Addressing Anxiety in Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists. While we’re all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked. A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns. It’s been a perfect storm of stress.

Are there real solutions right now? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, physical things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it’s happening right now as you read]. When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.”

The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, we significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we’ll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It’s Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture agree on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people
who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are not perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.”{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remodel chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.”{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.”{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and then speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately networking neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape.{9} This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design for renewing the mind.”{10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

**Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude**

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.{11} “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.”{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.”{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation.”{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.
So, what’s going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at Mindful.org claims, “The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting.”{16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The “fight or flight” area actually shrinks in size.{17} It’s a real chill pill!

God keeps “him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”{18}

**Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart**

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It’s a God-given right to pursue it, according to America’s founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—“steal, kill, and destroy”{19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, “You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety. There really is hope.”{20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and knowing that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we’re not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].”{21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God’s help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to PsychologyToday.com. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”{22}

Moreland jokes, “If we’re not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn’t need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it’s] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.”{23} As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That’s joy far beyond happiness!

**Takeaways & Practical Applications**

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we
capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.” {24}

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

• “I’ll be in real trouble if...”

• “What if so and so happens next week?”

• “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.” {25}

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like The Four Step Solution:

It goes as follows:{26}

**Step 1: Relabeling:** call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.” {27}

**Step 2: Reframing:** take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

• all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a total failure”)

• overgeneralizing

• singling out one thing to focus on

• catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and

• discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

**Step 3: Refocusing:** Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

**Step 4: Revaluing:** After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.{28} Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.{29}
Notes

1. Senator Ben Sasse, Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal, quoted by Richard Doster in Christian Healthcare Newsletter, June 2020, “Can the Church solve the country’s worst health problems?”
5. Ibid.
7. Leaf, 64.
9. Leaf, 47.
10. Leaf, 65.
11. As with Buddhist meditation practices seeking utter emptiness.
14. Leaf, 82.
16. Ibid. Wolkin
18. Isaiah 26:3.
23. Finding Quiet, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
26. Entire section, Finding Quiet, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.

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Byron Barlowe probes the underlying implications of the global reaction to COVID-19 from a worldview level, asking if we may be being conditioned to accept unbiblical views without realizing it.

You and I are being conditioned, you know that, right? It’s a daily thing. Events and messages work on us, and we need to learn to shape them before they shape us. We must take in the right stuff to counter lies and well-intended overreach.

All of a sudden a universal and ubiquitous mind-and-heart-shaper has hit the world like an alien invasion. The tension and suspense feels like that in the film Signs: sitting in the basement, waiting for green “men” to creep into the boarded-up farmhouse, getting snatches of what’s going on in the outside world through a baby monitor. We are covered over with everything COVID-19 virus: news of it, perhaps even the real effects of it as a sickness. But for most of us the newly-minted mandates by mayors and governors, and social pressures from friends and family stemming from the worldwide reaction is the main reality of our lives as we “shelter in place” and are bombarded with a constant stream of information. It’s ruining investment portfolios—at least for now “on paper”—and skyrocketing the recently record-low unemployment numbers. People are scared for themselves and loved ones since so much is unknown.

How is all this change changing us? Materially, how will shifting norms transform public policy and law, along with our personal beliefs? What will the upending of our economy, civic, and personal lives mean? For folks with secure jobs and schoolchildren, is it simply about getting through a few weeks of downtime and home-work, commonsense hygiene and personal contact avoidance? Or will we be forever stamped with new attitudes and convictions birthed by events beyond our control?

We are Responsible for Our Thoughts and Beliefs

Brain scientists confirm what good pastors, parents, and coaches teach: we can’t necessarily control what we go through, but our reaction to it is up to us. Don’t get “Corona’d”! We can either fall mindlessly into lockstep with what we’re told, or to run this experience through a wise grid and conquer fear and foolishness. Cognitive researcher and Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf emphasizes the power of mental self-control: “As we think, we change the physical nature of our brain. As we consciously direct our thinking, we can wire out toxic patterns of thinking and replace them with healthy thoughts . . . . It all starts in the realm of the mind, with our ability to think and choose—the most powerful thing in the universe after God, and indeed, fashioned after God.”{1}

The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of our Creator God, acknowledged this reality when writing to the first Century Roman church and, by extension, to us today. If he were writing what became Romans 12:1-2 to contemporary folks he may have emphasized an action point first (verse 2) and expanded his words’ scope to entail what early believers took for granted: God as the center of all things. Their worldview, including their view of the universe (cosmology), was hierarchical and infused with “God-ness.”-Our temptation to trust in God-optional techno-science and complex government structures would be alien to our ancient Christian brethren. Yet, there were competing views of the way the seen and unseen worlds work, so Paul’s admonition to develop their new Christ-inhabited mind is just as germane today.
It might have read something like, “Do not be conditioned by the world [all that is other-than-God, the cosmos, and anti-biblical realms, including your own self-created view of the world] but be reconditioned by the total upgrading of your mind in a new operating system downloaded by the entrance of the Holy Spirit when you believed. This will help you discern how to use that new mind wholeheartedly, purely serving through your body, which is only fitting and quite pleasing as your service to the Master of created reality, Himself the ‘I Am’ Reality.”

It’s Real for Me Too

I’m not immune from the scare and worry. My smartphone just dinged: my son’s second interview for his first career job set for 90 minutes from now was just cancelled. The recently thriving corporation—a very promising prospect—has frozen all hiring due to COVID-19. On the other line is a daughter who is seeking a low-income service position since her employer has no jobs in the pipeline. Our other daughter, an Intensive Care Unit nurse, feels the pressure of shortages and health risks. She posted a picture of herself in a mask and gown, disease prevention protocols called “Droplet Precautions.” Their medical equipment is inadequate and has to be washed and reused. A friend’s fiancé’s family have all been laid off: dad, mom, and siblings. It’s up to me to regulate my Corona-news intake, take my anxiety to God, and trust him. But I am determined not to be led into fear and one-sided thinking and to help others.

Mind-Conditioning: Words Matter to Our Worldview

Harsh new realities are marked by new verbiage which is always a sign of cultural change and often a signal of improper controlling (“shelter in place,” “social distancing,” “presumptive positive,” “an abundance of caution”). Euphemisms like these mask meanings. In order of appearance, they clearly mean “Stay home, keep apart, we presume that he/she is a carrier, and we are going into high-control mode.” As philosopher Peter Kreeft writes, “Control language and you control thought; control thought and you control action; control action and you control the world.” Are you and I being conditioned to become used to changes we may not want?{2}

In the chaos, those of us with downtime and a biblical view of life need to use it to reflect and speak into a frightened and confused world. In the larger pluralistic community, how we respond collectively and personally will in no small way determine the arc of our future. As Dr. J.P. Moreland says, “Each situation in our lives is an occasion for either positive formation or negative deformation.” {3} Yet, this is not simply a personal matter. We are citizens and need to be active ones.

Basic assumptions about reality—worldview presuppositions we just take for granted—tend to sit like bedrock or sinkholes underneath the foundations of cultures, families, and individual lives. We either don’t know about them or ignore them, especially in hectic times of real or perceived crisis. They’re deep, unseen, and usually of no concern until events unearth them or an earthquake shakes things up. Sinkholes cause collapse. Bedrock stands.

Specific Concerns About Corona-Conditioning

Here are some concerns I have as a teacher of biblical worldview discernment as this worldwide quake rattles on:

*Have we become too beholden to medical science for direction?* Every human life is infinitely precious—a very biblical stance given that we are made in God’s image, that He died for all people, and that He desires for none to perish (Genesis 1:27; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet, how does a society weigh its view of life-value versus the inevitability of sickness and death? Citizens demand a disease-
free life without pain and engage in death-avoidance, then take “death with dignity”; the medical establishment pretends it can deliver all that. Can outbreaks like this be allowed to shut down entire economies and render personal freedoms moot? Only if we play along with such pretense. An international obsession with killing it ignores everything else. Will our COVID-19 response cause more harm than good? How one answers such concerns, not whether such dilemmas should happen, is at issue. Our personal worldviews and collective societal constructs—which we can help change—will determine controllable outcomes. We will not determine uncontrollable.

This is not to say that public health decrees are wrong in principle nor to necessarily question at least some of those being decreed in this situation, for example voluntary at-home work and study. Repeating louder this time: I am not saying a massive and unusual response is bad or wrong in and of itself. Nevertheless, history is absolute regarding the exercise of such power—it almost never regresses. 9-11 and subsequent one-off attempted terrorist acts put in place onerous rules for air passengers that look permanent. Progress, in this sense, may be regress if it unrealistic and ill-conceived.

**Conditioning Reality Itself?**

*Is Modern mankind seeking to short-circuit reality and its consequences?* This is the biggest underlying issue. There’s something new in the air: near-unanimous mass morality based in rapidly fueled public opinion further fed by transnational fear. I call it “CoronaVirus Virus.” So far, epidemiologists and medical scientists are calling the shots for a global society. Pundits pump up the hype before we can know. Public peer pressure (along with corporate acquiescence and promotion) guarantee an unquestioning going-along for most people and institutions.

We constantly hear and read the phrase, “It’s just the right thing to do.” This orientation raises the question, “Why is it the right thing to do? What is the moral grounding for that decision?” “The greater good” is the mantra of a utilitarian worldview that eventually erases the kind of individual freedom of moral agents which Scripture honors. The people in power decide what is good for all the rest. In a pluralistic society like ours, the privileging of choice was traditionally baked into the very fabric of public policy. Law allows leeway for disputable matters of conscience—at least they did before the advent of “hate crimes” which require God-like knowledge of motives. Such fundamental precepts of liberty have long been eroding. In this new Corona-driven milieu, dictates like government ordered shuttering of businesses and stay-at-home decrees means they may never be fully regained. Let’s at least realize this, even if the calculus of health-risk mitigation over civil liberty wins the day.

Then there’s the prospect of the next pandemic. Some virus is surely incubating for debut next year. Will this draconian level be the new standard of response? How will our economy or that of the world (who often follow our lead) survive under such control?

**“What, again, is government’s role?”**

Who is pausing even for a moment to ask about various requirements, “Is this a bridge too far?” That leads to the other great concern: the directives from medical science’s mass diagnosis-for-the-world are, of course, implemented by government. But the biblical view of the role of government is pretty much limited to policing and making war. Admittedly, society and hence, government has multiplied in complexity—an unbiblical situation given the limits mentioned—therefore public health and economic interventions are somewhat necessary. Absolutely, there are critical emergency situations and this is one of them. It would be unconscionable to allow an epidemic to spread willy-nilly on its own.
However, again, is anyone hitting Pause to ask how far is too far? One hopes that in retrospect, this crisis engenders a throttling back and overturning of policies that helped us get in this pickle (e.g., Federal Reserve-mandated interventions and supposed fixes which are being implemented again; also, allowing a Communist foreign nation a choke hold on pharmaceutical and medical supply chains to gain the “common good” of cheap goods while caregivers do without). Government solutions for all of life. Did we vote this in? Will we do it again in November?

**Government Tyranny in Sight?**

Most worrisome is a move toward what appears more like a police state. In Jordan, missionaries report that 400 people have been arrested for leaving their apartments. Refugee relief workers cobble together care in an impossible situation. A Kentucky man was kept in his home somehow after he refused to *self-isolate* (another new term in the popular vernacular)—I don’t know the details. That spooked me. I wish he cared enough to stay away from people, but when it comes down to it, he could be shot in his own neighborhood—presumably on his own property—for leaving. Explain that to your six-year-old. A *shelter in place* order for all counties surrounding Kansas City is to be enforced by police. Cops deciding to fine or arrest you for leaving your home for other than trips to the doctor, grocery story, or cleaners? Politicians telling us what’s essential may be necessary but seems arbitrary at best. Talk of state borders closing for a sickness? This is a novel consideration, far as I know! Does the Coronavirus rise to the level of a nuclear fallout situation? Is this our shared future? As author and apologist Dr. Ken Boa asks (in a personal email), “Given the nature of interconnectivity in a digital world, we now live within plausible sight of a fear-induced technological plague that could lead to a totalitarian outcome.”

**Choices, Not Conditioned Responses**

Again, all I am asking is, “Does the necessity of this drastic a world-changing meta-response go without saying? Could a relatively restrained response now be wise—despite the public relations suicide of facing a sometimes mad mob morality?” On the other hand, “Is freedom—economic and cultural—worth more lives? Whose feet would that be laid at? Politicians? The medical establishment (they are simply doing their calling)? Fate’s? God’s?”

If the choice is between saving every possible life and forever changing life itself for earth’s entire population, where is the middle ground and how does a society find it? That boat has sailed, I fear. Relativistic, ever-changing ideals and their progressive promotion have won the day. The mindset of “We are going to win this thing, no matter the cost!” reigns triumphant in headlines.

There’s a worldview at work—learn to notice it: note the irony of a Postmodern relativism entwined with a Modernist certainty regarding mankind’s ability to control what used to be called an “act of God.” That’s what the highly moralistic and humanistic John Mauldin is unabashedly promoting, I believe. One more mass-mediated call to controlling an out of control universe. As if we could.

**Be At Peace, Christian, And Spread That Peace**

For individual believers, a biblically realistic and optimistic response is to shelter in place (“abide in Me”). Rest in the peace and assurance of a loving, sovereignly overseeing Creator who will make all things right someday, whose agenda is being met. The best outward response toward unbelievers is to share not only the certainty of that hope, but the gospel that leads to hope in a disease-free, worry-free, perfectly functional and loving society of brother and sisters in Christ. Eternal perspective is the conditioning we must seek. Because we’re all being conditioned. It is truly a daily thing.
Meanwhile, pray for the individuals in charge and their decision-making to be sound. As a new normal reconditions minds and hearts around the globe at the speed of Internet connections, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed" by the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2).

Notes

1. Dr. Caroline Leaf, Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health, p. 20, emphasis mine.

Scrapping Ceilings and Souls: Lessons on Sanctification From a Home Improvement Project

The process of upgrading and repairing Byron Barlowe’s home helped him to see how God does the same kind of transformation in the souls of Christ-followers.

My wife and I are living in a suspended state of misery in our own home. It’s like camping in a plastic-lined dustbin after a tornado blew furniture and books into random piles. Hidden in every crevice there’s a thin fog of whitish dust and snow that won’t melt. “How long, O Lord?” This odyssey started as we launched a long-awaited kitchen remodel, which would be stress enough: “Where’s that sink they took out with the bulk waste—we need it back until the granite people come to install the new one!” Camping indoors again.

But then we succumbed to the contractor’s compelling sell-job on removing popcorn from our ceilings—you know, that lumpy stuff hanging from 20th century ceilings. “They’ll get it done and clean it up for you.” No sweat, right? Right!

Anyone who’s lived through a major renovation or addition can testify to the disturbance. It’s an all-encompassing project. “How many more trips to Home Depot?” I’m at the library writing this and will head to the shower at the YMCA. The paint makes it hard to sleep. Finally, we left for vacation. Disruption of routines and an exploded sense of place overwhelms and badgers us.

Yet God is in it. The ordeal is bringing out loads of attitudes and frustrations in me, especially since God seems to be doing an attitude renovation within me simultaneously. Is that dual lesson cruel of God, or spiritually strategic? Do I really grow when things sail smoothly along?

Yes, the promise of a new look and feel gets lost in the temporary tiresomeness of it all. The more you have, the more you pay in so many ways! Yet, what we had was not up to grade. Some of it was poised to cause disaster, like some plumbing in our kitchen. Replacing the working fridge with a cooler one (accidental pun) revealed a faulty valve. It had to be replaced. In the same way, my soul needs a makeover.
Like a master plumber, the Lord needs to hook up the new pipes of grace he has for me. He’s renovating my heart. I need to grow into the new creation I already am. New openings for new blessings, old things made new. Getting hung up on my way of seeing issues or settling for an inadequate view of God’s goodness calls for a major overhaul. The Lord is committed to make this happen as I somewhat grudgingly lay my life before him in submission—again. It hurts and is a mess, like the unexpected plumbing issue. But like the fridge fix, it makes possible a bounty of unspoiled fruit and prevents a nasty flood!

Back to the originally intended project: the process for the ceiling redux is a multi-step process. It requires the following:

- **scraping**: complete with the roar of compressor to spray water, a sharp scraper, and the old junk that falls to floor (and into everything) like oatmeal or, well, wet popcorn

- **“mud”** to fill holes and fix gouges, a lot like grout for tile or what painters do with picture hanger holes

- **texture** for a new, updated look, smoother than the stuff from the days of puffy hairdos and disco music!

- And **paint** to “top” it off and complete the enjoyable and more livable change.

Simple processes aside, the disarray and disruption of either kind of renovation cannot be overstated. Every last physical item, habit, and way of life has been overturned, from sleeping to showering, eating to breathing itself. Repeat after me, self: *temporary pain for years of gain*. And isn’t that what spiritual growth is like? Is it worth it? This is the operative question each time the Lord convicts us of sin or a character issue. Sanctification—the project of turning us into the real likeness of Christ—promises *eternal* reward and glory! It showcases the goodness and truth of God. Maturity matters, even though its development stinks at efficiency and convenience from a human perspective.

Because negative thought patterns burn into our minds and even have bodily effects, they need to be peeled off, removed. Kind of like the dragon skin of the character Eustace, the unbearably cynical and snooty boy character in C.S. Lewis’s *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. His spiritual blindness and insensitivity had to go but was painful to remove. Sin sticks and separates us from God, goodness and others. Due to its toxic spiritual effects, transformation can’t be kept waiting. We, like young Eustace, need to release our sense of entitlement and thanklessness, rid ourselves of a false sense of pleasure and pride. He have to grow new skin. We too must be scraped over, repaired, remade and painted afresh.

What does this spiritual scraping of sanctification look like in more detail? Well, not unlike ceiling refurbishment in so many ways.

**Necessary Disruption**

First, like those old popcorn ceilings, coverings in my soul simply must be replaced, and not for reasons of fashion. *Scraping ceilings and hearts is inconvenient*—the workers are in our house all day. The Lord does his work while we do our lives. There is never a “good time” for it. You just have to suck it up and have your life turned around a bit. I have been forced, in no small part by dealing with contractors and suppliers, to wrestle down thoughts like, “People are clueless—I wish they’d smarten up and pay attention.” While there is truth behind those convictions as we all know, people have reasons for distraction and the unredeemed have no choice but to be self-centered and
confused. The Lord has been revealing what it means to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). When my protective and cynical dragon skin layers are removed, I begin to appreciate how gentle and ordered others’ minds can be. Their skills and especially their ability to roll with messy, changeable situations amazes me. They are better than me at a lot of things. Regardless of my perceptions, God sees them as priceless and since he loves me supremely, so I can afford to regard them as more important than myself.

**Healing Takes Time, Repetition**

Second, filling in the holes and cracks means going over the same “ground” again. It’s detailed work and has to set up and dry before you can move on. This does not feel efficient, yet it ensures that things are permanently restored. Often, the soulish equivalent of this comes in the form of deep fellowship and counseling—filling in the injury done to our souls with solid truth and love. The old becomes new again, the cracked smooth, the damaged healed. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12).

**The Grace of Preparation and Protection**

In fact, prepping the house took the most time: taping plastic to the floor, draping furniture and ceiling fans, disconnecting light fixtures and removing air vents. It’s as if the protection of our belongings and dwelling takes precedence over the new look and underlying stuff. Isn’t this God’s way? As his Spirit renovates our lives, he lines us with protective layers of grace and love, draping us with the encouragement of prayers he evokes on our behalf and the love of fellow Christ-followers.

**Renovation Takes Force**

Third, just like ceiling overhauls, retexturing is yet another wearying pass over the same square footage for the purpose of renewal—and it has to be forced. Workers hold a little orange plastic tank attached to a hose that’s hooked up to a compressor, then spray the new coating on the freshly prepared surface. The pneumatic motor kicks into a whining screech that fills the house. Without that push, the spray can’t come out of the nozzle ten feet in the air. Similarly, the Spirit’s regeneration of our souls is noisy, messy, pushy and downright unpleasant. We may tire of reaching up to do our part in spreading newness onto the same surface from which God has removed the old stuff. Our shoulders and hearts get exhausted, sore from holding up our part of the work. The air is a bit nasty to breathe. But if our new life is to be realized, it has to be done, forcibly.

**The Stuff of Spiritual Renovation**

Just what is such spiritual newness? The material used is God’s Word illumined by his Spirit, creating new pathways for our minds, hearts and wills, right down to the bone and marrow of our beliefs. It means filling our minds with “whatever is true . . . honorable . . . right . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good repute . . . any excellence [and] anything worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8), being “transformed” and “renewed” in our minds (Romans 12:1-2), reckoning (deciding to be so) ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). All of these fresh Spirit-pumped coatings can cover our internal overheads with new, living realities. That is, thinking and believing in a life-giving outlook that takes seriously the promise that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) is the ultimate renewal. Now, the house has a new sky, if you will, and the sun is ready to shine a bit brighter. As we capitulate to the often onerous process of scraping, mudding, and texturing, we experience a brand new covering for ceilings and souls-in-Christ. And now for the coup de grace!
**New Paint, New Spiritual Robes**

*Painting* is the final stage of this household transformation. Gone are the ugly, useless bits, replaced with the smoothness of shalom—peace-filled blessedness—where defects get filled in and fixed as we submit to the work. Likewise, as we are molded into Christ’s likeness, we put on robes of pure white righteousness (Revelation 19:8; 3:4). So much can be said about the glory of holiness produced in willing saints. Suffice to say that the glory that awaits us outshines even the brightest hues applied to earthly surfaces. Our spiritual man is growing brighter, even as our bodies break down and fade. “We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Many of us have ceilings that overhang us with old, outdated looks. All believers in Christ have rooms—perhaps whole houses—that need reworking. Let the scraping begin. It’s worth it!

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**“Gosnell”: The Doctor Who Snuffed Out Babies and His Silencing Accomplices**

“Were you guys at the ‘Gosnell’ showing?” asked the older gentleman at the urinal next to me. “Have you ever been in a theater where nobody speaks as they leave the movie?” Two very unusual events had just occurred: the reaction he mentioned and men talking at the toilet! A men’s room discussion ensued, focusing on the heaviness of the topic: abortion and baby killing.

Despite unseasonable cold and rain, my wife and I had sat with a few others in the local theater late on a weeknight. It was the last chance to see a film that’s been just as shut down as the discussion of its topic: killing of babies born alive by an abortionist so unprincipled that he was foresworn by fellow abortionists and pro-abortion advocates. The perpetrator: Dr. Kermit Gosnell. The film bears his name. It is also subtitled, maybe exaggeratedly, “The Trial of America’s Biggest Serial Killer.” But who cares if a few others killed more humans than he did over 30 years’ time? Gosnell is deservedly serving three life sentences for first degree murder for offing who knows how many newborns as a “service” to poor women.

As we exited the theater, I had nearly commented about the palpable silence, but realized the gravity of the moment and stopped myself. Perhaps it would take a while to process the newly resurrected horror. The alternate thought occurred to me that, even with a likely self-selecting audience of pro-lifers, silence is what got us to the cultural situation we are in regarding abortion. Would anyone even comment?

The “right to choose” has now been superseded by a debate about personhood of fetuses and babies. Christians often remain silent. Many believe fetal sonogram pictures have dealt a blow to the euphemisms. Turns out, it’s a picture that sealed Gosnell’s doom.

The story tells itself, so the film simply needed to be believable. The superbly cast “Gosnell” pulls it off, with characters as diverse as inner-city young women employed by the mad doctor to a suburbanite prosecutor and mother of five to the queerly eccentric, self-justified Gosnell himself. (The lead actor is the actual Gosnell’s doppelganger!) A well-played Emo blogger may have made the difference in prosecuting the deranged doctor, while the mainstream press was absent without

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leave. Cable TV-level cursing lends a less religious, more real-to-life tone, but it seemed a bit overdone.

“Gosnell’s” biggest strength, unfortunately, is the unraveling of a chamber of horrors haunted by the abortionist’s classical piano playing and taste for exotic flowers. It is surreal. This cat- and exotic turtle-loving, soft dictator’s demise began as a drug case. In a classic storyline, the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) and FBI encroach on a local police investigation, forcing the investigation down the cul-de-sac of a mere drug bust. As a law unto himself, Gosnell had become a dealer. No one was prepared for the baby body bags and slime of Gosnell’s “clinic.” That is, the headlines and court case were stranger than fiction—and more disturbing than most. Frankly, the pre-Halloween release seems appropriate. Still, the obvious moral implications and the inevitable appeal to conscience provides a critical reality check for all time, something that cuts through the slogans and euphemisms surrounding abortion.

That tension between the practice no one talks about and the inherent law of right and wrong within human hearts at times splits the screen. The pro-abortion prosecutor subtly rethinks her position as she cuddles her new baby. The most telling scene is the courtroom practice session with the defense lawyer, brilliantly played by Nick Searcy. Here, Gosnell unequivocally states that he has no respect for laws about training healthcare workers up to code. More chillingly, he declares that his diagnosis of fetal-and live-birth babies’ viability is the definitive opinion. In other words, the doctor totally violated the classical “do no harm” doctrine of medicine as aided and abetted by authorities, wantonly violated laws designed to protect women, and played God with babies’ lives even beyond the allowance of Roe-liberalized abortion laws. But truth has a way of emerging. And history repeats itself in a way.

How so? The up-to-the-minute story, which smells as fishy as Gosnell’s clinic and the cover-up-by-negligence that kept him in grim business for a third of a century, is a tale of viewpoint discrimination. The little-known fight to stanch this movie’s release and cancel showings parallels the way that authorities ignored—by decree—the egregious crimes of Gosnell. This week, headlines like “‘Gosnell’ Filmmakers: Theaters Dropping Movie, Preventing People From Buying Tickets” emerged on Christian news web sites—and nowhere else, apparently. “John Sullivan, the film’s producer and marketing director, said, ‘The fact that we’ve been dropped from theaters where the movie is the number 6 or number 9 movie is just something you don’t see. ‘It’s hard not to believe it isn’t about the content of the movie’.”[1] Despite an excellent opening run, Facebook ticket-buyers report refunds from AMC outlets without explanation and in explicable screening cancellations.

It still seems as if there’s a conspiracy to shut down knowledge of the facts. The spirit of the grand jury-convening judge who demanded the case not be about abortion lives on. Recently, NPR played the same card, avoiding the hot button term “abortion.” The Daily Beast reports that “National Public Radio’s own past reporting called Kermit Gosnell an ‘abortion doctor.’ But when the makers of a new film [“Gosnell”] wanted to pay to use the phrase on air, no dice.” According to actual events, which comprise most of the screenplay, health officials had direct orders from the governor’s office not to follow up on complaints about the clinic.

Gosnell’s “hellhole” of an abortion mill defied imagination. It was a nasty nest of cat filth and biohazards. Turns out, lots of that biological “waste” were the bodies of infants killed both in the womb past legal dates, whom the butcher-doctor “snipped” in the neck after they were delivered. “As liberal commentator Kirsten Powers wrote at USA Today back in 2013, ‘Infant beheadings. Severed baby feet in jars. A child screaming after it was delivered alive during an abortion procedure. Haven’t heard about these sickening accusations? It’s not your fault.’ Powers continued, ‘Since the murder trial of Pennsylvania abortion doctor Kermit Gosnell began . . . there has been precious little coverage of the case that should be on every news show and front page.’” Years later,
the crickets can still be heard. Gosnell’s gruesome methods boggled the mind of jurors and moviegoers. Still, the trial was not allowed to “be a case about abortion.” Nor the film. Yeah, right.

So, the docudrama about a “prolific serial killer” seems to be merely another extension of the strange silence induced by a biased system and a duped public. On a radio interview, the producer said he had to raise funds himself, as with other such independent conservative films. He has faced astonishing resistance at every turn in the four-year process of creating and releasing “Gosnell.” Studios supposedly balk because of controversy, but conservatives know that there is more viewpoint discrimination than anything at work. One would almost think that there are tweaked consciences being defended.

In a monumental scene, the prosecutor shows the gruesome picture of a late-term born-alive baby boy who had been executed by Gosnell. Courtroom fact-finding, arguments, and persuasive appeals gave way to the impact of a picture, worth many more than a thousand words. May the light of day shine on the awful picture of death-dealing in and out of the womb in the court of public opinion and individual hearts and minds. “Gosnell” provides a revealing and compelling picture that will hopefully live on despite the spotty and embattled theater releases.

Note


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The Scandal of Blood Atonement: “Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?”

*The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection raises accusations that Christianity is obsessed with blood. Many believers struggle with this too. Byron Barlowe explores the biblical reasons for the focus on Christ’s blood and why its shedding was necessary.*

**The Bloody Cross: A Tough Thing to Handle**

*Easter season is all about the death and resurrection of Christ—which centers on the blood sacrifice He endured. Christianity is called a bloody religion, focusing on the execution of Jesus Christ on a cross. Why is this true and what does it mean when we say His blood atones for our sin?*

Millions of Americans—and billions of Christians around the world—celebrated the death and
Resurrection of Christ during Passion Week and Easter Sunday. The topic was everywhere from sermons to a CNN docudrama titled Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery.

You may have questions about all the talk of “the blood of Christ” and songs saying things like “Jesus’s blood washed away my sins.” This bloody theme does raise understandable concerns that are shared by believers, seekers and skeptics alike.

In fact, more and more skeptics are posting on the Internet things like this book promotion:

“Christians are obsessed with blood! They sing about it, declare they are washed in it and even drink it! In this book you will discover the crazy background to this Christian obsession and the truth about the bloodthirsty God they claim to know and serve.” {1}

In this article, we’ll discuss whether these charges are true and fair and explain the doctrine of blood atonement.

Again, even many Christians—including me—have wondered deeply about all the biblical imagery of shed blood, what some call the Crimson Thread of Scripture. I mean the grotesqueness of Old Testament animal sacrifice and the belief in Jesus’s torturous slaying as the core of salvation. Radical stuff for modern ears.

So what is blood atonement and why does it matter? In historic orthodox Christian thought, God’s Son is at the very center of history doing these things:

• reconciling man to God,

• ransoming humans from slavery to sin and well-deserved death and

• justly recompensing God for the horrific offense of rebellion and disobedience to Him.

Thankfully, the gospel (or good news) is simple. The Bible claims, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” {2}

The bottom line for all people is this: out of Christ’s death came the hope of eternal life—and His resurrection proved this. Our sin caused God’s Son to suffer and die. By grace, through faith, we can benefit. Otherwise, we suffer eternally for staying with the cosmic rebellion that started in a perfect Garden long ago.

Yet, this blood-centered good news is a scandal to both those who believe and those who deny it. In fact, the Greek root word skandalon is used for Christ Himself. {3} You see, Jews denied Christ as the Promised One and Gentiles thought it was all nonsense. Nothing has changed for mankind: the choices are either do-it-yourself religion, being too smart for all that, or believing in this radical hope.

**The Reason Someone Had to Die**

*Why did anybody have to die? God’s justice and holiness demands a death penalty for the sinner.*

We are all in a serious spiritual and moral pickle. Biblical Christianity declares that each person ever born is stuck under an irreversible “sin”drome” for which there is no human answer. History sadly records the habitual and continual effects of sin: oppression, addictions, self-promoting power plays, deceit, war, on and on.
Now for a reality check: no moral order, either in a family, a company, military unit or society survives ambiguity or failure to enforce laws. Just ask the victims of unpunished criminals set loose to perpetrate again. If the Creator were to simply wink at sin or let people off scot-free, where would justice be? What kind of God would He be?

God is holy and He called Himself the Truth. There is no way God would be true to Himself and the moral order He created and yet fail to punish sin. Such impunity would mock justice. As one theologian puts it, "Pardon without atonement nullifies justice . . . A law without penalty is morally unserious, even dangerous."

Ok, but penalties have levels of harshness. Why is death necessary? Scripture spells out clearly the decree that sinners must die. In God’s original command He stated, “When you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). In Ezekiel the same formula appears slightly reworded: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Paul boiled it down this way: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s justice and holiness demand death for sin. Blood must be shed. Detractors of the cross tend to underestimate sin and know nothing of its offense to a holy God. Everyone wants justice—for others.

Ok, so what does a just and holy God do with impure, treasonous creatures He made to bear His image? God was in a quandary, if you will.

Yet, even in the Garden, He was already hinting at a plan to reconcile this dilemma. “God so loved the world” that he sent down His own Son as a man to pay the death penalty. {4}

Thomas Oden writes, “God’s holiness made a penalty for sin necessary . . . Love was the divine motive; holiness [was] the divine requirement. [Romans 5:8 reads] ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. [And as Romans 8 teaches,] This love was so great that God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32).” {5}

Christ’s Death and Resurrection Was Unlike Other Religious Stories: It Was All for Love

*God’s morally just demand for a death-payment is not the same as pagan gods, who maliciously demanded sacrifices. True for one big reason:* 

Isn’t this crucifixion thing simply about a grouchy god acting all bloodthirsty, as some atheists like popular author Richard Dawkins say? Should good people find this repugnant? One unbelieving critic wrote,

> “Unfortunately, much of Christian art consists of depicting the sufferings and agony of Jesus on the Cross. This reflects the obsession of Christianity with the Crucifixion . . . “Crosstianity” [in the contemptuous words of one skeptic]. The obsession with ‘our sins’ having been ‘washed away by the Blood of the Lamb’ would be regarded as evidence of a serious mental illness . . . but when this is an obsession of millions of people it becomes ‘religious faith’.” {6}

Wow! Did you know that you, if you are a believer, are part of an insane global crowd? This vividly illustrates the scandal of the cross: “which is to them that are perishing foolishness” as the Apostle Paul described it. {7}

No, biblical sacrifice is not a bloodfest, but the way to deal with a sad reality. Put it this way: If God said, “Nah, don’t worry about rebelling against your Creator,” would that be a just and righteous
God? Would a deity who fails to punish wrongdoing be worth following? Would His laws mean anything? Yet, we are unable to keep laws, so He steps in to pay that penalty. With His lifeblood. This storyline is utterly unique in the long human history of religions. And the resurrection Christians celebrate shows its truth in actual time and on this dirty earth.

Pagan myths of savior gods who rise from the dead have only a surface resemblance to the biblical resurrection. Such deities are more like impetuous and tyrannical people than the one and only Yahweh. The biblical God’s love fostered the unthinkable: set up a sacrificial system for a one-of-a-kind people—the Israelites—that served as a foretelling of His coup de grace: dying in man’s place as the spotless sacrificial Lamb. What a novel religious idea that only the true God could dream up! Theologian Thomas Oden says it this way: “It was God who was both offering reconciliation and receiving the reconciled.”

God’s merging of perfect holiness, just retributive punishment and allowance of His Son’s execution was actually a beautiful thing. Francis of Assisi wrote that “love and faithfulness meet together [at the cross]; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.”

But Why a Violent, Bloody Death?

I get that death was demanded of someone to pay for sin. So why a bloody suffering and execution? Why the constant shedding of blood?

Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ hit movie theaters in 2004 to mixed reviews. It earned its R-rating for gory bloodshed and, ironically, became a cultural scandal itself. Seems that the bloody realism was too much for both soft-core Christians and high-minded unbelievers. But this vividly poignant portrayal of Christ’s blood-stained Passion did raise a good question.

When it came to saving mankind, why the shedding of blood? Could God not have found another way? Church Father Athanasius believed that, if there were a better way to preserve human free will and still reconcile rebellious man to a holy God, He would have used it. Apparently, Christ’s suffering and death was the only solution.

The Apostle Paul summarized Christ’s entire earthly ministry this way: He “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). At the cross, “human hate did all the damage it could do to the only Son of God.”

God used the realities available to Him, including the masterfully grim method of crucifixion, honed to a fine art by Roman pagans who viewed human life as dispensable.

Again, why is death demanded of God to atone for sin? The grounding for such a claim appears early in the Bible, after the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In Genesis 9 Yahweh declares, “I will require a reckoning . . . for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.” Apparently, God has put the price of a man’s life as that of another’s life.

The highlight of Christ’s death was its substitutionary sense. The Apostle Peter wrote, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” Justice, fairness, reality itself demanded a bloodguilt payment for sin. Christ paid it.

Substitutionary sacrifice was nothing new for the Jews who unwittingly had the Messiah crucified. From the beginning of God’s dealings with His people, agreements were blood covenants. What else
could carry the weight of such momentous things? And, as the book of Hebrews teaches, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins**.”{13}

One theologian plainly said, “Through this sacrificial system, the people of Israel were being prepared for the incomparable act of sacrifice that was to come in Jesus Christ.”{14}

His suffering, death and resurrection conquered sin and neutered the fear of death. Only blood could clean sin; only God’s Son’s blood could do it perfectly and forever.

Here’s the scandal we spoke of: only a perfect sacrifice would do for washing mankind’s sins away and reconciling us back to God.

**Beautiful Obsession: God Was Glad to Allow This Brutality for Us!**

*God said it was His pleasure to pay the death penalty with His own self, in the Person of His son. Christianity’s so-called blood-obsession is a beautiful picture of perfect divine love.*

Theologian Thomas Oden summarized well our discussion of Christ’s blood atonement. He wrote, “Love was the divine motive; holiness the divine requirement. ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8).”

Such claims trump the understandable disgust of doubters. But the red blood leads to clean white.

Chick-fil-A restaurant employees are trained to say, “My pleasure” when serving customers. Imagine God saying that to believers regarding the cross of Christ! Paul explains in his letter to the Colossian church that “it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness of deity to dwell in Him . . . having made peace **through the blood** of His cross . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death . . .”{15}

God was glad to stand in as the essential scapegoat to restore us to right relations with Himself, to buy us back from slavery to sin, fear and death, and to abolish sin and its effects. This doesn’t sound like a bloodthirsty tyrannical deity demanding a whipping boy or abusing his own child, as some acidly accuse. “My pleasure” brings in new dimensions of lovingkindness and servant-heartedness.

But wait, there’s more! Scripture lists lots of wonderful effects created by the blood of Christ. These include forgiveness, propitiation or satisfaction of God’s righteous wrath, justification or being made right, reconciliation with God, cleansing, sanctification, freedom from sin, and the conquest of Satan.

Yes, you could say that Christianity is blood-obsessed. As accused, even its hymns often focus on the benefits bought at the highest of prices: the life of the God-Man Himself. One famous hymn goes:

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For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
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This beautiful blood obsession finds its highest hope in Revelation. The following is a prophecy about persecuted believers:

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“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear
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from their eyes.” (16)

Maybe the revelations here are as crazy as skeptics say. The foolishness of God. We believe they are the most glorious story ever told.

Notes

1. Promotion at Amazon.com for *Obsessed with Blood: The Crazy Things Christians Believe*, Book 1, by Ex-Preacher.
2. 1 Peter 3:18, NASB.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:18.
8. Ibid., 414.
9. Ibid., 405.
10. Ibid., 389.
12. 1 Peter 3:18.
15. Colossians 1:19.
16. Revelation 7:14b-17, emphasis mine.

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**Even America’s Largest Denomination Is Bleeding Members: Is It Too Late?**

*Further erosion of membership within America’s largest denomination, Southern Baptist, shows a larger trend of churches losing [bleeding] members. Byron Barlowe believes the answer may not be more programs, even evangelism programs.*

Many wonder about the state of the Christian Church in the U.S. How is it doing? Is it holding steady or shrinking? At Probe, we are constantly monitoring this vital question, doing raw-data-level cultural research.

We got another indication recently that the Evangelicals in America are on their way down like Catholics and Mainline Protestants have been for years. At this rate, the Church may drop into relative obscurity—or at least become a small subculture. Read on despite your denominational (or churchless) background because American culture is morphing under all our feet. The ripple effects are only beginning.

Just before this post was written, the Southern Baptist Convention was gathering to address topics
like the ongoing decline in America’s largest Protestant denomination. Top of the agenda: despite adding around 500 new congregations, it is bleeding membership and baptisms which indicate a declaration of faith (Baptists call it “believer’s baptism” as opposed to other branches of Christianity which baptize infants). According to Christianity Today, the SBC just “reported its largest annual decline in more than 130 years—a loss of 236,467 members.”{1}

The negative numbers just keep coming. “The denomination is down to its ‘lowest baptisms since 1946; lowest membership since 1990; lowest worship attendance since 1996,’ according to historical analysis from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. ‘The true bad news is that when you put last year in the context of all previous years, it indicates the SBC is in the midst of a decline that shows no signs of either slowing down or turning around,’ said Chuck Kelly, the seminary’s president.”{2}

The Southern Baptists are not alone and not the first Christians to see such a disheartening trend. Churchgoers are voting with their feet in alarming numbers. Are they, in part, being pulled away by unbelievers who want nothing to do with church? Probe has researched deeply the “rise of the Nones,” referring to the fast-growing segment of the nation who do not affiliate with Christianity on surveys. They mark “None” when it comes to which faith they claim. These politically and ethically “moderate” or “liberal” folks are not atheistic or hostile to religion. They simply don’t think about it. And as someone quipped, the opposite of good is not evil, it’s indifference.

It seems that some of the former believers among the Nones are likely represented by the two of five Americans who believe that “when it comes to what happens in the country today, ‘people of faith’ (42%) and ‘religion’ (46%) are part of the problem.”{3} More likely, the general malaise regarding eternal destiny or religion of the non-affiliated Nones has infected tepid churchgoers in a silent, insidious way. The spirit of the age whispers, “Meh, go to church? Not relevant. No one believes that stuff anymore. At least I don’t have to go to church to believe it.”

Yet, efforts to make the faith culturally relevant have often fallen flat. Christian talk show host Janet Mefferd wonders what’s gone wrong with Southern Baptist churches in this regard. She wryly asks, Wasn’t the infusion of more cultural conversation, increased societal sensitivity led by Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission Russell Moore supposed to plug the leak, staunch the flow of members out of Southern Baptist churches? Weren’t closed-door conversations with gay rights leaders designed to open the church doors to those who feel marginalized? Formal denominational statements on Earth care and animal rights were supposed to turn things around, says the conservative and Baptist-friendly Mefferd. “What happened? I don’t know. But more evangelism and less conversation would be in order.”

Mefferd echoes Southern Baptist strategists and leaders. “It’s clear that evangelism and discipleship are waning,” Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, an SBC affiliate which produces the [Annual Church Profile] report being discussed. “I don’t believe it is due to the lack of opportunities, though. Instead, there is a lack of engagement.”

Yes, evangelism and discipleship are central to the Great Commission and are undeniably tiptop biblical values, commands really. However, we no longer live in a milieu where agreed-upon notions of sin and evil exist-or even that such truth claims could possibly be valid for all. Simply launching new evangelism campaigns and standard discipling programs doesn’t seem to work anymore. Massive work on the worldview level, including apologetics to challenge underlying misinformation and beliefs, coupled with winsome and culturally engaged and convinced Christians are vital to even getting the gospel a hearing. My work on campus tells me that you must establish absolute truth before any claim to Christ’s offer is anything other than “he said, she said, just what grandma believed.”
So maybe the issue isn’t membership rolls and baptisms, though these are helpful measures. Forget church growth programs with the lowest-common-denominator appeal using culture-copycatted branding. Joyful and hopeful Christ-followers with studied answers to common objections will make an eternity of a difference. We see this happening now.

Pollster-turned-activist George Barna and his namesake Barna Group “collaborated on the 2014 book Churchless to further examine the nation’s unchurched community.” Co-author and Barna Group President David Kinnaman commented on the phenomenon that a growing number of Americans don’t attend church but used to do so. “This fact should motivate church leaders and attenders to examine how to make appropriate changes—not for the sake of enhancing attendance numbers but to address the lack of life transformation that would attract more people to remain an active part.”

Pastors and laymen alike, perhaps the studies by The Barna Group and others are right: it’s time to dispense with programs that speak only to us, stop relying on “professional Christians,” and become the informed, sacrificial, calling-driven, supernaturally joyous ones the Lord Jesus saved us to be. Now that’s relevant! Build that and they may just come back.

Notes


Gay Men to Lead Boy Scouts: Gates’ Failure to Render Genuine Leadership

This week the Boy Scouts of America have announced they will welcome transgendered youth into the program. This culture-following trend began when the BSA allowed gay scouts, then gay leaders. This shows a serious leadership gap, according to Eagle Scout, former Scout employee, and volunteer Byron Barlowe.

Boy Scouts will now be subject to gay adult leadership if BSA (Boy Scouts of America) president Robert Gates’ advice is taken. Gates, who once held our military’s top position as Secretary of Defense, declared the inevitability of ending the ban on openly gay Scout leaders while addressing the BSA national annual meeting in Atlanta Thursday, May 21, 2015.

Does anyone really doubt that Gates’ position will be made official, especially given recent advances for gay rights at the states’ level, with the Girl Scouts, in Ireland’s national referendum vote three
days later and most likely via the United States Supreme Court this June? I wager it’ll be only a few months before it’s official BSA policy.

The question for Mr. Gates: How does bowing to the rapidly changing poll numbers on this issue constitute leadership? Don’t heroes often have to stand alone? Even if Gates holds convictions that would dictate openness in his personal dealings, his stated premise for lifting the long-time ban on gay Scout leaders that stands to affect tens of thousands of youth is flawed: that the proverbial train has left the station and the organization needs to cover its rear guard, to go with the inevitable flow of gay rights, to kowtow to pressure from within and without. Pure pragmatism on parade. And entirely inappropriate and unrespectable.

Brave New World vs. “A Scout is Brave”

Part of the Scout Law every Boy Scout for 105 years has memorized and recited reads, “A Scout is trustworthy . . . brave . . . reverent. . . .” But the BSA has done a 180-degree flip on the topic of homosexuality, having won a Supreme Court case against a gay membership push as recently as 2000. The Opinion of the Court in Dale v. Boy Scouts of America, written by Chief Justice Rehnquist, reads, “The Boy Scouts asserts that it ‘teach[es] that homosexual conduct is not morally straight!’” in its defense of denying avowed homosexual and gay activist James Dale leadership privileges with a Scout troop.

Oh, what a difference fifteen years makes when one bases decisions on the swiveling wind vane of a degrading culture.

To his credit, Dr. Gates called for individual chartering organizations—representing 70 percent of Boy Scout Troops and Cub Packs—to decide for themselves how to implement such a policy. Yet, in the same speech, Gates cites the refusal of a New York Council to abide by current BSA policy in hiring gay leaders as a realistic reason to change the national policy. Which is it? Gay men get the right to lead, or troops and packs get to say no? We see where that is going in the courts and in culture with Christian photographers, bakers and T-shirt makers: inescapable pressure to succumb.

Live Up to High Standards of Scouting

I’m holding President Gates to a high standard here. Sure, he’s been pressured by his own big business (read: big donor) board members like Randall Stephenson of AT&T and James Turley of Ernst & Young to eradicate the BSA’s longstanding policies against gay participation at every level. Though it may not compare to high stakes, national level non-profit boardroom politics, I lost my job as a BSA District Executive by holding to the principles of Scouting (and my biblical faith). When asked to misrepresent the number of Cub Scout Packs in local schools at a BSA Council in North Carolina, I refused. Threats didn’t move me despite my 23-year-old, first-job fears. Call me naïve. Then explain that to a boy. It would be refreshing to see Mr. Gates stand up to power himself.

Even if I agreed with gay rights claims concerning the private youth training organization, I’d object to the hypocrisy of its leader. Gates’ recent declaration, as with the BSA’s 2013 decision to enroll openly gay Scouts, is modeling another dereliction of duty. Yet “duty to God,” others and self has always formed the three-legged stool of values on which Scouting stood. God is not confused on this issue, nor was the Scouting program for a full century.

If This Goes, Scouting Will Forever Be Altered

I write “values on which Scouting stood” in past tense advisedly. As I was quoted via the Los Angeles Times syndicate while demonstrating against the policy change to allow openly gay Scouts in 2013,
this is the end of Scouting as we have known it. Another prediction: A sharp decrease in numbers following that decision will be surpassed if the BSA allows admittedly gay leaders. As an Eagle Scout, father of an Eagle Scout, former volunteer Scouting leader and BSA local executive, I can no longer support in any way the Boy Scouts of America. I’ll support other youth programs.

This conviction grieves me, but borrowing from the Christian reformer Martin Luther, here I stand and I can do no other. No, this episode does not rise to the level of religious reformation; however, the gravity of such social slides will change the cultural landscape for as long as our Republic stands. The gay advocacy heavyweight Human Rights Campaign is right when it celebrates Gates’ announcement as a huge victory in its drive for full acceptance of homosexuals across the culture, given that the BSA is “one of America’s most storied institutions.”

As SecDef, Gates ended the ambiguous “Don’t ask, don’t tell” doctrine, a decision that opened doors for openly gay service men and women to serve freely despite fears of sexual chaos. Our former CIA Director and, again, Secretary of Defense Gates now holds the top leadership post among a younger group of Americans. On this issue he has led neither members of the armed forces nor impressionable and sexually vulnerable adolescent Scouts.

Once again, Gates’ ethics reek of pure pragmatism: “We must deal with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be. The status quo in our movement’s membership standards cannot be sustained,” he said to the assembled Scouting leaders.

Never mind high ideals. The wind has blown, the ship has sailed and we must get on board or be left behind (or at least sued heavily). Oh, such bravery.

The Tug of War of Reason and Faith in C.S. Lewis’s Favorite Novel

Byron Barlowe examines the timeless battle between reason and faith in C.S. Lewis’s novel—his favorite—Till We Have Faces. Are they mutually exclusive or can they balance one another? How do we reconcile them? “To rationally look at love and logic and to gaze along, to creatively depict and model its living out, may soon be all that is left to us to reach a new generation.”

“You think the gods have sent you there? All lies of priests and poets, child . . . The god within you is the god you should obey: reason, calmness, self-discipline.”

- The Fox, Greek tutor in Till We Have Faces[1]

“Heaven forbid we should work [the garden of our human nature] in the spirit of . . . Stoics . . . We know very well that what we are hacking and pruning is big with a splendour and vitality which our rational will could never of itself have supplied. To liberate that splendour, to let it become fully
what it is trying to be, to have tall trees instead of scrubby tangles, and sweet apples instead of crabs, is part of our purpose.”

- C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves[2]

A strong relationship between C.S. Lewis’s conceptions of Contemplation and Enjoyment persists throughout his novel Till We Have Faces. It seems most fruitful for today’s apologist to examine two primary characters’ relationship to the concepts in this way: the Greek slave-tutor known as the Fox, represents cold, hard, factual rationality which grudgingly gives a nod to the divine, but only in a limited, controlling way. He represents Stoicism more than any other school of thought. Meanwhile, the barbarian-pagan Priest of the god Ungit represents a less worldly wise, more mysterious and superstitious faith, rooted in earthly experience (fertility rites, blood sacrifice, etc.). Either worldview can limit human nature, truth and meaning. The Greek-infused contemplative life-view (nowadays seen most strongly in Modernism and its irreligious pupils), largely eschews the heartfelt experience of the latter, while the latter’s religiosity often dismisses the thoughtful, discerning caution of the former. This artificially strict dichotomy and lack of balance shows forth at every turn in the Church today, creating a blindly loyal fideism with few answers for contemplative questions; or we see, in an overcorrection, a clinical, spiritless, formulaic religion of pure reason. The former, an unreflective *modus operandi*, chills—and according to testimonies of many apostates and atheists, creates—skeptics, who much like the Fox, seizing on pure reason, ceaselessly explain away the immaterial and numinous. In doing so they, like the Fox’s star student Orual, act as plaintiffs against God or the gods. One apologist recently found that nearly all the young men he surveyed who serve as leaders of college atheist/agnostic groups in the U.S. were raised in church and attended Christian youth groups. Given the ubiquity of broken families, where little love borne of God-given freedom exists—much like the main character Orual’s situation—and know-nothing, superstitious Christians, it is no wonder that a mass exodus of youth from the Church continues. One antidote to the current state of imbalance of Contemplation (reasoned examination toward applied wisdom) and Enjoyed faith (in Lewis’s sense, experientially realized) may be to use and model the dual approach of Lewis’s *The Four Loves* alongside *Till We Have Faces*. To rationally *look at* love and logic and to *gaze along*, to creatively depict and model its living out, may soon be all that is left to us to reach a new generation.

In the mythic *Till We Have Faces*, which we will discuss here, the dual (and often dueling) dynamics of reason (often couched in secularized religion) versus mystical religion (often superstitious) interplay in various characters. It may help to explore these chief characters Lewis creates to embody the story of clashing worlds and worldviews, as well as the Fox’s prize student, Orual. Meanwhile, we will briefly attempt to apply the lessons Lewis teaches apologists into the modern milieu.

First, Lewis revealed the predominant worldview, the Fox’s philosophy, early in the novel as he tutored Orual. His Platonic views were summarized thus, “‘No man can be an exile if he remembers that all the world is one city,’ and ‘Everything is as good or bad as our opinion makes it.’”[3] As a well-taught classical Greek, he sets out to import real learning into the barbarian kingdom to which he is enslaved. Orual admired her “grandfather's” constant quest for knowledge and carried on his tendency to question, Socratically, all that went on. Yet, since her dear Fox, always the philosopher, seemed “ashamed of loving poetry (‘All folly, my child’), she overachieves in philosophy to “get a poem out of him.”[4] Foretelling the dismissiveness and globalizing of the numinous by today’s naturalistic thinkers, the Fox scoffs at surpranatural / supernatural explanations with a curt, “these things come about by natural causes.”[5] In an ancient instance of positive-mental-attitude-laced freethinking, he lectures, “we must learn, child, not to fear anything that nature brings.”[6] When Orual’s sister Psyche goes about ostensibly healing the townspeople, and Orual asks about the
validity of the claims, Fox the Naturalist characteristically keeps the options limited but somewhat open. “It might be in accordance with nature that some hands can heal. Who knows?”[7] Herein lies a bit of epistemic humility, somewhat disingenuous it seems, something this writer detects quite a lot among materialist-naturalists.

The Fox’s framework of Platonic forms emerges in his assessment of Psyche’s ethereal beauty, “delight[ing] to say, she was ‘according to nature’; what every woman, or even every thing, ought to have been and meant to be, but had missed by some trip of chance.”[8] While talk of gods peppered his language (“Ah, Zeus” and “by the gods”—more than curses?), fate seems to drive the universe’s cause and effect. He considers suicide and opines about returning to the elements in death, fatefully acquiescing, to which Orual beseeches, “But, Grandfather, do you really in your heart believe nothing of what is said about the gods and Those Below? But you do . . . you are trembling.” His Gnostic-tinged response: the body fails me. I am a fool, being trapped in it so long.[9] From what little the writer knows of Greek theology, its progeny thrives in and out of the Church today as an admixture of practical atheism, pantheism and pragmatism. Lewis sneaks in the side door of the skeptical fortress by characterizing so strongly the Fox, whose loving humanity belies his deadening philosophy. If Lewis’s retelling of ancient myth can be refashioned again, or better, simply read, truth and meaning may get through.

On the second worldview, Lewis sets forth the theme of a grounding darkness, holy and otherworldly, chiefly through the pagan Priest of the local goddess Ungit. The Priest served as prophet, harbinger of judgment. He repeats the warning of Ungit’s all-hearing ears and vengefulness to the irreligious king on two occasions[10] He carries out shadowy, ancient rituals without explanation and in dark places, sticky with blood offerings. Even outside the dank and sacred temple, “every hour the Priest of Ungit walked around [the sacred fire],” narrates Orual, “and threw in the proper things.”[11] Throughout, Lewis equates the holy with the mysterious, the hidden and darkened. Divine silence, corresponding to the biblical God’s hiddenness and holiness, presents as a major theme of Till We Have Faces. The Priest offers few and brief explanations.[12] The god judging Orual in the afterlife allows her lifelong complaints to speak for themselves. Her resultant epiphany balances the equation between reason and religion, witty words and wordless (if corrupted) wisdom, and reconciles the silence: “I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word [of inner secret] can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble we think we mean?”[13] These characters serve as foils for one another, a creative way to tie Modern rationalism to man’s inexorable and entirely unnatural acknowledgment of both the spiritual, or numinous and the moral law.

Sixteen years previous, Lewis had published The Problem of Pain, wherein he explores this undeniable yet insanely irrational or rather supernaturally revealed sense of numinous awe and moral law inherent in every man and culture. As if foreshadowing the clash of worldviews in discussion, Lewis writes, “Man . . . can close his spiritual eyes against the Numinous, if he is prepared to part company with half the great poets and prophets of his race, with his own childhood, with the richness and depth of uninhibited experience [the Fox, to a high degree, or]. . . He can refuse to identify the Numinous with the righteous, and remain a barbarian, worshipping sexuality, or the dead, or the lifeforce, or the future [the old Priest].”[14] The concepts of Contemplation and Enjoyment intertwine through a scholar and a man of the altar, through the gods and humans alike. In life and in myth, “men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle.”[15]

The Fox’s and Priest’s views of one another and each other’s worldview clashed like contemporary apologetic debates. The Fox saw the Priest’s work as “mischief”[16] and nonsense. “A child of six would talk more sense” was the Fox’s response to the apparent contradictions of the Priestly doctrines regarding the Great Offering.[17] Contrarily, the Priest reflexively dismisses the Fox’s Greek wisdom. According to Orual, “like all sacred matters, [a sacred, acted ritual] is and it is not
Yet, “even Stoicism finds itself willy-nilly bowing the knee to God.” The Fox at times let down his learned persona, evidencing the axiom that man is inherently religious. Yes, he gave a regular nod to the gods, and at the birth of Orual’s sister Psyche he says wistfully, almost wishfully, “Now by all the gods . . . I could almost believe that there really is divine blood in your family.” Though his comment regards the family bloodline, one picks up here and elsewhere a religious man, who then quickly covers the sentiment with appeals to reason, even rationalization. Such characterization seems both autobiographical on Lewis’s part and testimony to his many dealings with materialist, humanist, secularist, liberal Christian, and unbelieving scholars and laymen.

The Priest’s mythical, experiential religious conviction versus the Fox’s worldly wisdom weaves itself through a climactic showdown. A death sentence falls on Psyche as the Accursed, to be offered to the goddess Ungit. (Here is the clash of wills between man and the divine in a crisis of state and religion so often seen in history.) “Ungit will be avenged. It’s not a bull or ram [sacrifice] that will quiet her now,” pronounces the Priest. He mentions “the Brute,” who legend says will take away the human sacrifice. In classic rational fashion, the King challenges, “Who has ever seen this Brute . . . What is it like, eh?” In this moment, the Fox presents himself as the King’s counsellor, living out his reasonable raison d’être. Prosecution-style, he determines that the Brute only exists as an image, a shadow, six-year-old nonsense. The Priest dismisses this as “the wisdom of the Greeks,” and seeks the peoples’ fear as a fallback position. (Interestingly, many who either believe in or dismiss the supernatural and mystical seek strength in numbers, popular opinion to make their case, which is no argument at all.) The high stakes exchange illustrates the gravity and consequences of the age-old clash. If religion is to be followed, it must be regulated by reason; if reason is to properly play its part, it must bow to realities beyond its grasp.

The Priest and Fox provide an extremely stark contrast of views during this conflict. The Fox presents a compare-and-contrast list of the Priest’s teachings, revealing what he believes defies the Law of Non-Contradiction. The Priest first responds to the abstractions by appeal to concrete realities. Greek wisdom “brings no rain and grows no corn.” He portrays such constricting logic as unable to offer “understanding of holy things . . . demand[ing] to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book . . . nothing,” he continues, “that is said clearly [about the gods] can be said truly about them . . . Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.” The apologist cannot help but think of the frustration of trying to communicate the mysterious paradoxes of spiritual truth and meaning to skeptics who demand only linear logic from a naturalist point of view. (The Fox continually appeals to “the Nature of things” and says “according to Nature.”) One must also guard against becoming Fox-like, limiting inquiry and explanation merely to that accessible to the physical senses and human reason. Either philosopher or accommodating priest / poet can make that mistake; via their opposite approaches, whether overly from man’s reason or God’s assumed reasons, deny the paradoxes of reality.

Ironically, Orual’s conversion to real belief in the numinous—halting and years-long—begins during this fight. Though she’d “have hanged the Priest and made the Fox a king” if she could, she realized the power lay in the Priest’s position. Her convincing comes in a climactic moment, when pressed at literal knifepoint to stop prophesying the unwelcome judgment, the Priest shows unearthly peace, calm, and indeed a willingness to die. “While I have breath,” he intoned, “I am Ungit’s voice.” Resolute and full of faith at death’s door, his was evidence beyond reason, much as the testimony of Christ’s Apostles in their martyrdoms. This was not lost on Orual, who narrates, “The Fox had taught me to think—at any rate to speak of—the Priest as of a mere schemer and a politic man” who pretended and said whatever would provide him power or gain, in Ungit’s name. The Fox’s prize student now saw through personal experience—the kind he taught her to guard against—that the Priest was sincere unto death. “He was sure of Ungit.” He may have
been mistaken or misled, but he did not pretend. One of the modern apologist’s greatest arguments is a convinced life and a faith, well-tested, sometimes right in front of the skeptic. The ultimate witness: a life and death scenario.

After a lifetime, in the afterlife, the Fox repents of his constraints and biases of the supernatural and religious. In this, Lewis communicates a truth applicable today. “I taught [Orual], as men teach a parrot, to say ‘Lies of poets,’ and ‘Ungit’s a false image.’ . . . I never told her why the old Priest got something from the dark House [of Ungit] that I never got from my trim sentences . . . I made her think a prattle of maxims would do, all thin and clear as water.”[27] How like so many testimonies of those who, in our day, come to Christ after years of dismissing and rationally ruling out the reality of the transcendent. Words are cheap and book knowledge only gets one so far, the Fox admits. What a mirror of teachers who lead people of faith away from that which requires revelation using smart-sounding verbiage. Hence, for those enamored with the Richard Dawkinses of our time, a reading of this novel may be the foxiest way of all to reach them.

Orual is a product of her own Need-Love[28], which is serviced alternately by her Fox-taught Greek rationalism and belief in humanoid gods, whom she thinks she can control. As a young woman being flirted with by a prince on the lam, she characteristically staunches true emotions. “I had a fool’s wish to lengthen” the encounter, she says. “But I came to my senses.” On her odyssey to save her sister from a supposedly evil god, Orual blocks every sentiment with controlling motherly logic, eschewing all glimpses of and desires for the divine. She chooses to outwit the gods. She ends up the pawn in the hands of the gods, however gracious, that she fancied to be her equals.

The Orual-Queen-Psyche’s-twin character spends a lifetime employing Greek wisdom learned under the Fox to seek out life’s mysteries of human and divine relations, up to the bittersweet end, constantly denouncing the gods for the woes she experiences. Face to face with divinity, her bitter hiding reveals her glorious humanity. Now, true-faced, she is free. Up until then the helpless, yet defiantly and impressively skillful independence she exhibits as a mothering sister, and later as regent, so well illustrate fallen human defiance of the true God of the Bible, seen most vividly in well-educated apostates and atheists today. Those unbelievers, consumed by angry confusion regarding suffering and life’s seeming futilities, should find both empathy and resolution in this novel.[29] While doing excellently (in human terms) for a lifetime, as Orual did, one can still deny the existence of the divine while cursing the god’s or God’s supposed effects on mere mortals. Orual’s torturous private thought life increasingly revealed her sin nature, which she turned back into ravings against the fate of the gods. Control was her only weapon, until the deaths of all who propped up her life and kingdom, and until visions of her corrupted affections forced humility upon her. Such desperate machinations to live a meaningful life in the face of deadening routine punctuated by tragedy, in turn, raises the biggest questions of life: Why are we here? Are we mere mortals or eternal beings with a destiny? If the latter, what or who determines our fate—is there really meaningful choice or only divine whim or something else? Lewis creates multi-layered characters who live out the quest for ultimate answers.

In another resolution of sorts, the myth comes full circle through the Fox and priesthood back to Greece. Arnom, the new Priest of Ungit, adds a notation on Orual’s book (at our novel’s end) entreating anyone travelling to Greece to take it there,[30] which may ironically imply that the barbarians had something to teach the world’s greatest philosophers. Likelier, Arnom, who put himself under the tutelage of the Fox, meant to dedicate the Queen’s life saga to a greater civilization. Is this a symbolic merging and maturing of the two schools of thought and faith? A reference to Arnom as “priest of Aphrodite,” likely indicates his fuller “Greekification.” Whether this change was for ill, good or neutral is hard to say. Perhaps the former priest of the crude barbarian goddess Ungit was effectively sending a message, as if to preach: “To those in Greece, supreme land of learning and reason, place of the gods of the philosophers, we commend you this account of a
Being beyond description who revealed our Queen’s aching fallenness, journey into redemption, and glorified revelation as a goddess in her own right.” This writer’s weak grasp of Greek mythology and theology notwithstanding, it seems clear Lewis offers much resolution of reason and religion, of the contemplative and the Enjoyed, however incomplete it must naturally be.


[7] Ibid., 31

[8] Ibid., 22.

[9] Ibid., 17-18.

[10] Ibid., 15,54.


[12] Ibid., 15-16, etc.


[16] Ibid., 33.

[17] Ibid., 49.

[18] Ibid., 268.


[20] From the little the writer knows of Plato’s *Republic*, there seem to be echoes of it here in the Fox’s views. Worth exploring.

[21] Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 46.

[22] Ibid., 49-50.

[23] Ibid., 50.

[24] Ibid., 51.
Crimping Consciences: Texas City Railroads Pro-Gay Ordinance

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

New Anti-Discrimination Policy Approved

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

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

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

Good Intentions: Trying to Legislate Values Directly

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

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

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

**ROLE OF GOVERNMENT. . .**

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

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

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

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

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

**Progressivism on Parade**

The subtext of public deliberations on Plano’s ERP was plainly a progressive agenda. Why else would a city seek to get “ahead of the curve” on a social issue such as gender bias or sexual identity discrimination or whatever the euphemism is today? (Refer above to the value of limited role of government, which was expressed repeatedly to the council by citizens of Plano.) The council, challenged that there are no known cases of such discrimination, seemed to shrug dismissively and invoke the need to “get ahead of” the issue.

“The issue of equality is a basic human rights issue and the choice for some to focus on a person’s sexuality is conflating the issue,” said the Mayor. Conflating what with what? Either the mayor misunderstands the term “conflating” (making things the same) or he’s basically accusing objectors of the very thing that has been foisted upon them—namely, making one’s sexual choices (not their true sexuality) the determiner of human rights. This is like watching someone start a fight over a piece of land and then accusing the one attacked of starting that same fight over that very piece of
Questioning the need for the statute was otherwise met with a not-so-veiled sense of accusation, an implication of inherent bias on the part of the objectors, despite an overall congenial atmosphere. So, if I question the veracity of the claim to need such a policy or ask for reasonable cause, I am automatically anti-gay? That’s patently false and unfair. Yet that was the sense of things in a politically correct undercurrent that is the zeitgeist of our day.

**Worldview War**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Any claim to that distinction has been lost with the adoption of the near-universal belief in what amounts to a “gay gene”—that a person inherently possesses a sexual identity that may indeed be homosexual or of other varieties. This, over and against a mere proclivity or attraction to the same sex, which leaves room for choice, which is an ethical issue. Remove choice regarding homosexuality, you remove any basis of objection. Remove objection, you can run roughshod over any cultural restraints on the free and damaging expression of sexuality outside the bounds of its Inventor, God. Remove those restrictions, celebrate the lifestyle, then codify and impugn those who disagree, and the After the Ball agenda is a complete success.
Monday night’s meeting was an incremental victory toward this end, whether or not players on the city council or either side of the issue realized it. Regarding objectors’ motives, it’s one thing to care for individuals whose sexual identity is in question or those who act out a gay lifestyle and it’s another kind of thing entirely to exercise one’s rights to oppose codification of these choices and lifestyles. I and many of my friends there that night were doing one while we practice the other in private situations, too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This attitude, this taken-for-granted starting place was most evident in closing remarks made by several city council members—all of whom happened to vote for the policy. One council member waxed eloquent on his world travels, noting that the most advanced societies he’d run across made it a point never to discriminate. (I don’t know where he’s been, but perhaps his hotel’s staff might beg to differ—just guessing.)

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

“There were lots of strong feelings on the topic of discussion tonight” and
“This is a very emotional issue for many. . . .”

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

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

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

. . .Conflating Race & Sexual Lifestyle

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

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

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

“No!”

And rightly, my new African friend—who is a Christian—was bothered by the conflation of the two and the use of such rhetoric to elevate a class of people based on their sinful behavior and identity to it as the basis to extend so-called human rights. We all have the right to fair treatment as humans made in God’s image. We do not have a right to socially engineer law to force the compromise of conscience that is being carried out by Plano’s new ordinance.

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

“How Do I Get Over False Guilt About Watching Profanity on TV?”

I had/have a conviction to not listen to TV profanity. So I bought a TV Guardian (a device which blocks out all of TV profanity). I was so happy, problem solved. However, I still sense a somewhat deep sense of guilt. I believe I am struggling with false guilt, because I am feeling guilty for doing something (using a TV Guardian) which I know to be godly and just. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how do I cure false guilt?

I applaud your desire not to expose yourself to profane language. That’s commendable. Further, you took steps to ensure. That desire is for holiness and let me affirm that.

The fact that you feel guilty about it is difficult for me to assess without knowing precisely what it is you feel guilty about, or why. Answering these questions will help you determine whether your guilt is in fact false guilt, as you put it, or just good old fashioned conviction from the Holy Spirit.

Probe’s president Kerby Anderson wrote an article on False Guilt which explores these very issues and can help you answer just such questions. Check it out. I pray it will bless you. I hope this is helpful.

Praying for you,

Paul Rutherford

Thank you. Somebody else pointed out to me that maybe the problem is that I am remembering a little of the profanity. You see, I used to watch some of the same shows with no filter. God convicted me so I bought a TV Guardian. However, since I had already watched the shows without the Guardian I can still remember some of the curse words. What should I do?

Hi ____,

Allow me to “jump in” here and try to help you a bit. I think Paul did a good job of counseling you.

After reading your follow up to his response, I sense an uneasy pattern may be at work in you: a need to perform holiness for God and not mess up. This could be the root of the problem you are having—not understanding very fully the grace God offers.

Rather than focus on the curse words that you recall (or that fact that you recall them, which is no surprise, since God’s forgiveness does not mean He gives us a lobotomy), it would be more fruitful to concentrate on the enabling of God’s Holy Spirit for any believer to experience and live out holiness in our lives. It’s a subtle shift to talk about, but profoundly different in effect.

How might this look in your situation? Try applying some biblical principles to your thinking:
• Make your mind up to fill it (your mind) with Scripture—the holy words of life. Read Scripture daily like your life depends on it (your spiritual life and health DO depend on it), but it’s not to get favor with God. That’s already yours if you put your faith in Him—Jesus took care of our relationship with His Father.

• John 15:3-5 says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” So, if you have believed in Jesus to forgive your sin and keep you from everlasting punishment that we all deserve, you are clean. He said so. Act like you believe it and move on.

• Abide in Christ (live, breathe, think about, aim your life at and depend on Him for everything). This doesn’t mean you lay down and expect Him to do your living out of faith for you, but it means you have no confidence in yourself to either care about sin or defeat it. It’s He who works in you to make you holy. (Notice those two verses linked to above are back-to-back in the same thought. You cooperate with God’s work in your life by letting Him work and doing your part.) Your job is to let him, to yield, to put to death (stop feeding) the flesh. Getting TV Guardian seems like a great step—but it’s Christ who has to work out the memories, etc. for believers.

• Speaking of memories of images (sexual or otherwise), curses / cuss words, violence, ungodly things, here is something that is effective for me: give them to God to bury them, to take them off your mental screen or from your mental “hearing.” I base this on the verse: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). This applies a general principle to our own rebellious, fleshly thoughts that have gotten corrupted by things like bad language.

• Most of all, don’t worry about it. “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.” (Philippians 4:6, NLT)

You seem to be obsessed with “doing it right” and “not messing up” (as I would put it). This is not trust, so it’s not God-centered or God-honoring—and it won’t work. Ephesians 1 says, “It was for freedom that Christ set you free.” You neither have to live in bondage to sin (like cursing) OR to having to keep the Law (keeping from cursing or thinking about those words). You’re free to rise above all of that by living a genuinely Spirit-led holy life—believe it and learn to live it. It takes practice and you will fail! Go back to God, ask forgiveness for this particular failure (you’ve already been saved from the penalty of sin if you believe Him for that) and start all over.

Ultimately, if you cannot get past this any other way, are you willing to give up the movies—even if your TV Guardian goes unused and you miss those fave movies? Giving them up could, for you, be
part of putting the deeds of the flesh to death and picking up your cross to follow Him (“Then, calling the crowd to join His disciples, He said, ‘If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow Me.’” —Mark 8:34)

Believe me as one who’s been asked to give up various things enough times in my 35 years of walking with Christ, when the Lord leads you to give something up, it’s well worth it.

I hope this provides some guidance. It goes deep. Read it and the Scripture passages many times, praying that the Lord will make things clear to you and apply them with others holding you accountable—share with mature Christians, your pastor, etc.

Praying with Paul for you, ______. Thanks for writing.

Byron Barlowe

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