

Fear and Its Remedies

All set for the next terrorist attack? Got your biohazard suit? How 'bout your gas mask, radiation detector and potassium iodide pills? A new store opened in Manhattan recently, only a few blocks from Ground Zero. "Safer America" markets personal safety products for a post-9/11 world.

Work in a high-rise? Have you considered a personal parachute? It comes in two models: the streamlined Executive Chute and the deluxe "HOPE" system (High Office Parachute Escape; opens automatically, good from heights over 100 feet, accommodates persons up to 300 pounds).

Safer America President Harvey Kushner takes a pragmatic approach to homeland security: "These products are no different than safety devices already commonplace in most homes, such as fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and first-aid kits. We are enabling people to alleviate their fears by doing something smart and productive: preparing to overcome that which they most fear."

Fears abound these days. CIA director George Tenet recently warned Congress that al-Qaida could attack at any time here or abroad. A sampler, from a guy who is privy to more intelligence data than most of us: "Based on what we have learned about the 11 September [attacks], an attempt to conduct another attack on U.S. soil is certain.

"You must make the analytical judgment that the possibility exists that people are planning to attack you inside the United States—multiple simultaneous attacks. We are the enemy, we're the people they want to hurt inside this country," Tenet said.

As Tenet spoke, the nation was still on alert code yellow—"significant risk of terrorist attacks"—because officials had no specific details about time and location of

possible attacks. Frightening times. How should we deal with fear?

We trust military and law enforcement to keep us safe from harm. But we can never completely prepare for every risk in life. And eventually life will end for each of us. What then?

Besides taking reasonable precautions, might it also be worth considering something deeper as an ultimate solution to fear? An Israeli shepherd who became a king knew dangers from wild beasts and wild political enemies who sought his life.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” he wrote. “I have everything I need. Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you [God] are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.”

A descendant of this king, Jesus of Nazareth, offered similar advice to His friends: “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God,” He taught. God loves people, values them and saves a spot in eternity for those who trust Him.

It’s hard to turn on the news these days without finding cause for fear: terrorism, snipers and financial woes augment personal concerns about relationships, family and job future. Maybe it’s time to look more closely toward One who can calm fears and who holds the future in His hands.

Laugh a Little: It’s Good For Your Health

Had a good laugh recently? Need one?

Stressful days can invite comic relief. Doctors realize that laughter can enhance physical and mental health. Now it seems even looking forward to laughter can be good for you.

WebMD reports that Lee Berk, MD, a University of California Irvine medical professor, and his associates have for years investigated how moods affect immune systems and illness. They've found laughter has a role in fighting viruses, bacteria, cancer and heart disease.

Stress can hamper your immune system; a good chuckle can help. Berk found earlier that watching a one-hour humorous video reduced stress hormone secretion and helped the immune system counter viruses and bacteria.

But there's more: Berk now says the mere anticipation of laughing can help. He studied ten men, measured their stress signs, and told them that in about three days they would see a humorous video. In each man, spirits lifted before viewing the video.

Two days before the viewing, depression was down 51 percent, confusion 36 percent, anger 19 percent, fatigue 15 percent and tension 9 percent. Right after the viewing, depression and anger were both down 98 percent, fatigue 87 percent, confusion 75 percent and tension 61 percent.

Berk feels anticipating humor brightens life and affects health. He calls this influence the "biology of hope." Berk says, "Positive anticipation of humor starts the ball rolling in a sense, in which moods begin to change in ways that help the body fight illness. We believe this shows that even anticipation can be used to help patients recover from a wide range of disorders."

Moral: Planning humor can benefit your health. Watch a funny movie, spend time with humorous people. Tell your boss, professor, clergy or club chairperson to liven up their speeches a bit if they want healthy employees, students, or

members. Put laugh-breaks on your calendar, since anticipation is part of the therapy.

A Jewish proverb observes, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Paul, a first-Century follower of Jesus, emphasized hope: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope. . . ." Those biblical writers have some good advice now and then, practical stuff for everyday life.

The other day, a friend sent what he claimed were comments from federal employee performance evaluations. Maybe because I've encountered a groundswell of administrivia-creating bureaucrats recently, some of the remarks left me roaring. . . and feeling much better. With apologies to the many capable federal workers, know anyone like this?

"Since my last report, this employee has reached rock bottom and has started to dig."

"I would not allow this employee to breed."

"This young lady has delusions of adequacy."

"He sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them."

"Got a full 6-pack, but lacks the plastic thing to hold it all together."

Those biblical writers would probably tell me to pray for those who hassle me, advice I should heed. But this laughter-break lifted my spirits and got me going again.

So, laugh more. You'll like it. And say, have you heard the one about. . . ?

Romantic Hyperbole: A Humorous Look at Honesty in Love

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

It would be a great way to express my enduring affection for my wife. I would find seven romantic birthday cards and give one to Meg each day for a week, starting on her birthday. It would continue a sweet tradition begun before we married.

Each card would have a simple picture that would tenderly convey our feelings for one another. Inside would be an endearing slogan or affirmation to which I would add a personal expression of my love for her.

I didn't foresee that Day Three would bring an ethical dilemma.

I carefully selected the cards and arranged them in an appropriate sequence. Day One showed a cute puppy with a pink rose. Inside: "You're the one I love."

Day Two featured a picture of a little boy and girl in a meadow with their arms over each other's shoulders. The slogan: "Happy Birthday to my favorite playmate."

Day Three depicted a beautiful tropical sunset: bluish pink sky, vast ocean, silhouetted palm trees. You could almost feel the balmy breeze. Inside: "Paradise is anywhere with you", to which I added personal mention of places holding special memories for us: an island vacation spot, a North Carolina hotel, our home.

I completed the remaining cards, dated the envelopes, and planned to bestow one card each morning of her birth week. Then reality happened.

You see, I had agreed to go camping with her for Days One and Two. Camping is something Meg thrives on—outdoor living, clean air, hiking, camp fires. It's in her blood. Camping is something I did in Boy Scouts—dust, mosquitoes, noisy campers, smelly latrines. It ranks just below root canals on my list of favorites.

We camped at a state park only fifteen minutes from our home. On her birthday morning, she liked the fluffy puppy. Day Two, the cute kids made her smile. So far, so good.

Meanwhile, I was tolerating camping, doing my best to keep my attitude positive. The food was OK; the bugs were scarce. After two days, I was ready to go home as planned. Meg wanted to stay an extra day. We each got our wish.

Once home and alone, I pulled out Meg's card for "Day Three," the one with the tropical sunset and the "paradise is anywhere with you" slogan.

Should I give her the card? I had chosen to leave the campground. "But," I reasoned with myself, "the slogan was true lots of the time."

I settled on a compromise, a post-it note on the envelope explaining, "You may find that this card contains just a bit of romantic hyperbole."

Might giving it a clever-sounding label defuse my hypocrisy?

The echoes of her laughter still reverberate through our home. I got off easy.

"Speak the truth to each other," wrote a Jewish sage. "Speak. . . the truth in love," advocated a first-century biblical writer. Wise advice for just about any relationship.

“Romantic hyperbole” has become a humorous gauge of truthfulness in our relationship, a test for honesty. Neither of us enjoys every location on earth. She feels some sporting events are a waste of time. I can get bored at shopping malls. But as long as we are honest with each other about our feelings, the bond seems to grow stronger.

That’s no hyperbole.

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Anxious for Nothing (radio transcript)

What Makes You Anxious?

What makes you feel anxious? What do you worry about? Finances? Conflict at work or with your neighbors? Making today’s appointment on time? Perhaps your family or your health.

Anxiety seems everywhere these days. September 11th brought fears of flying and of the mail. Homeland security alerts have raised tensions.

A necessary war with an uncertain future can make stomachs churn. An unpredictable economy can affect bank balances, business plans, education, and retirement.

One bright sign: In the wake of the terrorist attacks, pizza sales were up. Have you ever used pizza as comfort food?

“Death is the only joy, and the only release.” “Contrary to

popular belief, there is no hope.” These anonymous statements from a university newspaper and classroom blackboard exhibit what psychologists call “existential anxiety,” concern over frustration with a meaningless existence.

When I was a junior at Duke University, I wrote a paper for an abnormal psychology class investigating a biblical therapy for anxiety. I had come to faith as a freshman and found it brought me peace of mind. While studying psychology, I was fascinated to see that complex psychological disorders often stem from simple problems like anxiety, problems for which faith offers practical solutions.

I sent a copy of my paper to the author of our textbook, a prominent UCLA psychologist. A month later, he replied that he liked the paper and asked permission to quote from it in the revision to his text.

I picked my jaw up off the floor and said “By all means!” Actually, the first thing I did was send a copy of his letter to my parents in Miami so they would know their son had not gone off the deep end with my involvement in a campus Christian group. (They were beginning to wonder.)

This professor’s response to the paper indicated that the principles it contains – which certainly were not original with me – had both academic and personal relevance.

Anxiety has many causes, including emotional struggles, relationship deficiencies, aimlessness, poor diet or exercise, and chemical or hormonal imbalance. In this short essay, we will consider

three possible causes: guilt, fear, and lack of friendship. And we will consider a solution to each cause that very well could make a difference in your life.

Have you felt guilty recently? Let us look at guilt, a significant cause of anxiety.

Guilty or Not Guilty?

Guilt can make you feel anxious.

What makes you feel guilty? Losing your temper? Shading the truth? Maybe taking office supplies from your employer? Cheating on your income tax return? Cheating on your spouse?

Some psychologists say that feelings of guilt come from unresolved past conflicts or from following outdated moral codes. Solutions in these views involve recognizing our past problems or relaxing our moral codes.

Of course, past problems can affect us. And many people follow overly rigid behavior codes. But should we also consider that sometimes – maybe often – people feel guilty because they are guilty?

Admitting you are wrong can be hard. Perhaps you've heard of the writer who asked his domineering editor if he had ever been wrong. "Yes," replied the editor. "I was wrong once. It was when I thought I was wrong but I wasn't."

O. H. Mowrer, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, pointed out a common dilemma for people trying to face their own shortcomings:

Here, too, we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until first they acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgement unless he has "already changed." In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego "insult," and one must have a new source of strength to endure it.[{1}](#)

A biblical perspective offers a new source of strength. The biblical God loves humans and wants our happiness. We all blow it at times, by harmful actions or unhealthy attitudes, and miss His standards. One follower of Jesus outlined what he saw

as God's solution: "God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."[{2}](#)

If I had a traffic fine that I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. Similarly, Christ paid the penalty due our sins through His death on the cross. He offers us new life when we personally trust Him to forgive us. One early believer wrote, "God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins."[{3}](#) When we feel guilty, we can admit our sin to God and He will forgive us.[{4}](#)

Take it from a guilty person: being forgiven is wonderful. And the complete forgiveness – freedom from guilt – that Jesus offers is free.

Fear is another cause of anxiety; let us look at that next.

What's Your Greatest Fear?

What do you fear most? Confrontation? Maybe financial loss or abandonment? Your stomach, neck and shoulders tense up; your heart races; your mouth becomes like cotton and your breath gets short. Anxiety strikes.

Fear of death is perhaps humans' greatest fear. In college, the student living next door to me was struck and killed by lightning. Shock gripped our fraternity house. "What does it mean if life can be snuffed out in an instant?" my friends asked.

If you cannot answer the question "What will happen when you die?" you may become anxious.

Fear of circumstances – from the trivial to the traumatic – can bring anxiety. Once at a bookseller's convention my wife and I had spent an exhausting day on our feet promoting a new book. Late that night, after a reception crowd had thinned to mostly authors and our publisher, we stood in a circle engaged

in conversation. I left her side momentarily to attend to a matter.

Upon returning to the circle, I walked up behind my wife and began gently to massage her shoulders. She seemed to enjoy that, so I started to put my arms around her waist to give her a little hug. At that point, I looked up at the other side of the circle and saw . . . my wife. I had my hands on the wrong woman!

In that instant, I knew the true meaning of fear. Fear of circumstances. Even fear of death.

Is there a solution to fear? Jesus of Nazareth said He could replace fear with peace: "I am leaving you with a gift," He told His followers, "peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid."[{5}](#)

For fear of death, He offers eternal life. He told a worried friend, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me . . . are given eternal life . . . and will never perish."[{6}](#)

Faith can help allay circumstantial fear. Believing that I am in God's hands has helped keep me calm.

Or maybe I should say calmer. My life is not fear-free. I have even become anxious about speaking on anxiety! I can be fearful over an important project, a deadline or a strained relationship. Having God as a friend has not eliminated fear, but when fear comes I know whose hand to hold.

Speaking of friendship, lack of it can also make you anxious. We will look at that next.

A Little Help from Your Friends

William Glasser, a psychiatrist, says we all experience two

basic needs: the need to love and to be loved and the need to feel a sense of worth to ourselves and to others. To satisfy these needs he recommends developing a close friendship with another person who will accept us but also confront us if we act irresponsibly.{7}

We all need close friends.

1996 was a terrible year for me. My wife of 20 years, whom I loved dearly and continue to respect, divorced me. Some trusted coworkers turned against me. I had a cancer scare. (It turned out to be kidney stones, but it still was no fun.)

Divorce hurts. Imagine the pain of the worst spat you have ever had with a friend or spouse, multiplied by a trillion. I felt like an emotional Roto Rooter was reaming me out. I cried buckets.

In the midst of my pain, several wonderful friends held my hand. They would invite me to eat or to attend a sporting event. They listened. They called to see how I was doing. They prayed for me. They sat with me in divorce court. I learned through them what true friendship can mean. They helped me to survive this tragedy and to land on my feet. I am eternally grateful.

Good friends are very important. But human friendship, necessary as it is, is still fallible. People can let us down and make mistakes in judgment. Wouldn't the ultimate in therapy consist in becoming involved with our creator? The biblical documents say that God is "faithful and righteous." {8} He never lets us down and He always has the best advice. He loves us, so much that He would send His son to die for us.

Paul, a prolific ancient writer and speaker, wrote of the depths of God's love:

I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his

love. Death can't, and life can't. . . . Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."[{9}](#)

Wouldn't it be great to have a friend like that?

Faith in God can help treat causes of anxiety like guilt, fear, and friendship-deficiency. But could faith be just a psychological trick?

Is Christianity Just a Psychological Trick?

In this article, I have claimed that God can treat several causes of anxiety such as guilt, fear and lack of friendship. You might wonder, "So what? The Christian faith could just be a psychological trick."

Sigmund Freud taught that Christian faith was merely an illusion driven by wish fulfillment, a fairy tale invented by needy humans to satisfy their emotional needs for security.

Is Jesus' belief system an illusion? Consider three issues.

First, consider the object of the Christian's faith. As somewhat of a skeptic, I was surprised to learn that the evidence for Jesus' deity, His resurrection, and the prophecies He fulfilled make a strong case for the validity of His claims.[{10}](#) The fact that Christian faith can be described in psychological terms does not negate its validity. Examine the object of any faith. If the object is valid, we would expect the faith to have practical benefits.

Second, human personality alone cannot explain all faith-related behavior. Our personalities have intellect, emotion,

and will. Many psychologists believe the will cannot completely control the emotions.[{11}](#) Nor is it likely that the intellect could completely control our emotions. Yet many followers of Jesus have suffered humiliation, beatings, torture, cruelty, and death but still have loved their enemies and forgiven their persecutors. Something beyond human personality seems at work here.

Third, the Book in which Jesus' solutions to anxiety are recorded has unusual credentials. Written over a period of 1,500 years, in three languages and by 40 different authors (most of whom never met), the biblical documents are thematically coherent, internally consistent and historically accurate.[{12}](#) Completed more than 1,900 years ago, the Bible continues to provide workable therapy for millions. A book with these credentials bears a closer look.

This article on anxiety started with a college paper that the author of our textbook found intriguing. This professor told me he lacked personal peace and wanted to know God personally. I showed him a simple four-point outline and he invited Jesus to forgive him and to be his friend. An internationally acclaimed scholar linked up with, if you will, the greatest psychologist.

Anxiety plagues millions of us. God offers genuine peace. Is that worth considering?

Notes

1. O. H. Mowrer, "Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils," quoted in Henry R. Brandt, *The Struggle for Peace*, (Wheaton IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1965).
2. 2 Corinthians 5:21, NLT.
3. Colossians 1:14, NLT.
4. 1 John 1:9.
5. John 14:27, NLT.
6. John 11:25-26, NLT.

7. William Glasser, MD, *Reality Therapy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
8. 1 John 1:9.
9. Romans 8:38-39, NLT.
10. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).
11. S.I. McMillen, MD, *None of These Diseases*, (Old Tappen NJ: Fleming H. Revell Publishers, 1968), 77.
12. McDowell, *New Evidence*.

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Stressed Out? You Might Need Sleep

Feeling irritable lately? You might need more sleep.

Snapping at your kids or spouse, stewing in checkout lines, shouting at road hogs . . . cultural negativity abounds. A recent National Sleep Foundation (NSF) poll suggests links between sleep deficiencies and negative attitudes and behavior.

Over one-third of respondents said they are sleepy during daytime at least a few days monthly. Those who slept under six hours on weeknights reported tiredness, stress and sadness more than eight-hour sleepers did. In general, sleepy people reported more dissatisfaction and anger while better sleepers said they were “full of energy,” “relaxed” and “happy.”

The NSF detects what may be a possible trend toward declining sleep and claims that as many as 47 million sleepy adults may

be at risk for injury, health problems, even overeating. NSF Executive Director Richard L. Gelula notes that, "Some of the problems we face as a society—from road rage to obesity – may be linked to lack of sleep or poor sleep."

I'll bet that's why just recently, two inconsiderate drivers blew their horns at me in sticky traffic situations. At least I thought they were inconsiderate. In retrospect, I probably could have been more careful. Their angry horns brought feelings of surprise, shock, tension and a bit of anger. Perhaps we all needed more sleep.

Fatigue can hamper coping and make life seem gloomy. But emotional stress can also hamper sleep. The NSF found this especially true after September 11. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington saw reported sleep problems rise. Respondents claimed stress or anxiety as chief causes, citing fear, depression and nightmares as well.

Sleeplessness influences stress, and anxiety influences sleeplessness. How to break the vicious circle?

Admitting your sleep needs can be a start. NSF spokesman and University of Minnesota neurology professor Mark Mahowald, MD, told WebMD that some see sleep deprivation as a "badge of honor." "We never brag about how much sleep we get," he notes. "We only brag when we get too little sleep."

NSF president James Walsh recommends scheduling "worry time" during the day to consider troublesome issues and plan to resolve them. Then when worries shout for your attention at bedtime, knowing you already have an action plan can bring comfort.

Developing inner stability can enhance personal peace. One ancient Jewish king thought he had it all. Wealth, power and pleasures were his to enjoy. But in the end it all brought him pain. As he reflected on his life, he concluded that strengthening spiritual roots was essential to contentment.

“The reverence of the Lord leads to life,” he wrote, “So that one may sleep satisfied.” He felt that faith even had implications for work:

“Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is useless. Unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to his loved ones.”

Workaholics take heed: Get more sleep. Your family and coworkers may thank you. You might become happier, safer, saner, even thinner. And consider that—just maybe—knowing and following the One who makes life possible might help bring you pleasant dreams.

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Civility

We are living in the midst of an epidemic of rudeness and desperately need civility. Kerby Anderson looks at the rise of incivility and documents its effects in society, education, and politics. He concludes by providing a biblical framework for civility.

The Rise of Incivility

We seem to be living in the midst of an epidemic of rudeness. Articles in the newspaper document the number of incidents of road rage. And if you doubt that, just try to merge onto a busy freeway and see how many drivers honk their horn or try to cut you off.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. A 1997 American

Automobile Association report documents a sharp rise in the use of cars as weapons (people trying to run over other people on purpose). A Colorado funeral director complains about impatient drivers darting in and out of funeral processions. Instead of waiting for the procession to pass, they threaten life and limb while ignoring both law and tradition in their rush to get somewhere.

Rudeness seems to be at an all-time high in airports. There is the story of the man who was angry at missing a flight connection and threw his suitcase at an eight-month pregnant airline employee. Or there is the story of the woman who learned that there were no sandwiches on her flight and punched the flight attendant and pushed her to the floor. And there is the tragic story of the man who rushed the cockpit and had to be restrained. In the process of stopping him, the passengers apparently used too much force and killed him.

Cursing and vulgar language are on the increase. Character assassination and negative political advertisements are up. Meanwhile, charitable giving seems to be on the decline along with volunteerism.

No wonder so many are talking about the need for civility. George W. Bush's inaugural speech talked about "a new commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character. America, at its best, matches a commitment to principle with a concern for civility."

Commentators are wringing their hands over our social distress. Former education secretary and virtues guru William Bennett has addressed the issue of civility. Gertrude Himmelfarb has written about *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, has devoted a book to the problem, as has Yale Law professor Stephen Carter.

Newspapers are running stories asking, "Why are we so rude?" *U.S. News and World Report* talks about "The American Uncivil Wars." [\[1\]](#) They conclude that "Crude, Rude and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners."

So in this article I will be addressing this very important concept of civility. In a sense, it is a second installment on a previous article I wrote on [integrity](#). If integrity is the standard we use to judge our own moral development, then civility is the standard we use to judge our moral interaction with others.

As we will see, the rules of civility are ultimately the rules of morality, which are rooted in biblical morality.

The Moral Basis of Civility

The word *civilité* shares the same etymology with words like *civilized* and *civilization*. Quite simply, the root word means to be "a member of the household." Just as there are certain rules that allow family members to live peacefully within a household, so there are rules of civility that allow us to live peacefully within a society. We have certain moral responsibilities to one another.

While there have been many philosophical discussions on what civility is and how it should be practiced, I believe Jesus simply expressed the goal of civility when he taught that, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). If we truly love our neighbors, then we should be governed by moral standards that express concern for others and limit our own freedom.

Perhaps that is why civility is on the decline. More and more people live for themselves and do not feel they are morally accountable to anyone (even God) for their actions or behavior. We are told to "Look Out for #1," and not to let anyone limit our freedom to be ourselves.

Civility also acknowledges the value of another person. Politeness and manners are not merely to make social life easier. Stephen Carter, in his book on *Civility*, says that our actions and sacrifice are a

. . .[S]ignal of respect for our fellow citizens, marking them as full equals, both before the law and before God. Rules of civility are thus also rules of morality; it is morally proper to treat our fellow citizens with respect, and morally improper not to. Our crisis of civility is part of a larger crisis of morality.[\[2\]](#)

Again, this may help answer why civility is on the decline. An increasing majority in our society no longer believes in moral absolutes. These deny that absolutes of any kind exist, much less moral absolutes. So as our crisis of morality unfolds, so does barbarism and decadence. Civility is what is lost from society.

If this is so, then the rise of rudeness and incivility cannot be easily altered. Miss Manners and others have written books about how our nation can regain its civility. But if the crisis is greater than a lack of manners (and I believe that it is), its solution must be found in a greater social change than merely teaching manners or character. Ultimately, an increase in civility must flow out of a moral and religious change. Spiritual revival and reformation are the ultimate solutions to the current problem of incivility. And I believe Christians should lead the way by exemplary behavior. In essence, Christians must be the best citizens and the best examples of civility in society.

Civility in the Schools

We have documented the rising incivility in our society. What is so tragic is to find that our children are mimicking the incivility of the adult world. A poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals found that

89 percent of grade school teachers and principals reported that they “regularly” face abusive language from students.[{3}](#)

Contrast this situation with the nature of public education just a few decades ago. It is likely that when you grew up, you were instructed in manners and etiquette. The day began with the pledge of allegiance to the flag, and throughout the day you were instructed to show respect to your country and to your teachers.

Today when schools try to teach manners, parents and civil libertarians often thwart those plans. And when a school does succeed in teaching civility, the story becomes headline news; as it was when *U.S. News and World Report* opened its account on “The American Uncivil Wars” with a story of a school that was actually trying to teach manners.[{4}](#)

Consider what would have happened a few decades ago if you misbehaved at school. Your teacher or your principal would have disciplined you. And when you arrived home, your parents would have assumed you were disciplined for good reason. They probably would have punished you again. Now contrast that with today’s parents who are quick to challenge the teacher or principal and are often quick to threaten with a lawsuit.

When I was growing up there seemed to be a conspiracy of the adults against the kids. Every parent and every teacher had the same set of moral values. So if I misbehaved at Johnny’s house, I knew that Johnny’s mother had the same set of rules as my mother. If I misbehaved at school, I knew my teachers had the same set of rules as my parents.

Today that moral consensus is gone. If anything, we have a conspiracy of the kids against the adults. Most kids spend lots of time telling their parents what *other* parents let their kids do. We have sunk to the least common denominator in our morality.

To rebuild civility in our society, we need to begin with the

next generation. Sadly they are not learning to respect authority. They are learning to disrespect authority and to play one set of parental values against another. And parents must begin to trust a teacher's authority. My parents trusted the teachers and the school to enforce the rules appropriately. Trust and respect are two essential ingredients in rebuilding a foundation of civility.

Civility in Politics

Often when we talk about the need for civility, we focus on the political arena. Character assassination and negative political advertisements are on the increase. Many commentators lament what they call the "politics of personal destruction." And savvy candidates have tried to tap into this growing concern by calling for greater civility in our public discourse.

At the outset, we should acknowledge that politics has always been a dirty business. More than two centuries ago, the founders of this country often had harsh and critical things to say about each other during political campaigns. Yet we also have some very positive examples of civil discussions of major social ills.

According to Stephen Carter in his book *Civility*, one shining example of this is the Civil Rights Movement. "The leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) knew that the protests would be met with violence, because they were challenging a violently oppressive system. But they also knew that success would be found not through incivility, but through the display of moral courage."

Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders trained their protestors to remain civil and even loving in the face of repression. He called this the "process of purification," and it "involved both prayer and repeated reminders that the Biblical injunction to love our neighbors is not a command to

love only the nice ones.” It’s instructive to remember that the stated purpose of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was “to save the soul of the nation.”

Those of us involved in social action today should be mindful of this as we fight against social ills in our society. I firmly believe that Christians should be good citizens and models of civility. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be passionate about trying to rectify social problems. And we can disagree with those who do not hold to a biblical view of morality. But we should learn to disagree without being disagreeable. We should make our case with logic and compassion. And I believe we will be more successful if we do so.

Consider the abortion debate. A majority of citizens have a great deal of ambivalence about abortion. They do not feel good about abortion on demand, but they also fear what might happen if abortion was totally banned in this country. Will we attract these millions of people by being angry, vociferous Bible-thumpers? Or will we attract them by being thoughtful, compassionate Christians who demonstrate our love for both mother and child at crisis pregnancy centers? I think the answer should be obvious, and that is the power of civility in the public arena.

Civility: A Biblical Framework

At the heart of civility is the biblical command to love your neighbor as yourself. While it is relatively easy to love people who are your friends or people who are nice to you, the real test of Christian love comes when we are with strangers or with people who are not civil to you. When we find ourselves in the presence of strangers, we should treat them with dignity and respect even if they are not civil to us. Even if they are not gracious toward us, we should not repay them with incivility. Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Our duty to be civil to others should not depend on whether we like them or agree with their moral or political perspectives. They may be disagreeable, and we are free to disagree with them, but we should do so by giving grace. Often such a gentle response can change a discussion or dialogue. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that, "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

Civility also requires humility. A civil person acknowledges that he or she does not possess all wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, one should listen to others and consider the possibility that they might be right and that he is wrong. Philippians 2:3 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."

Civility also requires that we watch what we say. The Bible clearly warns us of the danger of the tongue (James 3:5-8). We should work to cleanse our language of harsh, critical, and condemning words. We should rid ourselves of nasty and vulgar language. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear."

If Christians want to reform society and return to civility, one excellent model is William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Most people know Wilberforce as the man who brought an end to the British slave trade. He served for half a century in the House of Commons. And led by his Christian faith, he tirelessly worked for the abolition of slavery. But that was only one of the "two great objects" of his life. The other, even more daunting was his attempt to transform the civil and moral climate of his times. Although he is known as an abolitionist, the other great accomplishment of his life was in the reformation of manners.

I believe he provides a positive example of how Christians should engage the world. We should do so with courage,

compassion, character, and civility.

Notes

1. John Marks, "The American Uncivil Wars: How Crude, Ruse and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners and Why That Hurts Our Politics and Culture," *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 April 1996, 66-72.
2. Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 11.
3. Antonia Barber, "Rough Language Plagues Schools, Educators Say," *USA Today*, 11 March 1997, 6D.
4. Marks, "The American Uncivil Wars," 66.
5. Carter, *Civility*, 28.

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Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Got lingering anger, stress or high blood pressure? You may need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself).

That's the conclusion of an increasing number of social scientists. Religion has long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. A recent *Christianity Today* article outlined secular research that also supports its personal and societal benefits.

Thirty years ago, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harndon searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the

academic digest Psychological Abstracts. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar "Campaign for Forgiveness Research" (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu are among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harndon says forgiveness "releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer and other psychosomatic illnesses."

He's big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, recently, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

University of Wisconsin psychologist Robert Enright and his colleagues discovered that "forgiveness education" may have helped college students who felt their parental love reservoirs were low to develop "improved psychological health." Self-esteem and hope increased while anxiety decreased.

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies, racial and ethnic bigots. If offense leads to resentment and resentment grows to bitterness, then anger, explosion and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation and restoration can follow.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton, an African-American, was bitter toward whites. Bo, who was white, called himself a "Christian" but seemed a hypocrite for his disdain for blacks. One day in an Atlanta civil rights event in the late 1960s, Bo and his buddies assaulted Norton by clobbering him with sandbags. Animosity ran deep.

Several months later, my roommate spoke with Norton about faith and knowing God personally. Norton placed his faith in Jesus and believed he was forgiven. He experienced what Paul, a first-century believer, described in the New Testament: "...Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"

Meanwhile, Bo began to realize his hypocrisy and placed God back in the "drivers seat" of his life. Three years after the assault, Nort and Bo unsuspectingly encountered each other at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into transparency and forgiveness. By week's end they were publicly expressing their love for each other as brothers.

Earlier this year, Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel sang Germany's praises for observing remembrance for Holocaust victims. But he urged the German parliament to go farther, to seek forgiveness for the Third Reich's behavior. "We desperately want to have hope for the new century," he declared. Recently German President Johannes Rau asked the Israeli Knesset for forgiveness for the Holocaust and pledged to fight anti-Semitism in Europe.

Forgiveness can be contagious. It can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

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Integrity – A Christian

Virtue

Kerby Anderson helps us understand the true meaning and importance of the Christian virtue of integrity. From a biblical worldview perspective, integrity is a critical element of a Christ centered life. Understanding integrity will help us incorporate it in our daily walk with Jesus Christ.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Integrity and the Bible

The subject of this article is the concept of integrity—a character quality that we often talk about but don’t see quite as regularly in the lives of public officials or even in the lives of the people we live and work with.

The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and implies a wholeness of person. Just as we would talk about a whole number, so also we can talk about a whole person who is undivided. A person of integrity is living rightly, not divided, nor being a different person in different circumstances. A person of integrity is the same person in private that he or she is in public.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about those who were “pure in heart” (Matt. 5:8), implying an undividedness in following God’s commands. Integrity, therefore, not only implies an undividedness, but a moral purity as well.

The Bible is full of references to integrity, character, and moral purity. Consider just a few Old Testament references to integrity. In 1 Kings 9:4, God instructs Solomon to walk with “integrity of heart and uprightness” as his father did. David says in 1 Chronicles 29:17, “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity.” And in Psalm 78:70-72

we read that “David shepherded them with integrity of heart, with skillful hands.”

The book of Proverbs provides an abundance of verses on integrity. Proverbs 10:9 says that, “He who walks in integrity walks securely, But he who perverts his ways will be found out.” A person of integrity will have a good reputation and not have to fear that he or she will be exposed or found out. Integrity provides a safe path through life.

Proverbs 11:3 says, “The integrity of the upright will guide them, But the falseness of the treacherous will destroy them.” Proverbs is a book of wisdom. The wise man or woman will live a life of integrity, which is a part of wisdom. Those who follow corruption or falsehood will be destroyed by the decisions and actions of their lives.

Proverbs 20:7 says, “A righteous man who walks in his integrity; How blessed are his sons after him.” Integrity leaves a legacy. A righteous man or woman walks in integrity and provides a path for his or her children to follow.

All of these verses imply a sense of duty and a recognition that we must have a level of discernment of God’s will in our lives. That would certainly require that people of integrity be students of the Word, and then diligently seek to apply God’s Word to their lives. The book of James admonishes us to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). That is my goal in this article as we talk about integrity.

Corruption

As we examine integrity, I would like to talk about its opposite: corruption. We claim to be a nation that demands integrity, but do we really? We say we want politicians to be honest, but really don’t expect them to be; perhaps because often we aren’t as honest as we should be. We say that we are

a nation of laws, but often we break some of those same laws—like speed limits and jaywalking— and try to justify our actions.

A powerful illustration can be found in the book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, by James Patterson and Peter Kim.[\[1\]](#) Using a survey technique that guaranteed the privacy and anonymity of the respondents, they were able to document what Americans really believe and do. The results were startling.

First, they found there was no moral authority in America. “Americans are making up their own moral codes. Only 13 percent of us believe in all the Ten Commandments. Forty percent of us believe in five of the Ten Commandments. We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect.”

Second, they found Americans are not honest. “Lying has become an integral part of American culture, a trait of the American character. We lie and don’t even think about it. We lie for no reason.” The authors estimate that 91 percent of us lie regularly.

Third, marriage and family are no longer sacred institutions. “While we still marry, we have lost faith in the institution of marriage. A third of married men and women confessed to us that they’ve had at least one affair. Thirty percent aren’t really sure that they still love their spouse.”

Fourth, they found that the “Protestant [work] ethic is long gone from today’s American workplace. Workers around America frankly admit that they spend more than 20 percent (7 hours a week) of their time at work totally goofing off. That amounts to a four-day work week across the nation.”

The authors conclude by suggesting that we have a new set of commandments for America:

- I don't see the point in observing the Sabbath (77 percent).
- I will steal from those who won't really miss it (74 percent).
- I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn't cause any real damage (64 percent).
- I will cheat on my spouse; after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same (53 percent).
- I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one full day in every five (50 percent).

We may say that we are a nation that wants integrity, but apparently a majority of us lack it in our own personal lives.

The Traits of Integrity

Honesty

I would now like to turn our focus toward four key traits found in a person of integrity. One of those traits is honesty.

We talked about some of the findings from the book *The Day America Told the Truth*. The authors found that nearly everyone in America lies and does so on a fairly regular basis. Truth telling apparently is no longer a virtue people try to adopt for their lives. We may say we want people to tell the truth, but we don't do it ourselves.

That is the problem with corruption; it is corrosive. We believe we can be dishonest just a little bit. We say we want people to be honest, but then we cheat on our taxes. We say we want people to obey the laws, but then we go "just a little" over the speed limit. We want to be honest just enough to ease our conscience.

It's a little like the story of the man who sent a letter to the Internal Revenue Service. He said, "I cheated on my income taxes, and felt so bad that I couldn't sleep. Enclosed find a

check for \$150. And if I still can't sleep I'll send the rest of what I owe."

Many of us can relate to that man. We want to be honest, but sometimes we find it easier to be dishonest. So we try to find a way to compromise our values so that a little bit of lying doesn't bother our conscience.

Trustworthiness

Another characteristic of a person of integrity is trustworthiness. A person of integrity is unimpeachable. He or she stands by principles no matter what the consequences. A person of integrity realizes there are moral absolutes even in a world of relative values.

In Tom Clancy's novel, *Clear and Present Danger*, Jack Ryan is about the only noble character in the book. As he begins to uncover this clandestine government plot, he is confronted by the antagonist who makes fun of Jack Ryan's principles. He says, "You're a boy scout, Jack. Don't you get it? It's all grey. It's all grey."

I wonder how often people of integrity hear a similar statement in corporate board rooms or the halls of government. It's all grey. There are no absolute right and wrong values. It's all relative.

A person of integrity knows that it isn't all grey. There are principles worth standing by and promoting. There are values that should govern our lives. We have a responsibility to follow God's law rather than the crowd.

When the book of Proverbs talks of the "integrity of the upright" it implies that we adhere to God's will and God's laws. We have a duty to obey God's absolute commands in our lives and become men and women of integrity.

"Private" Life

There is a popular book on the market entitled, *Who You Are When Nobody's Looking*. Who are you when nobody's looking? Will I see the same person that I see when you are in a group of people? Do you do the right thing no matter what the circumstances?

There was a newspaper story years ago about a man in Long Beach who went into a KFC to get some chicken for himself and the young lady with him. She waited in the car while he went in to pick up the chicken. Inadvertently the manager of the store handed the guy the box in which he had placed the financial proceeds of the day instead of the box of chicken. You see, he was going to make a deposit and had camouflaged it by putting the money in a fried chicken box.

The fellow took his box, went back to the car, and the two of them drove away. When they got to the park and opened the box, they discovered they had a box full of money. Now that was a very vulnerable moment for the average individual. However, realizing the mistake, he got back into the car and returned to the place and gave the money back to the manager. Well, the manager was elated! He was so pleased that he told the young man, "Stick around, I want to call the newspaper and have them take your picture. You're the most honest guy in town.

"Oh, no, don't do that!" said the fellow.

"Why not?" asked the manager.

"Well," he said, "you see, I'm married, and the woman I'm with is not my wife."[\[2\]](#)

Apparently he had not considered the consequences of his actions. Even when he was doing something right, it turned out he was also doing something wrong. A person of integrity is integrated and authentic. There is no duplicity of attitudes and actions.

When the apostle Paul lists the qualifications for an elder in

the church, he says “he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:7). This is not only a desirable quality for church elders, it is a quality we should all aspire to. Christians should be “above reproach” in their public testimony before the watching world.

In the next section we will talk more about the importance of a public testimony of integrity and conclude our study.

Public Testimony

I would like to conclude our discussion by addressing the importance of integrity in our daily lives.

It’s been said that we may be the only Bible some people ever read. In other words, people around us often judge the truthfulness of Christianity by its affect in our lives. If they see us as hypocrites, they may not go any further in their investigation of the gospel.

Every day we rub shoulders with people who are watching us. Your life will demonstrate to them whether Christianity is true or false. They make value judgements about you by your attitudes and actions. Have we made the right choice?

After his Sunday messages, the pastor of a church in London got on the trolley Monday morning to return to his study downtown. He paid his fare, and the trolley driver gave him too much change. The pastor sat down and fumbled the change and looked it over, counted it eight or ten times. And, you know the rationalization, “It’s wonderful how God provides.” He realized he was tight that week and this was just about what he would need to break even, at least enough for his lunch. He wrestled with himself all the way down that old trolley trail that led to his office. Finally, he came to the stop and got up, and he couldn’t live with himself. He walked up to the trolley driver, and said, “Here. You gave me too

much change. You made a mistake.” The driver said, “No, it was no mistake. You see, I was in your church last night when you spoke on honesty, and I thought I would put you to the test.” {3}

Fortunately the pastor passed the test. Do you pass the test when unbelievers look at you and your life and wonder if the gospel is true? It’s a convicting question. When we live lives of integrity, opportunities for evangelism and ministry surface. When we don’t, those opportunities dry up.

I have been encouraging you to develop a life of integrity. In some respects, it’s a life-long process. But we have to begin somewhere. Our lives are the collection of choices we have made in the past³/₄ both good choices and bad choices. Perhaps you have seen the poem:

Sow a thought, reap an act.
Sow an act, reap a habit.
Sow a habit, reap a character.
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

I would encourage you to begin to focus on the verses and biblical principles delineated here. If you want to be a person of integrity, it won’t happen overnight. But if you don’t make a deliberate plan to be a person of integrity, it will never happen at all.

Notes

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Dallas Times Herald, 23 Sept. 1966.

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Valentine's Day Brings Back That Lovin' Feeling

February is known for cold weather, presidents' birthdays and Cupid's delight. As Valentine's Day approaches, hearts flutter, lovers sigh and Charlie Brown hopes that little red-haired girl will like the card he's been gathering up the courage to give her.

Love, sex and amorous relationships have dominated the news over the past year. Not every culture is as comfortable as ours with public displays of affection. In one Malaysian state, laws ban total darkness in movie theaters "to prevent immoral acts like kissing, cuddling and other activities," as one official explained it. Public kissing there usually rates a \$70 fine.

In Venezuela, extended public kissing and embracing can get you arrested. "If you kiss for more than five seconds, the police will grab you," complained one young woman whose friends were jailed. "It's ridiculous," grouched a 24-year-old man. "Whoever invented this law must not have a girlfriend."

Defining immoral kisses can be difficult admitted one policeman, but "when you see it, you should know it." (Has he been reading U.S. Supreme Court decisions?)

Kids often have unique insights into adults' urge to merge. A friend passed along from the Internet children's answers to questions about love. What do people do on a date? Lynnette (age 8): "Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough."

Martin (age 10) sees the bottom line: "On the first date, they just tell each other lies, and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date."

When is it OK to kiss someone? Pam (7): "When they're rich!" Curt (7): "The law says you have to be eighteen, so I wouldn't want to mess with that." Howard (8): "The rule goes like this: If you kiss someone, then you should marry them and have kids with them....It's the right thing to do."

How does one decide whom to marry? Allan (10): "You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dips coming." Allan may find it prudent to slightly revise that theory in a few years.

This season pundits ponder, "What is genuine love?" Popular speaker Josh McDowell delineates three kinds of love that can inform kids' (and adults') attitudes: love if, love because of, and love period. Love if and because of are based on personality or performance: "I love you if you go out with me, if you have a good sense of humor, if you sleep with me. I love you because you're attractive, intelligent or athletic."

But the best kind of love says, "I love you period: even with your weaknesses, even if you change, even if someone better looking comes along. Even if you have zoo-breath in the morning. I want to give myself to you."

Paul, an early Christian writer, eloquently described this unconditional love: "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. ...Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever...."

Committed unconditional love could probably heal many romantic rifts. Solid spiritual roots that help produce it can help

undergird stable relationships. And the children have noticed that families and adult relationships can use some strengthening.

How can a stranger tell if two people are married? Derrick (8): By “whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.” And how would the world be different if people didn’t get married? Kelvin (8): “There sure would be a lot of kids to explain, wouldn’t there?”

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Listening

Listening: A Lost Art?

“Listen to me!”

“Don’t you ever listen?”

“Listen up!”

“Are you listening?”

“Listen carefully to what I have to say.”

“Listen and learn.”

Do such phrases sound familiar to you? Maybe you have heard them from your parents, a teacher, a preacher, or maybe you use them with your children or other family members. They are commands or questions that emphasize the importance of listening. We all want to be heard; we believe what we have to say is significant. It is disheartening and humiliating when we are ignored.

Many years ago I witnessed a scene that has been written indelibly in my memory. It was not an event of earth-shaking importance. It was a simple exchange of time and attention between two people. One of those people was a very prominent, world-renowned pastor of one of the largest churches in the world. The other person was a church member who simply was seeking to spend a few minutes in conversation with the pastor. I don't know what the member wanted to discuss; it didn't seem to matter to the pastor. The thing that made their conversation so memorable was that many people just like the one with whom he was talking surrounded the pastor. They all wanted a few minutes of his time and attention. But instead of being distracted by many different voices, the pastor gave his full attention to one person at a time. He focused his eyes on each individual and appeared to have a genuine interest in each of them. This scene has proven to be a model for me. I have thought of it many times as I have attempted to give my attention to anyone who seeks to be heard.

On the other hand, we have seen and experienced the opposite of this scene. Too often we are oblivious to the importance of listening. Either the one to whom we are speaking is not listening, or we are not concentrating enough on what someone else has to say to us. Have we lost the art of listening? If so, it is important that we consider how meaningful it can be to be good listeners. Within a Christian worldview, this is an essential art.

The words *listen* or *hear* and their cognates are used in the New American Standard Bible over 1,500 times. Obviously this implies that the terms are important for one who takes the Bible seriously. If we are to build a worldview that honors God, we should learn to listen.

To whom or what should we listen? Surely many answers to this question could be suggested. The art of listening is worthy of thorough discussion. But, in this discussion, I will concentrate on four facets of listening. First, we should

listen to God. Second, we should listen in order to understand. Third, we should listen to the world around us. And fourth, we should listen to the non-Christian. Each of these will be offered with the hope that the development of good listening skills will lead to good communication of God's truth. If we are listening carefully, we will in turn have a hearing among those who need the message we can share.

Listening to God

What would your parents, or children, or family, or friends, or coworkers say if they were asked if you listen to them? In most cases, we would like to think that such people deserve to be heard. But if you are a Christian, God should be added to such a list. Surely a Christian wants to listen to God above all others.

A Christian worldview includes the belief that God is a supernatural but personal being who communicates with us. His transcendent character does not mean that He is bound to be isolated from those He loves. That love includes the fact that He has infinite wisdom to share with His loved ones. And the wise person is one who is worthy of that description because he has learned to listen to God's wisdom.

In addition, the Christian worldview includes the glorious truth that God listens to us. As a book title states, *He is The God Who Hears*.^{1} The creator and sustainer of the universe actually chooses to hear us. The Bible is clear about this. "Idols are deaf (Deut 4:28; Rev 9:20), but God is personified as having ears (1 Sam 8:21) and hearing his people (2 Sam 22:7)."^{2}

Such thoughts are part of a common thread among most Christians. But those of us who have been taught the central tenets of biblical content may tend to be too comfortable with such concepts. We may have ignored the startling nature of communication with God. It can be helpful for us to realize

that these beliefs are distinguishing marks of both biblical Judaism and Christianity. “Unlike ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing. Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible.”[\[3\]](#) From the central proclamation of Judaism, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deut. 6:4), to the familiar declaration of the Lord Jesus, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15), the Bible affirms the importance of listening to the God of the Bible.

At this point we should stop and consider at least one segment of what is entailed in listening to God. That is, we are to listen to God through His Word, the Bible. “Just as human beings address God by means of language through prayer, God addresses human beings by means of language in the pages of Scripture.”[\[4\]](#) Before we succumb to the temptation of letting such truths pass by us, consider the dynamic implication of God addressing us in the pages of Scripture. The apostle Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

Obviously Paul believed that what He wrote was from God through the Holy Spirit. Paul was listening to God in such a way that “we might know the things freely given to us by God.” Thus, when the Christian reads or hears the Bible, he is listening to God.

Listening In Order to Understand

Have you ever had a frustrating conversation? That’s a ridiculous question, right? You can probably bring many such

conversations to mind! You just were not able to “get through” to the person, or the opposite was true. Maybe one of the two of you was listening, but you just did not understand one another.

As Christians, such frustration may be the result of not cultivating the art of listening. This begins with listening to God. If we have learned to hear God through His Word, we have come to realize important elements of listening in order to understand. If we can listen to God, we are able to listen to our fellow men.

First, we realize that understanding is often the result of focus. Whether we are studying the Bible, praying, hearing a sermon, listening to family or friends, viewing a movie, or a list of other things, our attention needs to be focused. Admittedly, this can be difficult to achieve. Distractions seem to flood our lives at the most inopportune times. But how often are such distractions a result of unnecessary additions to our lives? Have we put rugged mountains in our paths? Do we find ourselves struggling to climb those mountains before we can focus on what we truly are seeking on the other side? Perhaps we are in need of a refocusing on what is truly important, along with the discarding of what is not truly important. When this happens we will begin to walk a path that will provide more opportunities to listen in order to understand. I believe our relationships with God and those we love will deepen as a result.

The second element of understanding is patient contemplation. Some may call this meditation, which is a thoroughly biblical practice when we are meditating on Scripture. But whether we are contemplating Scripture, or what our children may have just said, our objective is to understand. Again, this also can be difficult to achieve. Because of the ways in which pop culture has permeated our lives, we have grown accustomed to immediate gratification.[\[5\]](#) This isn't surprising in light of the fact that most of what fills our ears and eyes doesn't

require much, if any, patient contemplation. In fact, the things we tend to hear and see would be considered failures if we didn't respond immediately. Such pressures are indicative of the struggles of Christians in the world. According to Scripture, this will be true until Jesus returns. As a result, the Christian community is in need of those who are willing to do the hard work of patient contemplation. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

The third element of listening in order to understand concerns the application of what is heard. When we have listened carefully enough to focus and contemplate we then are ready to use what has been heard. This is a crucial element of a Christian worldview, because in the New Testament “. . . the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith (Matt. 8:10; 9:2; 17:20 etc.) and action (Matt. 7:16, 24, 26; Rom. 2:13 etc.).”[\[6\]](#) As Jesus said, “. . . everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock” (Matt. 7:24). Let's aspire to be considered among the wise. God will be glorified because He will have something to say through us.

Listening to the World Around Us

You are sitting in your doctor's office waiting to see him about a persistent cough you have had for more than two weeks. As you are thumbing through a magazine you are suddenly startled by an advertisement that proclaims, in very large letters: “YOU ARE THE C.E.O. OF YOUR LIFE!” Then you begin to read the fine print at the bottom of the ad, which states: “Think about it. Your life is like a business. It makes sense that you're the one in charge.” You are thinking about it, and you do not agree. Why? Because you have been “listening” to the world around you and you realize that your world view does not fit with what you consider to be a brazen claim. You are not the C.E.O. of your life; God is. Your mental and spiritual

sensitivity meter is working properly.

This fictitious scenario illustrates one of the common ways our Christian worldview guides us as we “listen” to the world around us. Many ideas are being shared in that world and many of them are contrary to Christian thought. Stephen Eyre refers to those ideas as “dragons.” He believes these are cultural values that “. . . are particularly strong and absolutely deadly for the church.”[\[7\]](#) Eyre identifies six of them.

The first dragon is *Materialism*. Matter is all that matters; “I am what I own.” Jesus said, “. . . do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?” (Matt. 6:25)

The second dragon is *Activism*. Life is to be filled with action; “I am what I do,” or “I am what I produce.” God said, “Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10).

The third dragon is *Individualism*. We can depend on no one but ourselves; “I am self-sufficient.” The apostle Peter wrote these memorable words to people, not just an individual: “. . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession . . .” (1 Pet. 2:9).

The fourth dragon is *Conformism*. Recognition by others is a necessity; “I am who others recognize me to be.” Jesus warned His disciples: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:1).

The fifth dragon is *Relativism*. It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe something; “I am whatever I choose to believe.” Jesus declared that what we believe about Him is what ultimately matters when He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but

through Me" (John 14:6).

The sixth dragon is *Secularism*. Religion is all right in its place; "I am sufficient without God." Jesus said we are not sufficient unless we have Him: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Are we listening to the dragons, or to the Word of God? May the Lord guide us as we listen to the world around us with His ears.

Listening to the Non-Christian

My ministry experiences include the privilege of travelling to the beautiful country of Slovenia. While in this formerly communist state I was invited to speak to older high school students in their classes. (Yes, they spoke and understood English very well.) After one of these classes I engaged in conversation with several young people who were especially curious about the issues I had raised about the subject of worldviews. As I listened closely to what they were saying I realized they might have been using certain terms without much knowledge of what they mean. One of those terms was the word atheist. Some of them claimed they were atheists. So I gently asked if they understood the implications of the word by using an illustration that got their attention. Then I asked if they knew of the word agnostic. After they indicated they had not heard of the word I explained it to them. Immediately they responded by asserting that the word agnostic described them more accurately than atheist. From that point in our conversation I was able to share the gospel, the answer to their agnosticism.

As you can imagine, that incident is a joyous memory in my life. But what if I had not listened carefully, not only to what the students were saying, but what they did not say? I believe that if I had not focused my attention in order to

contemplate their comments and questions, I would not have had their attention as I did.

When we are listening carefully to the non-Christian we are winning an opportunity to be heard by him. There are times when evangelism can be a matter of listening, and then telling. Here are two suggestions that can help in developing the art of listening to the non-Christian.

First, listen for what the person presupposes is true. For example, the actor Brad Pitt is quoted as saying, "I have a hard time with morals. All I know is what feels right. What's more important to me is being honest about who you are."[\[8\]](#) If you were listening to him say these things you may have wanted to encourage him to consider the implications of his statements. How would he react if someone "felt like" stealing his car or robbing his house? You also could ask him if Charles Manson was being honest about himself when he committed murder. Brad Pitt's presuppositions about morality cannot be sustained. He needs something greater than his feelings and a vague sense of honesty.

Second, listen for what is not said. You may hear a lot of assertions, but what are the crucial elements you do not hear? Imagine you are listening to a non-Christian friend as he has a tirade about the hypocrisy of the Christians he knows (you excepted, of course). It suddenly occurs to you to ask what is behind his anger. He then becomes increasingly agitated as he tells you someone in a church rejected him and defamed his family when he was younger. Now you can begin to build up what had been torn down in your friend's life, even though a lot of patience may be required.

People need to be heard. May God grant us the wisdom to listen. In the process may He grant us the privilege of carrying His wondrous message to those who will hear.

Notes

1. W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986).
2. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, gen. eds., "Ear, Hearing," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).
3. Ibid.
4. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 18.
5. See my essays on the subjects of [Television](#) and [Slogans](#).
6. Gerhard Kittel, akouw, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 220.
7. Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), 14. Much of the material in this section comes from this book.
8. Brad Pitt, quoted in *Ladies Home Journal* (March 1999), 46.