they are going to shape the minds and hearts of their students. He asked the rhetorical question, Should the wicked "tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly and plausibly, while the latter [believers] tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and . . . not easy to believe it?"{9}

Augustine and those who followed in his tradition down though the centuries believed that children must be trained in the beliefs and disciplines that made for a civilized society. Not just any information or content would do. A truly educated person would receive a foundation of theological training that would inform all the other disciplines. The first universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries continued to see theology as the queen of the sciences. Although theology was still center stage through the Renaissance and the Reformation, it was removed from its throne during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The progressive education movement's efforts to reduce the influence of Christianity on schooling in America have been successful. During the 1960s and 70s the Supreme Court issued ruling after ruling that resulted in the secularization of our public schools. Parents would have to look elsewhere to have their children instructed in a Christian environment.

Why Does This Matter?

Even the progressive education leader John Dewey understood the need to transmit the best of one's culture to the next generation through the process of education. He wrote, "Unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery."{10} Dewey and his disciples planned to use this transmission process to change our culture dramatically.

Dewey's goal was to change the worldview upon which educational philosophy in America was grounded. He was convinced that the only intellectually responsible philosophy was a naturalistic one. This meant that education, ethics, politics, and life itself should be devoid of any hope in, or influence from, supernatural beliefs. As a result, he worked to replace America's faith in Christianity with faith in democracy, which he referred to as a religious belief. Revelation and religious authority would be replaced with the scientific method and this new faith in democracy.

Dewey was instrumental in breaking the connection to our past as a society. His followers took his lead, offering an even more radical break from the academic tradition. For instance William Heard Kilpatrick, a mathematician, argued that mathematics is "harmful" for ordinary living, and that dancing, dramatics, and doll playing offered more potential for educational growth.{11}

At the end of WWII, progressive ideology reigned supreme in American education. But even though the battle over educational philosophy had been won, its implementation would constantly be challenged. The Russian satellite Sputnik in the 1950s caused a temporary panic and a short lived re–emphasis on science and mathematics. But by then, the enrollment in science had already declined precipitously. For instance, fewer than five percent of high school students took physics

in 1955, down from nearly twenty percent in 1900.{12}

By the late sixties, only the lucky few who scored well on IQ tests received an academic high school curriculum, and our universities had begun to give in to student demands for relevancy by gutting the required curriculum and adding less challenging, highly politicized programs like women's studies, Black studies, and peace studies. To some, it appeared as if adult supervision had disappeared from our university campuses.

In recent decades, parents have resorted to homeschooling and private schools in search of rigorous academics for their children. Others have pushed for charter schools and voucher programs to re–inject greater rigor in the public schools. But it appears that the hundred years war over educational philosophy will continue well into the future.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, www.bea.gov.
2. NAEP Data Explorer, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Eduation Institute of Education Sciences, nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile or On Education, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 278.
4. Ibid., 281.
5. Ibid., 84.
6. Ibid., 116.
7. Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4.9.
8. D. Bruce Lockerbie, *A Passion For Learning* (Moody Press, 1994), 78.
9. Ibid., 80.
10. E. D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, 120.
11. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 181.
12. Ibid., 350.

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Capitalism and Socialism

Kerby Anderson writes that recent polls show the a mere majority of Americans believe in capitalism. And those under the age of 30 are essentially evenly divided about capitalism and socialism. Is there a war on capitalism? And are there answers to the typical criticisms of capitalism?

Poll About Capitalism

Americans traditionally have supported capitalism over socialism, but there is growing evidence that might be changing. The latest Rasmussen poll showed that a mere majority of Americans (fifty-three percent) say capitalism is better than socialism.{1} And one in five (twenty percent) say that socialism is better than capitalism. America may not be ready to reject capitalism for socialism, but this poll does show less enthusiasm than in the past.



Age is a significant component. If you look at adults under the age of thirty in the poll, you find they are essentially evenly divided. More than a third of young people (thirty-seven percent) prefer capitalism, another third (thirty-three percent) embrace socialism, and the rest (thirty percent) are undecided.

What are we to make of this? First, the terms capitalism and socialism weren't defined in the poll. I suspect that if the

pollsters explained the various tenets of socialism that the percentages would change. Defining capitalism would also be important since many would not necessary associate it with a free market but instead might have visions of an evil, greedy capitalist. After all, that is how many businessmen are portrayed in the media.

How should we define capitalism and socialism? Here are some brief definitions of these two economic systems. Capitalism is an economic system in which there is private property and the means of production are privately owned. In capitalism, there is a limited role for government. Socialism is an economic system in which there is public or state ownership of the means of production and the primary focus is on providing an equality of outcomes. In socialism, the state is all-important and involved in central planning.

Another question surfacing from the Rasmussen poll concerns those under the age of thirty. They are probably the least likely to associate socialism with Soviet-style repression. Instead, they may have in their minds the current government push toward European socialism and find that more attractive. Also, they are less likely to have "skin in the game." When you ask investors this same question about capitalism and socialism, they favored capitalism by a five-to-one margin.

Political affiliation is another determinant of support for capitalism. Republicans favor capitalism over socialism by an eleven-to-one margin. By contrast, Democrats are more closely divided. They barely favor capitalism (thirty-nine percent) over socialism (thirty percent).

In what follows I'll look at the debate between capitalism and socialism and provide a biblical critique.{2}

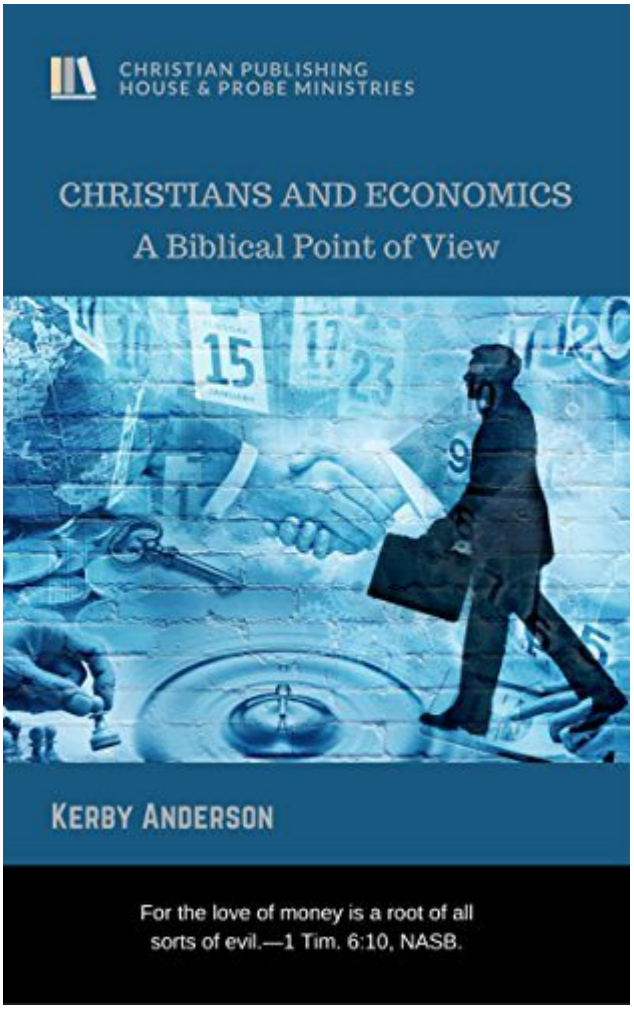
The War Over Capitalism

I noted that fifty-three percent of Americans say capitalism is better than socialism. While that is a majority, it is a mere majority and hardly a strong endorsement of free market economics.

We might wonder if the percentages of support for these economic systems might change if different words were used. A survey taken in 2007 came to a different conclusion. The Pew Research Center asked people if they were better off "in a free market economy even though there may be severe ups and downs from time to time." In that case seventy percent agreed, versus twenty percent who disagreed.{3} This might suggest that Americans like terms like "free market" more than "capitalism."

These polls illustrate that we are in the midst of a cultural conflict over capitalism. That is the conclusion of Arthur Brooks. His op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* argues that "The Real Culture War is Over Capitalism."{4} He notes that President Obama's tax plan will increase the percentage of American adults who pay no federal income tax from forty percent to forty-nine percent (and another eleven percent will pay less than five percent of their income in tax). This has the potential to change attitudes about taxes since half of America won't be paying taxes.

Brookes says, "To put a modern twist on the old axiom, a man who is not a socialist at 20 has no heart; a man who is still a socialist at 40 either has no head, or pays no taxes. Social Democrats are working to create a society where the majority are net recipients of the 'sharing economy.' They are fighting a culture war of attrition with economic tools."{5}



These various polls, as well as the current debate about the role of government in the economy, illustrate why we need to educate adults and young people about economics and the free market system (in my book, *Making The Most of Your Money in Tough Times*, I devote a number of chapters to economics and economic systems). How can we use biblical principles to evaluate economic systems like capitalism and socialism? The Bible does not endorse a particular system, but it does have key principles about human nature, private property rights, and the role of government. These can be used to evaluate economic systems.

The Bible warns us about the effects of sinful behavior in the world. Therefore, we should be concerned about any system that would concentrate economic power and thereby unleash the ravages of sinful behavior on the society. We should reject socialism and state-controlled economies that would concentrate power in the hands of a few sinful individuals.

Economic Criticisms of Capitalism

People often reject the idea of capitalism because they believe one of the *economic* criticisms of capitalism. Here are two of these criticisms.

The first economic criticism is that capitalism leads to monopolies. These develop for two reasons: too little government, and too much government. Monopolies have occurred in the past because government has not been willing to exercise its God-given authority. Government finally stepped in and broke up the big trusts that were not allowing the free enterprise system to function correctly.

But in recent decades, the reason for monopolies has often been too *much* government. Many of the largest monopolies today are government-sanctioned or -sponsored monopolies that prevent true competition from taking place. The solution is for government to allow a freer market where competition can take place.

Let me add that many people often call markets with limited competition “monopolies” when the term is not appropriate. For example, the major car companies may seem like a monopolies or oligopolies until you realize that in the market of consumer durables the true market is the entire western world.

The second criticism of capitalism is that it leads to pollution. In a capitalistic system, pollutants are considered externalities. The producer will incur costs that are external to the firm so often there is no incentive to clean up the pollution. Instead, it is dumped into areas held in common such as the air or water.

The solution in this case is governmental regulation. But this need not be a justification for building a massive bureaucracy. We need to find creative ways to direct self-interest so that people work towards the common good.

Sometimes when speaking on the topic of government and the environment, I use a thought experiment. Most communities use the water supply from a river and dump treated waste back into the water to flow downstream. Often there is a tendency to cut corners and leave the waste treatment problem for those downstream. But imagine if you required that the water intake pipe be downstream and the waste pipe be upstream. If you did require this (and this is only a thought experiment) you would instantly guarantee that you would have less of a problem with water pollution. Why? It is now in the self-interest of the community to clean the wastewater being pumped back into the river.

We can acknowledge that although there are some valid economic criticisms of capitalism, these can be controlled by limited governmental control. And when capitalism is wisely controlled, it generates significant economic prosperity and economic freedom for its citizens.

Moral Criticism of Capitalism

Another reason people often reject the idea of capitalism is because they believe it is *immoral*.

One of the moral arguments against capitalism involves the issue of greed. And this is why many Christians feel ambivalent towards the free enterprise system. After all, some critics of capitalism contend that this economic system makes people greedy.

To answer this question we need to resolve the following question: Does capitalism make people greedy or do we already have greedy people who use the economic freedom of the capitalistic system to achieve their ends? In light of the biblical description of human nature, the latter seems more likely.

Because people are sinful and selfish, some are going to use

the capitalist system to feed their greed. But that is not so much a criticism of capitalism as it is a realization of the human condition. The goal of capitalism is not to change people but to protect us from human sinfulness.

Capitalism is a system in which bad people can do the least harm, and good people have the freedom to do good works. Capitalism works well if you have completely moral individuals. But it also functions adequately when you have selfish and greedy people.

Important to this discussion is the realization that there is a difference between self-interest and selfishness. All people have self-interests that can operate in ways that are not selfish. For example, it is in my self-interest to get a job and earn an income so that I can support my family. I can do that in ways that are not selfish.

Capitalism was founded on the observation that all of us have self-interest. Rather than trying to change that, economists saw that self-interest could be the motor of the capitalist system.

By contrast, other economic systems like socialism ignore the biblical definitions of human nature. Thus, they allow economic power to be centralized and concentrate power in the hands of a few greedy people. Those who complain of the influence major corporations have on our lives should consider the socialist alternative of how a few governmental bureaucrats control every aspect of their lives.

Greed certainly occurs in the capitalist system. But it does not surface just in this economic system. It is part of our sinfulness. Capitalism may have its flaws as an economic system, but it can be controlled to give us a great deal of economic prosperity and economic freedom.

Capitalism and the Zero-Sum Myth

There is a myth that is often at the very foundation of many of the criticisms of capitalism. We can call it the zero-sum myth. By zero-sum, I mean that one person wins and another person loses. Most competitive games are zero-sum games. One team or person wins; the other loses.

In most cases, the free market can be a win-win scenario rather than a win-lose scenario. In his book, *Money, Greed, and God*, Jay Richards uses a fun example from his childhood to illustrate this point.{6}

In the sixth grade, his teacher had them play the "trading game." She passed out little gifts to all of the students: a ten-pack of Doublemint gum, a paddleboard with a rubber ball, a Bugs Bunny picture frame, an egg of Silly Putty, a set of Barbie trading cards, etc.

She then asked the students to rate how much they liked their gift on a scale from one to ten. Then she compiled the score and put it on the board. Then she divided the class into five groups of five students and told them they could trade their gift with anyone in the group. Jay traded the Barbie trading cards he had with a girl in his group who had the paddleboard.

Then the teacher asked them to rate how much they liked their gifts. And she put that number on the board. The total score went up.

Then she told the students they could trade with anyone in the room. Now they had twenty-four possible trading partners rather than just the four in their group. The trading really began to take off. Once again, the teacher asked them to rate their gifts. When she put the number on the board, the total score went up again.

Almost everyone ended up with a toy he or she liked more than when the trading began. In fact, the only individual scores

that did not go up were from students who really liked the gift they received initially from the teacher.

The students that day learned some valuable lessons about a free economy. When people are free to trade, they can add value to the traded item even though it remained physically unchanged. And they saw the value of having more trading partners (in this case twenty-four rather than four). Most of all, they learned that the free exchange can be a win-win proposition.

We can certainly admit that sometimes capitalism is not a win-win proposition. When there are limited resources and an individual or corporation is able to manipulate the political system in their favor, it is a win for the manipulator but a loss for Americans who did not have such political access. However, that is not a flaw in capitalism, but what results when government is corrupt or is corrupted by those who manipulate the system

Notes

1. "Just 53% Say Capitalism Better Than Socialism," Rasmussen Reports, 9 April 2009.
2. If you would like more information about this topic or would like to order my book, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*, visit our website store at www.probe.org for more information.
3. "World Publics Welcome Global Trade – But Not Immigration," Pew Research Center, 4 October 2007.
4. Arthur Brooks, "The Real Culture War is Over Capitalism," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 April 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. Jay Richards, *Money, Greed, and God* (NY: Harper One, 2009), 60-61.

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Health Care Concern: Government Utilitarianism & the Hippocratic Oath

Written by Heather Zeiger

The government doesn't take the Hippocratic Oath, but maybe it should.

As I was researching for this article, I easily found the over 2,000-page House bill on health care (H.R. 3962), and downloaded it over our high–speed Internet connection without a problem. I glanced at the Table of Contents, made some notes, and tried to go back to the previous page when my browser came crashing down. It could be that the size of the file gave Firefox some problems. Actually, it was fine at first, but when I realized that this monster was too cumbersome, I tried to get back to a page that was easier to navigate only to find that going back within this huge bill is not as easy as downloading it.

If I can use my experience in retrieving this bulky bill as being symbolic of anything, it would be that if passed, we will find the changes to our health care system confusing and unwieldy. And like my problems with trying to go back to an easier page, once we've realized what we've gotten ourselves into, it may not be easy to undo what has been done. There are many areas of concern in this legislation that raise ethical red flags, but I want to address a very fundamental issue in health care–that of authority and accountability.

The health care reform bill that has been passed by the House and its Senate counterpart (deliberations began November 30),

both bring to light several key bioethical issues: government funding for abortion, defining end–of–life care, who makes rationing decisions, and our obligation to the weak and infirm, to name a few. Many aspects of our lives can fall under the umbrella of health care, so this bill has the potential to affect almost every aspect of society. Another contentious (and constitutionally questionable) feature of the bill is the government requirement that everyone purchase health insurance, which marks the first time in history that the federal government has required everyone in society to enter a particular marketplace (car insurance is state–, not federally regulated).

I want to address the nature of health care specifically. Generally, the person administering health care is dealing with someone who finds themselves in a vulnerable state. That is why people, Christian or not, resonate with the idea that doctors take an oath to "Do No Harm." The essence of the Hippocratic Oath, even before it was Christianized, is that of a covenantal relationship between the physician, the patient, and God (or, in 400 BC, the Greek gods){1}. This recognition of a deep obligation of the physician to the patient in his or her time of vulnerability has been a vocational standard for the industry for centuries. Granted, after the 1950's these standards began to change into something far more utilitarian and consumer–driven and the Oath is rarely recited at medical graduations anymore. Nonetheless, doctors and patients today still operate under the assumptions of the Hippocratic Oath that the doctor is to "do no harm."

But back to the point of the recently passed House bill and the ongoing debate on the Senate bill . If both of these bills pass and are approved by President Obama in their current form, the government is going to exercise a large amount of fiscal and, therefore, regulatory control over the health industry. The Hippocratic Oath was a vocational agreement, but now the government is in the position of holding an

individual's health in its hands. The government makes no such promise to "do no harm" to the individual patient.

In actuality, the very idea of health care for all represents a distinct and debatable worldview. The language being used to argue these bills represents, at best, an attempt to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It no longer speaks on an individual level, but on a societal level. And while individual doctors agree to avoid harming patients, the government views its job as seeking what is best for society at large. That is a very different commitment at a fundamental level. In the United States, the governmental commitment is contractual,{2} while in the Hippocratic tradition, the doctor-patient relationship is covenantal. (See the wording for the Oath of Office and the Hippocratic Oath, below.)

Doing what seems best for society on the whole is fine when we are talking about national security and protecting our borders, or when we are talking about how best to implement and regulate interstate commerce, or even in creating boards that enforce common standards for pharmaceuticals, such as the FDA. This protects society, and protects the individuals within that society. But when it comes to an individual making a decision for his personal health or for his dependents, what is best for society as a whole is not the appropriate ethic. This is called *utilitarianism*, which is generally defined as an ethic that prioritizes "the greatest good for the greatest number of people."{3}

Utilitarianism has a limited place, but seeking the greatest good for society should not be the highest calling. This view elevates society and social good to a higher level than the individual, meaning that what is best for the greatest number of people, or society as an aggregate, may be at the expense of certain individuals. However, medicine deals with helping the weak, the infirm, and the vulnerable, which concerns the individual. Hence, the covenantal nature of the doctor/patient relationship. This care for the individual springs from the

idea that all people are made in the image of God. Therefore we cannot value some individuals more than others, even if we (fellow human beings) deem them more or less useful to society.

As Dr. Kathy McReynolds, a bioethicist and professor at Biola University and public policy director for the Christian Institute on Disability says about the health care bill, "I am concerned that decisions regarding patient care will be made by someone other than the patient and physician working together. A disinterested politician is not going to have a connection to that patient or be able to identify intrinsic factors about that person's disability."{4}

Link: Senate Healthcare bill: help.senate.gov/BAI09A84_xml.pdf

House Bill: The bill, the Affordable Health Care for America Act—H.R. 3962

www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_classical.html

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panaceia and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art—if they desire to learn it—without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from

harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself, holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

Importantly, the major feature of the traditional version of the Hippocratic Oath is that the doctor recognizes that he is dealing with a patient at a vulnerable time and will do everything with the patient's best interest in mind. He enters into a covenantal agreement between himself, the patient, and the deity.{5}

Oath of Office:

www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Oath_Office.htm

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies,

foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

The distinguishing feature of the Oath of Office is that of protection of those principles found in the Constitution of the United States. While this may protect the citizens of the U.S., this is not a personal obligation towards an individual with the individual's best interest in mind. In this sense it is a contractual relationship between the citizens of the U.S. and their representatives or armed forces.

Notes

1. Cameron, Nigel M. de S., *The New Medicine: Life and Death after Hippocrates*, 1991, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL.
2. For some foundational philosophy on Political Theory, see the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*The Social Contract*), John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes (Leviathan).
3. For an interesting look at the history of utilitarianism, see the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on "John Stuart Mill," www.iep.utm.edu/milljs/#SSH2d.ii; also, Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, Nashville, TN, 2005, Thomas Nelson, Inc., pps. 15-17.
4. Joni and Friends, www.joniandfriendsnews.com/docs/091125_healthcare.pdf
5. Translation from the Greek by Ludwig Edelstein. From The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation, and Interpretation, by Ludwig Edelstein. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943.

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Welcome to College: Great Worldview Gift for Graduates

The world is changing so quickly it's hard to keep up. Christians who take the Scriptures seriously as a guide for life and knowing God usually agree that we're sliding down a very slippery slope morally and spiritually. Non–biblical worldviews not only abound but gain star status. Christ–followers can easily feel overwhelmed, wondering how to make a difference. Nowhere is this cultural decay more manifest than on college campuses.

For years, my wife and I have seized the small window of opportunity of choosing a gift for a college–bound graduate. We realize this represents one good chance to help shape a still–moldable life and, by extension, potentially touch the culture for Christ. 'Tis the season of graduation right now and I invite you to consider following suit.

Our habit is to give college–bound graduates J. Budiszewski's excellent *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith*. I recently discovered a book by a new graduate that I'm adding to our graduation gift bag. It's a helpful–older–brother styled "guide for the journey" by a young man who has obviously been trained by some of the sharpest minds in contemporary Christian worldview thinking and apologetics.

If Probe ever hired someone to write an organizational brochure, it might be Jonathan Morrow. His book, *Welcome to College: A Christ-Follower's Guide for the Journey*, contains one of the most succinct rationales for what we do–*Christian apologetics*, that is, a defense of the faith–of anything I've read. Morrow's gift for profound insight coupled with brevity is keen. He shows a sweeping knowledge, yet he includes just enough material for busy students. "I have tried to keep the

chapters short and sweet since this won't be the only thing you'll be reading this semester," Morrow writes.

Morrow's experience as a recent college graduate and his unself-conscious approach should resonate with younger readers. I would have wanted to write this book when my street credibility with young readers was potentially higher, but I was nowhere near his level of maturity, awareness or comprehension in my 20s!

Of course, some would say Morrow's work is simply a *Cliff's Notes* version of all he's been taught at Biola University, Talbot School of Theology, and through apparent involvement with Campus Crusade for Christ. There is little or no truly original thinking here, perhaps. So be it.

Sure, this material is generally sprinkled throughout any well–read Christians' bookshelves, expounded profusely by the authors Morrow draws upon. But that's the genius of his book for today's graduate: a young yet well–schooled voice covering the gamut of worldview *and* personal life issues in brief, accessible terms.

The young man or woman being pummeled by secular professors–many of whose worldviews and intentions are in direct opposition to their Christian faith–need help *now*. This book makes that possible.

Welcome to College isn't filled with abstractions about controversial Bible passages or archaeological discoveries, interesting as that might be. Again, one strength of *Welcome to College* is its scope. Mixed in with the basic faith–defending ammunition like the problem of evil and suffering, Christology, ethics and so on, students will find a broad collection of pragmatic topics: health, sex and dating, finances, Internet use, alcohol, even a chapter on dealing with the death of a loved one. This provides unique and much–needed help for navigating the head–spinning new freedoms

of college life.

Not content to simply write a how–to–get–by manual, Morrow challenges students to consider the privilege of a college education and "spend it 'Christianly'." He discusses questions like:

- *How can you discover what you are supposed to do with your life?*
- *How do you share your faith in a hostile environment?*
- *How do you manage your time so that you can study and have fun?*
- *Is all truth relative?*
- *Are there good reasons to be a Christian?*
- *How should you think about dating and sex as a Christian?{1}*

Since the book offers in its beginning chapters a treatment of three major worldviews, I could have been reading one of our Probe *Student Mind Games* graduates. One of the first sessions in Probe's basic student curriculum contains a session on *theism, naturalism* (with a sub–section on *postmodernism*), and *pantheism*. Morrow uses a nearly identical breakdown of worldviews: *scientific naturalism, postmodernism* and *Christian theism.*

As Morrow directly points out, these three systems of thought predominate at the root level for people of all cultures. You base your beliefs on one or more of these, knowingly or not. Great similarity between a new book and a worldview apologetics curriculum like Probe's may be unsurprising. How many variations on basic themes could there be? Yet it is striking as a compact manifesto for what Morrow, his alma mater, Probe, and a growing host of authors and organizations are seeking to do, which is to *help people think biblically*.

The fundamental importance of another theme appears, as it should, in the book's opening pages as well. College kids need

to enter post–secondary classrooms with eyes wide open, being aware that the world at large (and academia in particular) scoffs at the idea of religion as possessing absolute, universal truth. Nancy Pearcey's treatment of what she calls the *fact / value split* in contemporary culture has become a go–to concept of culturally aware apologetics.{2} It also informs Morrow's book. This "two-realm theory of truth" places religious claims into an upper story of noncognitive, nonrational values. They supposedly offer the individual some personal meaning but hold no truth–telling power over anything or for anyone else. "True for you but not for me" is the slogan. This "upstairs" portion of life is just opinions–private, personal preferences not fit for the public sphere.

In contrast, the supposed lower story is made up of rational, verifiable, scientific claims that are binding on everyone. This is not opinion; it's truth by gosh. On this view, the only possible source of real knowledge is verifiable science. One professor in New York told his class that anyone who believed in the supernatural was "an idiot." That's why such war stories involving unwitting Christian students getting broadsided by scoffing professors abound. Academic authorities simply pronounce knowledge unattainable outside of the scientific method.

But understanding the anatomy of this view and its faulty presuppositions equips believing students to challenge prevailing campus biases. Though Morrow offers only a passing understanding, any student interested in pursuing further help will find direction here.

One example of Morrow's agility with big, tough ideas is this statement rounding out his brief discussion of one major worldview: "Postmodernism is a fundamental redefinition of truth, language and reality." Elsewhere he writes:

> *If the Christian worldview best answers the most profound of*

> *human questions (e.g., where we came from, who we are, how we should live, why the world is such a mess, and what our ultimate destiny is, to name a few) then it is true for more than just two hours on a Sunday morning.{3}*

That's just good writing!

Given its forty–two chapters, I only sampled the book. But that's in keeping with the reality of any busy, overwhelmed new (or not so new) college reader. Its usefulness lies partially in its accessibility as a reference. If questions arise in class or due to new life experiences, undergrads (others, too) can crack the book and get a quick, cogent, biblical viewpoint on it.

Chapter titles like "Ladies: Pursue the Real Beauty" may pull readers in before felt needs drive them there. Many others like "Discovering the Will of God," "Ethics in a Brave New World" or "Science Rules!" lend themselves to future thumbing on an as–needed basis. The *Big Ideas* chapter summations will serve as a useful preview, refresher, and set of talking points for young faith–defenders.

One surprising thought I had while reading the chapter entitled "Getting Theological: Knowing and Loving God" was its value as an evangelistic tool. If I met an average inquirer or skeptic who is unaware of the unified biblical *metanarrative* (big story) of Christianity–asking, *What is it you Christians really believe?*–I'd hand them *Welcome to College* bookmarked here. Morrow gives the doctrinal summary of the story, anyway. Here once again, clarity and brevity meets with completeness and orthodoxy.

Kudos to Morrow and his editors, not to mention all the fine teachers whose wisdom permeates the pages: Dallas Willard and William Lane Craig, Craig Hazen and Nancy Pearcey and many others. Simply refer to the endnotes and Further Reading sections at each chapters' end for a collection of apologetics

resources for the ages.

And don't forget to consider adding this book to your gift list for graduates and students at all levels. You may help a young person to understand Morrow's charge that:

> *God has already defined reality; it is our job to respond thoughtfully and engage it appropriately. Don't buy into the lie that you need to keep your Christian faith to yourself. It is personal, but not private. As a college student you have the opportunity to establish the biblical habit of living an integrated life for God's glory. In other words, think Christianly![{4}]*

Notes

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2. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (1995 Wheaton, IL: Crossway) p. 20ff.
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A President's Educational Choice

An Important Choice

With each presidential election Americans are called to

reflect upon public policy, ranging from military funding to education reform. Once the new president is chosen, everyone looks for evidence that he will move the federal bureaucracy in a direction favorable to their own agenda.

When it comes to education, President Obama has been difficult to figure out. In early speeches he seemed to favor dramatic reform. During the campaign he said:

> *We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform; where parents take responsibility for their children's success; where our schools and government are accountable for results; where we're recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers, and students are excited to learn because they're attending schools of the future; and where we expect all our children not only to graduate high school, but to graduate college and get a good paying job.{1}*

Later, Obama appeared to move closer to those who already hold sway over how our schools operate, especially the teachers unions. An indication of this trend was the sound of relief voiced by Marty Hittelman, president of the California Federation of Teachers, who said, "It's such a clear change from what we've had. . . . Someone who's friendly to labor. . . . Someone who wants to work with teachers."{2} Obama has also signaled encouragement to the unions by appointing a teacher-friendly Stanford University professor to lead his education transition team.

But sometimes personal action speaks louder than political appointments. Our new president has decided to send his two children, Malia Anne and Natasha, to a well known private school in Washington, D.C. The Obama children will attend Sidwell Friends School, a private Quaker affiliated school

that charges $29,000 a year per student. Some are criticizing the Obama family for not supporting the local public schools. As a supporter of educational freedom, and choice, I personally have no problem with the president choosing the best educational setting for his children. I would do the same.

What interests me is what this choice says about President Obama's thoughts regarding educational excellence. Sidwell Friends School violates key principles that the teachers unions and other public school supporters tell us are necessary elements for excellent schools, programs and policies that reformers insist taxpayers should be providing for every student in America.

Ensuring an adequate education for all of our children is a matter of justice that Christians should be concerned about. In what follows I will look at these so-called educational necessities the teachers unions and other public school supporters demand.

What Sidwell Needs

President Obama's decision to place his daughters in Sidwell reveals something about what he thinks it takes to provide a superior education. Choosing this expensive private school raises interesting questions about President Obama's support of what might be called the "common wisdom" that public school leaders and teachers unions tell us is necessary for good schools.

Much of the following was brought to my attention by Mike Antonucci who writes a monthly newsletter for those who are concerned about education in America and particularly the role that the unions play in shaping it. Antonucci points out six areas in which the Sidwell School might be seen as deficient by our leading reformers and especially by the teachers

unions.

According to the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the country, the first deficiency at Sidwell is obvious. On its web site the NEA argues that “the attainment and exercise of collective bargaining rights are essential to the promotion of education employee and student needs in society.”{3} In other words, the school simply must be unionized. How can Sidwell School hope to effectively educate students without a collective bargaining agreement? It boggles the mind to think that they can educate President Obama’s children without such necessities as union agency fees, binding arbitration, grievance procedures, and most important, teachers strikes!

How can real education occur in the absence of an angry battle between a well financed teachers union and a harried entrenched school administration? Can real learning happen in the absence of endless hours of negotiations over every aspect of the curriculum, the daily schedule, and teacher placement? Doesn’t the president know that a hostile, confrontational working environment actually improves the educational process?

In addition to this remarkable neglect, the Sidwell School forces its teachers to pay between ten and forty percent of their health care insurance premiums, contribute towards their own retirement plan, and almost unbelievably receive only two personal days off per school year. Barbaric! Everyone knows that teachers are only concerned about compensation and benefits and if they do not receive an amount above the median level paid out by other schools of similar size, they simply can’t function. These teachers are obviously being coerced to remain at this school. And to think that some have suggested that the opportunity to work with motivated students and supportive parents in building a strong learning community might be more important than financial rewards.

More Problems with Sidwell

A key ingredient missing from the Sidwell experience will be an appropriate level of diversity. To many, diversity has become the ultimate good in education. Millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent to create highly diverse student bodies across the nation. Without a high level of diversity, it's argued, students will not develop the necessary degree of tolerance, both for people and ideas, needed for our society to prosper or even exist into the future. A diversity deficit might result in the president's children coming to the frightening conclusion that truth itself isn't diverse and that perhaps we should not accept all ideas equally.

Although the Sidwell School has a significant level of diversity – thirty-nine percent of the students are part of an ethnic or racial minority group – Washington D. C. public schools are ninety-five percent ethnic and racial minorities. How can the president send his children to a learning environment that is so far behind the level of essential diversity prominent in our capitol's public schools? If some diversity is good, isn't more diversity better?

However, this deficit of diversity pales in comparison to the next problem. The Sidwell School is a Quaker institution. It has mandatory weekly worship meetings for all its students, including the president's children. This practice goes far beyond the legitimate academic objective of learning the history of religious traditions; it requires students to participate in a religious activity.

The official National Education Association's Web site makes it clear that "encouraging or compelling students to participate in any religious activity, such as prayer, during any type of holiday festivity or classroom activity is forbidden."{4} Now, if such activity is harmful to our public school students, does it make sense to expose the president's

children to them?

The NEA adds that while students may study various religious expressions and practices, they may do so "as long as schools make sure different faiths are represented in school-wide or classroom activities."{5} Does Sidwell promote Islamic or Wiccan worship? Is our president setting a good example by allowing his children to be taught in such an intolerant setting?

Sidwell's Curriculum

Here's another problem. It appears that Sidwell is kind of old fashioned when it comes to its curriculum. Its Web site says, "We believe that to be effective, education must be founded on secure mastery of basic skills . . . We place strong emphasis on reading, personal expression of ideas through speaking and writing, and the mastery of computational and problem solving skills. We also encourage scientific exploration, artistic creativity, physical activity, second language acquisition."{6} Basic skills? Mastery learning? Isn't this a throwback to the education of the nineteenth century?

In the middle school, Sidwell's history curriculum says that "Each history course is designed to provide students with a sound foundation of knowledge in a given subject area and to develop research, writing and interpretive skills."{7} To many modern educators, this focus on acquiring information and developing mastery of essential skills is reminiscent of educational policies that have been out of vogue for decades.

Professional educators tend to endorse something called the Progressive Education Movement. This movement emphasized a "naturalistic," "project-oriented," "hands-on," "critical-thinking" curriculum and "democratic" education policies endorsed by the philosopher John Dewey.{8} Beginning early in the twentieth century, educators challenged the emphasis on

subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the “tool” metaphor for learning.

The “tool” metaphor argues that students’ minds shouldn’t be filled with lots of facts, but instead should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something like this: “Since knowledge is growing so quickly – in fact it’s exploding – we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated.” Education historian Lawrence Cremin writes that our elementary schools have been dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.{9} The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called “intellectual capital,” an agreed upon set of necessary facts that all well educated people should possess.

The Sidwell School seems to believe that this so called intellectual capital is important. By stressing the acquisition of key information in its curriculum it is revealing a more traditional rather than progressive education. Can this antiquated curriculum possibly prepare the Obama children for the rapid changes of the twenty-first century?

Educational Excellence

It seems, then, that the Sidwell Friends School chosen by the Obama family for their daughters violates many of what is considered to be the “best practices” in the public school sector.

On the other hand, it represents many of the factors that we know make for a superior learning environment. Almost twenty years ago the Brookings Institution published a book that made a powerful argument regarding what makes for an effective school and what doesn’t.{10} The author’s conclusions were

really not that surprising. In a nutshell they found that bureaucracy kills, and if public schools are anything they are bureaucratic. In fact, the study argued that private schools are usually more effective simply because they have greater autonomy than public schools.

Exercising this autonomy begins with an educational leader. The role of a private school headmaster is often quite different from the public school equivalent, the principal. The headmaster has much more autonomy in fashioning the educational vision for his school as well as the authority for executing it. This includes shaping the curriculum and hiring and firing teachers based on their effectiveness and support for the school's program. In the end, private school leaders have much greater power to fashion the kind of educational community they envision than do public school administrators.

Private school leaders also enjoy the freedom to create a disciplined environment necessary for learning to occur. Because parents have freely chosen a private school for their children to attend, they have already bought into the way the school chooses to structure its students' time and how it deals with distractions to learning. Parents of private school children tend to be much more supportive of the school's teachers and administrators as a result. This is not to say that private schools always get it right when establishing a disciplined learning environment, but parents always have the option of pulling out if they become disenchanted with the program. This educational choice both empowers private schools and encourages change as well. Parents vote for the programs that work and take their funds elsewhere when they feel the school is not a good fit for their children. Successful schools are rewarded; others are encouraged to change.

Private schools succeed when the headmaster, teachers, parents, and children have worked together to create a learning community. As simple as this sounds, it can be life changing for the students involved. Even students from our

most challenging urban environments have benefitted from schools that have been freed from their bureaucratic straitjackets. If we hope to impact our most needy students in this country, we will do so by encouraging policies that increase the autonomy of school leaders and empower parents by giving them the kind of educational choice that President Obama enjoyed when deciding to send his children to the Sidwell Friends School.

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