MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking

MySpace and other social networking sites can be a great boon or a great danger. Byron Barlowe cautions Christian parents of teens to exercise discernment in educating themselves about this important part of life, and look for a redemptive view of this social technology.

Very Big and Very Hip

MySpace.com: *It's big, it's growing, it's controversial for good reasons, and it's probably touched your family—and you may not even know it. In this section, we answer the questions, "What is it and why do you as a parent need to learn more about protecting your kids without cutting them off?"*

Is *MySpace* a harmless teen hangout or a treacherous trap? Should parents forbid your kids from using *MySpace* or similar social networking Web sites? Kids, do your parents, like, *even* have a *clue*? And could Christians legitimately use *MySpace* as a mission field?

Controversy about *MySpace* still abounds, even in the fast-moving online world.

Imagine this: Your straight-A, straight-laced teenaged daughter Lori met Aaron online when he visited her *MySpace* profile, a Web page about her. Now she wants to go to the concert with Aaron and his online buddy, "PartyCrasher." "But mom, we've been 'friends' for weeks!" she whines. Mom and Dad, what do you do now?

This may not happen to your family, but something similar

happened to a Michigan family whose previously trouble-free sixteen-year-old daughter sneaked a flight to the Middle East to rendezvous with a *MySpace* "friend"

So, what is *MySpace*? According to one top ranking site, in August 2007 it became the sixth-most-visited Web site on the Internet,[{2}](#) with over 100 million accounts.

A "perfect storm": millions of people—many of them in their teens and twenties—are connecting with friends, meeting new ones, producing Web
pages and video and music, chatting, inviting back and forth to events—even
doing business and art—all within virtual communities.

Think of it as a microcosm of the World Wide Web, only much more easily connected and organized, even by kids. If the Internet was the Wild West, social networking sites—sites like *MySpace*—are becoming its boomtowns.

Wired magazine explains, "*MySpace*.Com, the Internet's most popular social networking site…has *helped redefine the way a generation communicates*."[{3}](#)

One digital culture watcher wrote, "Community-based websites are the fastest growing sites on the Internet. The teen social ecosystem *MySpace*" is the biggest.[{4}](#)

"According to some," writes Connie Neal, author of *MySpace for Moms & Dads*, "MySpace marks a societal revolution as monumental as the industrial revolution."[{5}](#)

MySpace owner Rupert Murdoch said, "The average person who is computer proficient is self-empowered in a way they never have [been] before."[{6}](#)

It's this newfound "empowerment" that rightly concerns parents.

Let's keep perspective. It's only natural that real life is

replicated online. A Roper study found that "online communities represent a real and growing phenomenon, but one that is dwarfed by interest in *real-world* social networks . . . [like] extended family (94% interest), neighborhood or town (80%), religious or spiritual organization (77%), hobby/interest (69%)" and so forth.

The directors of *BlogSafety.com* have written a handy book entitled *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking.* ("Blog" is short for Weblog, an online diary or commentary page.) They write regarding the rapidly evolving topic of teens redefining blogging into more of a social interaction: "As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go. . . . To them, these sites are just another tool for socializing."{7} Online and offline distinctions blur into oblivion.

What does this mean for Christian youth and parents?

Dangers and Solutions

MySpace *and similar social networking sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. Threats like malicious software, cyberbullying, and sexual predators render it risky for the unprepared and unsupervised.* MySpace *is being called to account and is responding, but it's primarily up to parents to protect their children.*

One thoughtful parent and Christian school educator responded to the topic as I first did: "Isn't *MySpace* a waste of time or worse, a place where kids think they're experiencing real relationships but are *only* getting a risky situation?" His observation was that the kind of kids who were drawn to *MySpace* already had deep needs that weren't being fulfilled, primarily by parents.

As a parent of three pre-teens, I shared his skepticism. Yet,

there's a bigger picture, I found. There's hope, too. Nonetheless, it can be scary, especially in light of greater autonomy for kids who naturally lack discretion.

Let's pretend you find your thirteen-year-old son pacing after something hits the wall with a crash. He blurts out, "They put up a site about me with nasty pictures and said I'm fat! Now everybody is messaging about it. I'm not going to school." He's been cyberslammed and feels his young world crashing in.

The sense of public humiliation caused by cyberbullying is coupled with the danger that online threats can spill into real life. *MySpace* and similar sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. As a parent, you may choose to forbid or restrict use of *MySpace* in your home. But I suggest you choose in an informed, careful way.

Sexual dangers are the best known. Chatrooms and posted messages easily enable such temptations and threats. One recent trip to *MySpace* rendered solicitations to chat online with a sultry woman seeking American servicemen and a gang-type fellow with the screen name "King Pimpin'."

In 2002, fifteen-year-old Katie Canton met John in a live online chat room. Since he lived far away, Katie felt free to send photos and flirt. Soon John was sending Katie gifts and e-mailing.

This story ended well: Katie testified at John's trial where he got twenty years in prison. But it had taken Katie participating in a role-playing video game to realize that her behavior and that of her would-be abuser was becoming a classic case of online predation.[{8}](#) This is why parental education and supervision are crucial.

Again, some perspective is in order. It's tempting to view sites like *MySpace*.com as a monolithic online ghetto. A more accurate word picture may be a high school campus. Enter on one side, see the "dopeheads"; enter another, see the "jocks"

and cheerleaders. You can't paint with too broad a brush in assessing it accurately. And students can privately stay in the "nice part of town."

Concern is warranted, of course. The required minimum age for *MySpace* is fourteen. However, age verification is still technically impossible, largely due to lack of a public track record for minors—ironic, as many of them create public records openly on such sites.

Parents have sued on behalf of their abused daughters, and thirty-four state attorneys general are now demanding more age-verification controls.{9} Meanwhile, *MySpace* has reportedly discovered thousands of members who are convicted sex offenders. "The attorneys general of Georgia, Idaho, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and New Hampshire joined Connecticut in signing a letter to the company asking it to turn over information."{10}

MySpace has responded. The company deleted two hundred thousand "objectionable" accounts.{11} (A similar move by networking site *Friendster* caused a mass exodus, a sad commentary on many of its users.) *MySpace* also began developing parental tracking software, seen by many as just a start.

After hiring a former prosecutor with experience working on sex crimes against children as chief security officer, in January, 2007, *MySpace* donated a breakthrough national database to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). It features the first-ever method to match faces and body features like tattoos to often-elusive sex offenders. Providing "a way to filter convicted offenders from younger *MySpace* members, the database combines the records of individual state registries, plus allows searches based on images, which the NCMEC said is important."{12}

A new senate bill would require—for the first time ever—sex

offenders to register their email addresses. Donna Rice Hughes, president of the watchdog/activist group Enough Is Enough, says, "While there is no 'silver bullet' for protecting children from Internet dangers, this legislation will help to provide another protective barrier for millions of children. . . . Parents must remain proactive and educated about the safety rules and software tools available."{13}

Child safety experts agree: parental guidance should be the first and strongest line of defense. Technology continues to outrun ethical reflection in a culture marked by the philosophy, "If it can be done, go for it!" Pragmatism, the myth of progress as always good, lack of a biblical understanding of sin's pervasiveness and seriousness and sheer greed, drive many of the developments like the *MySpace* revolution.

But so do innately human needs and God-given desires to connect in a disjointed, wired world. Moral panic regarding teens and technology are nothing new. Doomsday prophecies—partially deserved—ensued with the advent motion pictures, television, and the Internet itself, as Internet researcher Danah Boyd points out.{14} Wise adaptation is always essential to being "in the world but not of it."{15}

Hanging Out and Friending

Kids hang out on MySpace *because virtually everyone they know does, even if they would prefer not to. Another big draw: shared interests. But teens need to appreciate the distinction between acquaintances and true friends, as well as appropriate vs. illegitimate public intimacy while being truly "real."*

What can make young men cry? Take away their online "space."

At a conference panel discussion on social networking, four ministry leaders shared nearly identical experiences. Their teens had naturally migrated to *MySpace* with their peers and

created profiles there, unknown to these conservative Christian dads. After perusing the site, three of the four outright forbade use of *MySpace*. One by one, they told tales of begging and weeping. One boy sobbed, "Dad, it's the only time I've ever felt cool."

This is tricky. Parents' gut reaction may be to minimize or dismiss such a notion. Yet, socialization at this age happens naturally, inevitably, even critically. But online? Here?

But part of the vital process of adolescent socializing is decoding cues about where you fit into the youth culture and *who* you are perceived to be. If kids are deeply grounded in the love of their God and family, it's just another "place." It's when this grounding is missing that *MySpace* can easily become a platform to present a false self.

Danah Boyd talks about the psychology of publicly viewable social networking: it's performed. "Showing face" becomes key, being "real" has its limits while "friending" online. Note the use of "friend" as a verb there.{16}

Author Connie Neal lists ways *MySpace* meets the needs of teens in uncanny ways, needs to:

- *Communicate with peers*

- *Try on different styles*

- *See what others are like*

- *Explore their generation's music, art, photography*

- *Hear, view, read stories through media*

- *Flirt*

- *Make friends*

- *Feel included in a group{17}*

For a time, *MySpace* also seemed unavoidable (it may be "like, so last year" at this point; *Facebook* is reportedly the social site of choice today among youth). Danah Boyd says, "For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life—they are [at *MySpace*] because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it's cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do.

Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Joneses."[18]

Social networking relies on clicking to "make" or invite "friends." In contrast, an ancient Hebrew proverb states, "A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."[19]

This leads to a deeper question: "What does the term 'friend' really mean?" Certainly more than a popularity contest, which many accuse *MySpace* of becoming. Stephanie Bennett, writing for *Breakpoint,* warns, "In many ways these technologies reduce relationship to a commodity—something one possesses rather than a jointly developed friendship."

Bennett continues:

> *Just as the practice of [slow-paced] courtship . . . gave way to dating and the now common practice of objectifying "the other" [or "hooking up" and casual sex], the rules of relationship are . . . being rewritten, and . . . are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.[20]*

Author C. S. Lewis wrote:

> *Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some*

insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."{21}

Perhaps herein lies the greatest appeal of *MySpace*—shared interests. This is not lost on teenagers.

In balance, as one participant in a CNN.com forum wrote, "True friends . . . need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend."{22}

C. S. Lewis also wrote, "Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities."{23} The scantily clad girls parading on certain pages at *MySpace* reflect our culture. Sex is confused with intimacy nowadays; psychological nudity on the Internet is not so different.

Billed as a place to make friends and connect in community, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Xanga* and the like may be having the opposite effect, according to one study at San Diego State. It uncovered "an attitude of 'It's all about me'" prevailing among college students, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, and "blogging and social networking are 'playing a big role' in this."{24}

Nonsense, says tech educator Andy Carvin. Social networking largely entails "communities where people reinforce interpersonal relationships through sharing and creating content. . . . [They] want to be a part of something bigger than themselves."{25}

Social sites should reflect and enhance relationships, not define them. Challenge the presumption of *instant-friendship-by-mouseclick* with your kids as necessary. Guard against not only physical but "psychological nudity."

This presents one more important conversational topic for parents training their kids in a biblical worldview marked by serving others, not by parading themselves or sending false signals.

Parents and Teens Cooperating

Picture yourself or your child in a situation like this: "We're sorry, Caitlyn, but we just cannot hire you. Your online history isn't in keeping with our company's standards." A growing host of those among the Internet generation with online regrets have walled off their online socializing from prying parents and ended up miring their futures in controversy.

Another problem with *MySpace* and social sites is what Boyd calls *persistence in digital publics*. Unable to envision the future, kids don't grasp the lasting ramifications of their youthful foolishness, often captured publicly and permanently in cyberspace. "Without impetus," Boyd says, "teens rarely choose to go private on *MySpace* and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've "friended." They would just prefer [that] adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men."{26} Natural teenage feelings indeed.

Boyd continues:

> *While the potential predator or future employer doesn't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanding complete control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.{27}*

While hers may sound like a throwback to the 1960s "Question authority!" mantra, Boyd raises a good point. She points out that nowadays adults control youth environments as never before due to fear of abduction and safety issues. "Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang outs like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7-11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents."{28} Balancing the imperative to protect against the need to let go is tough.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and youth leaders need to inculcate and model a biblical respect for God-given authority. When kids disrespect this, their Internet privileges should be at stake. Some practical safety tips for parents:

- *Make sure your kids profile themselves online privately, only to well-chosen friends.*

- *Ask your kids to invite you online as a "friend"—but don't embarrass them!*

- *Openly discuss your concerns about social networking with your child.*

- *Tour their online space and those of their friends.*

- *Be alert to kids who are very secretive about their Internet use.*

- *Use the computer in a common area of the house.*

- *Monitor mobile online use and set up accountability with meaningful consequences. Yet, too many rules could exasperate older kids.{29}*

Remember the story of the crying kids who had *MySpace* privileges revoked? One dad took a different approach. He entered into his daughter's online world and began exploring

how to safely navigate and do ministry outreach together. Connie Neal describes *MySpace for Moms and Dads* how she participates with her daughter's willing friends as spiritual and relational advisor.{30}

The eventual goal of child-rearing is increasing autonomy and decreasing dependency. Social networking allows kids some autonomy, but they need to be careful in such a public arena. We as parents do well to act knowledgeably, not react out of sheer emotion.

Redeeming *MySpace*

MySpace has effectively tapped into youth culture *and* human nature. Teens are riding a culture-wide wave of self-expression.

But adult audiences there—and especially at other networking sites—are even bigger. Companies are now glomming onto the model for business purposes. *AnimalAttraction.com*, a social networking site for people who love pets, started as a dating service. Now, you can create a tailor-made social network through services like *Ning*.

Up to ten thousand Virginia Tech students conversed on social sites the day thirty-two were murdered in a shooting rampage.{31} Presidential candidates are leveraging networking sites today.

Why is this idea so powerful? Could it be that self-expression is a sign of *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted into the soul of everyone? God spoke the world into existence, and we, his highest creatures, create ideas in much the same way. We seem to have an insatiable need to be heard, especially as we emerge into young manhood or womanhood.

What if we're really after much more—eternally satisfying relating that nothing on earth can compare to? For many folks,

online "friends" or a bigger-than-life Web identity are just new ways to reach out for what's unreachable in this life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy . . . we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world."{32}

MySpace can be surprisingly redemptive. It served as a clearinghouse of mourning for Anna, murdered in cold blood while working at a McDonald's. A youth-led movement to help Ugandan orphans is building to huge proportions.

The head of Internet outreach for one of the world's largest ministries encourages viewing *MySpace* as a mission field. He tells kids, "It's where your friends and *their* friends are already. Jesus called us to be smart, not safe." As Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."{33}

If you decide that *MySpace* is not for your family, there are Christian alternatives created for fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship; *Meetfish.com* and *MyPraize.com* are two.

Rather than "circle the countercultural wagons," why not explore the frontier of online social networking with your child? In a few years, the choice will be theirs, and they will likely default to socializing online as well as offline. They need to learn how to:

• **Be discerning online***, asking things like, "Do I know and trust this person? Will this help me or hurt me?"*

• **Reflect Christ online:** *"How am I coming across? Does it honor my family and God? Am I teasing with moral compromise?"*

• *Ask themselves "Who seems lost, alone, afraid? Who needs the*
gospel?" **That is, see their online life as a calling of Christ***.*

Dr. Kathy Koch of *Celebrate Kids* offers a real-life prescription for healthy self-esteem: "Parents and teachers who pay attention to children and teens for who they are and not just what they do, believe in kids' present value and not just their future potential, and encourage kids by celebrating them on more than their birthdays."[{34}]

Do this while teaching discernment and a thoroughly biblical worldview, and social networking may not be a problem. It could be a blessing in disguise.

Notes

1. "'MySpace' teen back from Middle East," *USA Today*, www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-06-09-jordan-MySpace_x.htm (accessed August 14, 2007).

2. Alexa Top 500, www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?ts_mode=global&lang=none# (accessed August 14, 07).

3. "Marines Use MySpace to Recruit," *Wired*, www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2006/07/71448, July 24, 2006 (accessed August 14, 2007) (italics added).

4. Ellyssa Kroski, "Community 2.0," blog post on Web log Infotangle, infotangle.blogsome.com/2006/04/07/community-20/, posted April 7, 2006 (accessed August 14, 2007).

5. Connie Neal, "A Mom's Guide to MySpace: What you need to know about this popular website," *Today's Christian Woman* online edition, January/February 2007, Vol. 29, No. 1, Page 30 (print edition), www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2007/janfeb/5.30.html (accessed August 14, 2007).

6. Ibid.

7. Larry Magid and Anne Collier, *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking*, www.myspaceunraveled.com.

8. Ibid.

9. Lisa Lerer, "Why MySpace Doesn't Card," *Forbes* online, January 25, 2007, tinyurl.com/2jhwfy (accessed August 19, 2007).

10. Scott Malone, "Thousands of sex offenders discovered on MySpace," May 14, 2007, tinyurl.com/35x2zq (accessed August 14, 2007).

11. Joshua Chaffin and Aline van Duyn, "MySpace acts to calm teen safety fears," *Financial Times*, March 30 2006, www.ft.com/cms/s/3f8a53d4-c01c-11da-939f-0000779e2340.html (accessed August 14, 2007).

12. Ed Sutherland, "MySpace Makes Offer on Offender Database," January 29, 2007, www.internetnews.com/security/article.php/3656676 (accessed August 14, 2007).

13. Donna Rice Hughes, "Enough Is Enough Endorses The 'Kids Act Of 2007'," *Enough is Enough*, March 16, 2007, www.enough.org/inside.php?id=PM5ECT8A (accessed August 14, 2007).

14. Danah Boyd, "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace," *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, St. Louis, MO. February, 2006, www.danah.org/papers/AAAS2006.html (accessed August 14, 2007).

15. John 17:14-15 (NIV).

16. Boyd, "Identity Production in a Networked Culture."

17. Connie Neal, *MySpace for Moms and Dads: A Guide to Understanding the Risks and the Rewards*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 98-99.

18. Boyd, "Identity Production in a Networked Culture."

19. Proverbs 18:24 (NIV).

20. Stephanie Bennett, "MySpace—The Final Frontier?" January 12, 2007, radio commentary, *Breakpoint*, breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=5969 (accessed August 15, 2007).

21. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Orlando, FL: Harvest Books: Harcourt, Inc., original copyright 1960), 65.

22. Anonymous forum participant, CNN.com (page no longer available), as quoted in a conversation on eMinistryNotes on "Can Internet communication sustain us?" October 9, 2006, www.eministrynotes.com/2006/10/09/new-trend-conversations-offline (accessed August 15, 2007).

23. Lewis, 71.

24. "Narcissism due to social networking?" *NetFamilyNews*, March 9, 2007, www.netfamilynews.org/nl070309.html#6 (accessed August 15, 2007).

25. *NetFamilyNews*, "Narcissism due to social networking?"

26. Boyd, "Identity Production in a Networked Culture."

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Based on Neal, *MySpace for Moms and Dads*.

30. Ibid.

31. *ABC Nightline*, April 16, 2007. "At one point today, up to 10,000 Virginia Tech students were using social Web sites like Facebook & MySpace to communicate about the tragic events that unfolded on their campus."

32. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

33. [Romans 12:21](#) (ESV).

34. Dr. Kathy Koch, Celebrate Kids, [celebratekids.com](#).

"Can You Suggest Graduation Gifts With Worldview In Mind?"

We are desiring to give each of our graduates an age appropriate gift, i.e., 8th grade, High School, and College, for graduation. We want to give them something to help them think through the Christian worldview in light of the culture they are being raised in.

Great question! We are in the "business" of providing such resources for kids and adults especially useful for those headed to secular university or college so anything on our site is appropriate, as well as the books & sites below.

The [Reasons to Believe](#) section of Probe.org is a great place for starters.

Resources written for children up to about 8th grade:

Here are Amazon.com listings by journalist turned Christian apologetics author extraordinaire Lee Strobel (note emphasis on titles very similar but not the same):

  *The Case for a **Creator** for Kids*

  *The Case for **Christ** for Kids*

*[The Case for **Faith** for Kids](#)*

[Off My Case for Kids: 12 Stories to Help You Defend Your Faith](#)

[The Case for a Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence That Points Toward God](#) (more grown-up edition)

[The Case for Faith–Student Edition](#)

Also, see:

[My Heart Christ's Home: Retold for Children](#) (don't know grade level) by Robert Boyd Munger OR

[My Heart Christ's Home](#) (original)

Other suggestions for high school grads, possibly 8th graders:

[Ethix: Being Bold in a Whatever World](#), by Sean McDowell (son of Josh McDowell, good author, speaker, thinker in his own right; this book written somewhat to youth leaders, perhaps—I've only sampled it; great illustrations especially about absolute truth vs. relative truth and morality)

[How to Stay Christian in College](#), by J. Budziszewski—My wife and I give this one to high school grads for obvious reasons, given the title. J. Budziszewski is a one-of-a-kind critical thinker who matches his intellect with caring for kids. See his columns under Ask Theophilus at Boundless.org—excellent narratives of paraphrased professor-student conversations about deep, real life issues from a Christian worldview.

Note: I suggest the 1999 edition, although there's a newer one (Th1nk books, a NavPress imprint). This older one contains many useful links, many from a site I used to edit:

[LeaderU.com](#). Massively useful for scholarly work like writing

papers, essays, debates. Most or all of the links cited in the book should still work.

[Chris Chrisman Goes to College: and Faces the Challenges of Relativism, Individualism and Pluralism](). From the master of worldview, James Sire, brought down off the proverbial shelf for laypeople, this fictional account of three new collegians creatively tackles the topics in the book's subtitle. Particularly interesting: Sire "identifies no fewer than six types of relativism," according to the cover.

For college or high school grads:

[Welcome To College: A Christ-Followers Guide for the Journey](), by Jonathan Morrow. This sweeping, but accessible and succinct volume contains 42 chapters that ask: What do Christians really believe? Can I put that into words for unbelievers? What is the nature of truth and how do we know things? What about sex? Finances? How should a Christian worldview inform my entire life and experience? and much more. Packs a worldview wallop.

[Making Your Faith Your Own, A Guidebook for Believers With Questions](), by Teresa Vining. See the top review of a pastor's wife.

The second review at Amazon.com of the above book is by my colleague, Sue Bohlin, whose responses on scores of questions from believers and unbelievers, posted here on Probe.org, are worth their weight in gold:

[Probe Answers Your Email](). Look for Sue Bohlin's responses particularly, especially in the Marriage & Family, Sexuality, Homosexuality and Gender sections, but elsewhere as well. Michael Gleghorn is great on theology & philosophy. This set of 500-600 answers is good for high school, college, adult, sometimes younger, depending on topics.

[My Utmost for His Highest](#) *(latest edition), Oswald Chambers*

A subscription to our own *[Probe-Alert](#)* e-letter (always free, every two weeks, relevant new materials and more) might be a good "freebie"—they'll have to approve it via email. Or, to avoid that and make it a one-step operation, send a list of emails to me and I'll mass subscribe them manually.

I hope you find this helpful. God bless you and your graduates and may they thrive in their faith as they move to their next life-step.

Byron Barlowe

Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film "Amazing Grace"

The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace,em> a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed[1] transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you're so inclined, owning. Wilberforce's story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

Slavery then & now

The term "slavery" usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world's history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18ᵗʰ Century British slave trade "was legal, lucrative, and brutal."{2} Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce's day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.{3}

Latin America's pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent

conference:

> *My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples….*
>
> *I don't like it. I am not proud of it…. It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.*

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

> *And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries to an end?[{4}](#)*

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, "today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave."[{5}](#) "About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States."[{6}](#)

Relative to the *chattel slaves* of Wilberforce's day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today's illegally held human "property" comes cheap—and blends in. Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. "Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world's third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms

dealing."{7}

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner, member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. "There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World."{8}

An "alliance of modern Wilberforces" includes "lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz," who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.{9} They seek to repeat Wilberforce's success.

Opposition in Wilberforce's day

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. "…The entire worldview of the British Empire was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak."{10}

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."{11}

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement" in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, "A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed slavery and the slave trade{12}, was ignored." Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the "revival of slavery" in Wilberforce's time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies "…was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly

identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of pagans."{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce's convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce's life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

> *…The moral and social behavior of the entire culture…was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.*

Wilberforce's Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life's story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one's day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

> *Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who*

worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith, Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children, certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: "because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries."

The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he "appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen."{16} Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* ("by faith alone") and *sola gratia* ("by grace alone") formed the foundation of Wilberforce's

theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, "He really knew that he was as wicked a sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one's own sinfulness, it's very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee."

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

> *…The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living…. [The "Nominal Christians" or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce's day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.{17}*

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."{18} Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free…for you are all one in Christ Jesus."{19} The status of *slave* was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. "…Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery…in the ancient world, Paul's words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery, then and for the future."{20}

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same

altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others{21} (much like contemporary believers who buy freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.{22}

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

> *…The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.{23}*

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for "who knows which path leads to God?"

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life{24}—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.
2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/, accessed 3-22-07.

3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276. Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.

4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.

5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, www.worldmag.com/articles/12700, accessed 3-21-07.

6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.

7. *World*, Abraham.

8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day reality of forced servitude around the world" according to World. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.

9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.

10. "Doing good and helping the poor," interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: www.worldmag.com/articles/12703, accessed 3-22-07.

11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.

12. "The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: 'Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.' However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch." From Wikipedia entry, "History of Slavery," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2, accessed 3-23-07.

13. Schmidt, 276.

14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07

15. Ibid, entire section.
16. Schmidt, 277.
17. "Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice," John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, www.worldmag.com/articles/12691, accessed 3-22-07.
18. 2 Corinthians 3:17
19. Galatians 3:28
20. Schmidt, 273.
21. Ibid, 274.
22. Ibid, 289.
23. Ibid, 290.
24. John 14:6

"How Are We to Give to the Poor?"

I am working on a topic for a Men's breakfast on "giving to the poor." Do you have any articles on this specific topic? I am not looking at giving in general—i.e. to the local church or biblical ministries. My topic is specifically "giving personally to the poor." Are we as believers commanded to share with the poor? Is that any difference between poor "believers" and poor "non-believers"? Do we give to the poor to help them or to grow in our own walk with the Lord?

Thank you for your questions and for writing Probe.org. I want to speed you on your way with some input, links and rhetorical questions of my own to get you thinking. We pray your teaching / challenge / presentation goes well.

Your question, and it's understandable why you ask it, kind of

sets up a false dichotomy that we're all prone to these days. The notion that teaching on giving in general is somehow separate from teaching on giving as individuals seems like an American, 21st-century presumption. Why wouldn't one inform the other? The church, after all, is made up of Christians, one by one. So teaching to the church at large is teaching to each believer—the doing (giving) just sometimes gets done through an organization.

I don't know of any overtly direct commands on giving in the New Testament. However, as you can see below, there is much taught on the topic, which takes generous giving of several kinds for granted.

That should free you up to teach or lead discussions, if you buy into it. Pray and pick from all of the teachings to share. That's why I'm including some of the links on giving in general, below. Here's another good place to [start with Scriptures](#) and Bible study tools. Another set of Scriptures are [here](#).

What's more, it may be that your church has a very institutionalized way of giving. It could have big, church-wide or denominational programs for giving to the poor, to missions and other things commanded by God. This is okay in and of itself, but has a way of taking the individual out of the mix. Wasn't Jesus teaching disciples and followers rather than an institution? Too easy to cop out on our own responsibility or hide behind programs that way.

That's why the other links are there, about our own personal heart attitude in giving. Kerby Anderson talks about this and other issues in [A Biblical Perspective on Giving](#) (especially the final two parts).

Also, what about people in our lives who need help, who need money in particular? Yesterday, a friend of mine was in serious need. First, I bought him lunch. I spent hours driving

on miles on icy roads to get a huge amount of money to lend him. Today, I gave a bit of cash. I kept remembering the Scripture "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). I am not like this—I always have better things to do and naturally wonder why people let things get so bad. The Spirit of God was leading me in God's gracious way to see a fellow believer and human made in His image which is so different than my own fleshly way. It was the most fulfilling day I've spent in months, by the way.

Your query about whether Christians are different than unbelievers in this sense leads me to say, yes, when it comes to choices in general, I need to prioritize the brother and sister over the stranger. Ideally, I help all of them or lead them to help. But God's Name and reputation is at stake, according to John in his first epistle (1 John), when it comes to how we treat one another in the family of God. So again, fellow Christians are top priority—even while following after God's heart for the poor and oppressed in general.

What do you do when confronted with a panhandler or needy relative or friend? Not an easy answer. I need to ask myself:

- *IF I give, will I give gladly or grudgingly?*
- *How is God speaking to me these days about my own need to give?*
- *Am I giving already as a way of life or would it be just an impulse?*
- *Do I have anything to give the guy that will not put me or loved ones in great need or danger—where does wisdom come in to speak to me?*
- *Does he seem like he sincerely needs it or is he making a living on the street begging rather than working—is biblical discernment playing a role?*
- *Is it okay to ask that or do I feel guilty for even wondering?*

Believers have to wrestle with deep issues of Lordship (is God really in charge of my own money and things?) and stewardship (how exactly should I use what I've been given?—and it's ALL been given) and discernment (learning to know what's bad, questionable, good, better, best) well ahead of time or we're bobbing on the water when it comes to decisions in the moment.

Bottom line is: the heart of God is for the poor and oppressed. If I am seeking to love God and obey Him, to be like Him and reflect Him to others, I will care about the poor. If I honestly don't care, I need to ask Him to put that into my heart and change me. I need to meditate on all those Scriptures that tell me He cares for the poor and needy and wants me to. Meanwhile, I need to give by faith and participate in the changing.

Giving can look like writing a check to the Red Cross or, often better, a biblically-oriented relief group like Samaritan's Purse. Or it may be overtipping when witnessing to a waitstaff person. Or it could be just giving an (anonymous?) cash gift to someone who's hurting financially or who needs something they can't afford right now. It may be through the offering plate. Any way it's given, it needs to be out of a heart given over to God fully. This article offers good perspective on it: [Developing a Giving Heart](#) at Bible.org (note: this is part of a series that looks very promising to me on a trusted Web site).

These links may help as well:

  - [*Giving Can Improve Your Health; Science Says So*](#) *(what's wrong w/it being good for us?)*
  - [*Charity and Compassion: Christianity Is Good for Culture*](#) *(I can do my part to change culture, not just the one I'm helping right now)*
  - [*"What's the NT Understanding of Tithing?"*](#)

I hope this helps. Please let me know how it goes if you get a

chance, will you?

Blessings,

Byron Barlowe