Video Games — Evaluating Them From a Christian Perspective

Grand Theft Auto

The best-selling video game in America last year was "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas." The recent controversy over this popular video game is just another reminder of the deception of ratings and the need for parental direction and discernment when it comes to buying video games.

The game in question already has a bad reputation. The National Institute on Media and the Family described it this way: "Raunchy, violent and portraying just about every deviant act that a criminal could think of in full, living 3D graphics. Grand Theft Auto takes the cake again as one of the year's worst games for kids. The premise—restore respect to your neighborhood as you take on equally corrupt San Andreas police."{1}

Ironically what caused the controversy over the game was not its overt violence and sexuality. What caused a national stir was what was hidden within the game. Those playing the game (known as gamers) could download a modification of "Grand Theft Auto" that would allow them to see graphic sex scenes on screen.

Initially the distributor distanced itself from what hackers could do with their product once it was on the market. But that argument fell flat when it was found that the downloaded modification merely unlocked pornographic material already within the game. It now turns out that skilled players can unlock the pornographic content without downloading the key from the Internet. The game initially had a "Mature" rating. The Entertainment Software Ratings Board now requires that it

be labeled "Adults Only."

"Grand Theft Auto" has already been a lightning rod for controversy because it rewards players for committing crimes and engaging in dangerous and immoral behavior. Gamers can buy and sell drugs, steal cars, run down pedestrians, even feed people into a wood chipper. Nevertheless, the game has sold more than five million copies in the United States.

Who is buying this game? Some are adults buying the game for themselves, but a large percentage of the people buying this game are parents or grandparents buying the game for their kids or grandkids.

Columnist Mona Charen points out that the original concerns about this game surfaced when a Manhattan grandmother bought the game for her fourteen-year-old grandson. Then she was shocked to find out that he could modify the game by downloading material from the Internet. Charen asks, "So, a kindly eighty-five-year-old lady has no qualms about purchasing a gang-glorifying, violence-soaked, sick entertainment for her teenage grandson, but is shocked when it turns out to contain explicit sex? Wasn't the rest enough?"[2]

In most cases, parents and grandparents are buying these games and need to exercise discernment. Many games are harmless and even can help stimulate the mind. Some are questionable. And others are violent and sexually explicit. We need to use discernment in selecting these games.

Benefits of Video Games

A recent article in *Discover* magazine talked about the perception most people have of video game players. It said this is "the classic stereotype of gamers as attention-deficit-crazed stimulus junkies, easily distracted by flashy graphics and on-screen carnage."[3] Yet new research shows that gaming can be mentally enriching with such cognitive

benefits as: pattern recognition, system thinking, and even patience.[4]

One of the best-known studies (done by Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier) found that playing an action video game markedly improved performance on a range of visual skills related to detecting objects in briefly flashed displays. They found that gamers exhibit superior performance relative to non-gamers on a set of benchmark visual tasks.[5]

What they found was the action video gamers tend to be more attuned to their surroundings. While this occurs while performing within the video game, it also transfers to such things as driving down a residential street where they are more likely than a non-gamer to pick out a child running into the street after a ball.

They found that gamers can process visual information more quickly and can track 30 percent more objects than non-gamers. These conclusions came from testing both gamers and non-gamers with a series of three tests.

The first test flashed a small object on a screen for 1/160 of a second and the participant would indicate where it flashed. Gamers tended to notice the object far more often than non-gamers.

The second test flashed a number of small objects on a screen at once. The subjects had to type the number of objects they saw. Gamers saw the correct number more often than non-gamers.

The third test flashed black letters and one white letter on a screen in fast succession. The one white letter was sometimes followed by a black "X." Gamers were able to pick out the white letter more often than non-gamers and could more accurately say whether it was followed by a black "X."

The researchers also wanted to know whether the superior performance of gamers was acquired or self-selected. In other

words, do video games actually improve visual attention skills or is it possible that visually attentive people choose to play video games?

Green and Bavelier trained a selection of non-gamers on one of two video games. One group played the World War II action video game "Medal of Honor." The other group served as the control group and played the puzzle game "Tetris." The researchers found that after two weeks, the group trained on the World War II game showed a marked increase in performance over the control group.

The researchers therefore concluded: "By forcing players to simultaneously juggle a number of varied tasks (detect new enemies, track existing enemies and avoid getting hurt, among others), action-video-game playing pushed the limits of three rather different aspects of visual attention."{6}

Video games can also train our brain to be more efficient. In the early 1990s, Richard Haier (University of California at Irving's Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior), scanned the brains of "Tetris" players. He found that in first-time users, the brain requires lots of energy. In fact, cerebral glucose metabolic rates actually soar. But after a few weeks, these rates sink to normal as performance increases seven-fold.{7} In essence, "Tetris" trains your brain to stop using inefficient gray matter.

Types of Video Games

Let's now focus on the rating of video games and the major video game categories. As we mentioned earlier, the video game industry is self-regulated, so we need to exercise discernment.

EC – Early Childhood (age 3 and older) – These games are appropriate for anyone who can play a video game and contains no inappropriate material.

E – Everyone (age 6 and older) – These games are designed for younger players and are the equivalent of a PG movie.

T – Teen (age 13 and older) – Generally these games are not appropriate for younger ages and are equivalent of a PG-13 movie.

M – Mature (age 17 and older) – These games are not appropriate for children. They may be rated as such because of overt violence, sexual content, and profanity.

AO – Adults Only (ages 18 and older) – These games involve excessive violence, sexual content, and explicit language.

There are a number of different types of video games.

Puzzles – Puzzle games are usually acceptable for all ages and generally are rated "E." These games involve logic and spatial arrangements. The best known puzzle game is "Tetris."

Strategy – These games may be as straightforward as "Chessmaster" or involve the use of tactical moves of troops or players such as "Advanced Wars."

Simulation games – Some games like "SimCity" require creativity and advanced problem-solving skills. Others involve driving or flying simulations that can be relatively tame or highly offensive such as the "Grand Theft Auto" series of video games.

Arcade games – The classic arcade games include such favorites as "Pacman" or "Frogger." However, the newer arcade games may include games like the violent "Street Fighter."

Role playing games – This is a type of game where players assume the roles of via role-playing. Although these games may be less graphic, they often involve fantasy and even the occult.

Action games – These games most often have an "M" rating. Many

of these action games involve point-and-shoot games that are especially dangerous.

Violent Video Games

There is cause for concern about violent video games. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, playing violent video games increases the likelihood of adolescent violent behavior by as much as 13 percent to 22 percent.[8]

A 2005 meta-analysis of over thirty-five research studies (that included 4000 participants) found that "playing violent video games significantly increases physiological arousal and feelings of anger or hostility, and significantly decreases pro-social helping behavior."[9] Another study has shown a relationship between playing violent video games and being involved in violent acts.[10]

Testimony before the United States Senate documents the following: (1) that violent video games increase violent adolescent behavior, (2) that heavy game players become desensitized to aggression and violence, (3) that nearly 90 percent of all African-American females in these games are victims of violence, and (4) that the most common role for women in violent video games is as prostitutes.[11]

One of the people speaking out against violent video games is Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, whom I have interviewed on a number of occasions. He is a former West Point professor and has written books on the subject of killing.[12] He has also testified that these violent video games are essentially "killing simulators."

Grossman testified on the shooting in Paducah, Kentucky. Michael Carneal, a fourteen-year-old boy who had never fired a handgun before, stole a pistol and fired a few practice shots the night before. The next morning he fired eight shots and had eight hits (four of them head shots, one neck, and three

upper torso). This is unprecedented marksmanship for a boy who only fired a .22 caliber rifle once at a summer camp.

The typical response in firing a gun is to fire at the target until it drops. Carneal instead moved from victim to victim just like he had learned in the violent video games he played.

The goal in these games is to rack up the "highest score" by moving quickly. Grossman points out that many of the games (such as "House of the Dead" or "Goldeneye" or "Turok") give bonus points for head shots.{13}

Does that mean that anyone who plays these games will be a killer? Of course not. But Grossman says that the kind of training we give to soldiers (operant conditioning, desensitization, etc.) is what we are also giving to our kids through many of these violent video games.

Ironically, the U.S. Marine Corps licensed one of these popular video games ("Doom") to train their combat fire teams in tactics and to rehearse combat actions of killing.{14} The video game manufacturers certainly know these are killing simulators. In fact the advertising for one game ("Quake II" that is produced by the same manufacturer as "Doom"), says: "We took what was killer, and made it mass murder."

Biblical Discernment

If we look back at the list of different types of video games, it is pretty easy to see that it is possible to find acceptable games as well as questionable and even dangerous video games in just about any category. That is why parental direction and discernment are so important.

The latest controversy over "Grand Theft Auto" demonstrates that the video game industry has not been effective at self-regulation. And children cannot be expected to exercise good judgment unless parents use discernment and teach it to their

kids.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." We should focus on what is positive and helpful to our Christian walk.

As Christians, we should develop discernment in our lives. See my article on "Media and Discernment" (www.probe.org/faith-and-culture/culture/media-and-discernment.html) for suggestions on how to develop discernment in your life and the life of your child.

Parents need to determine the possible benefits to playing videos and whether those benefits outweigh the negatives. Many of the games available today raise little or no concern. As one commentator put it, "The majority of video games on the best-seller list contain no more bloodshed than a game of Risk."[15]

But even good, constructive games played for long periods of time can be detrimental. Over the last few years I have been compiling statistics for my teen talk on media use. The number of hours young people spend watching TV, listening to music, surfing the Internet, going to movies, etc. is huge and increasing every year. Young people spend entirely too much time in front of a screen (TV screen, computer screen, movie screen).

So even good video games can be bad if young people are staying indoors and not going outdoors for exercise. Obesity is already a problem among many young people. And good video games can be bad if they take priority over responsibilities at home and schoolwork.

Parents should understand the potential dangers of video games and make sure they approve of the video games that come into their home. They may conclude that the drawbacks outweigh the

benefits. If their children do play video games, they should also set time limits and monitor attitudes and behaviors that appear. They should also watch for signs of addiction. The dangers of video games are real, and parents need to exercise discernment.

Notes

1. National Institute on Media and the Family, "Expanded Game Reviews," www.mediafamily.org/kidscore/games_gta4.shtml
2. Mona Charen, "Grand Theft Auto and us," 5 August 2005, www.townhall.com/columnists/monacharen/mc20050805.shtml.
3. Steven Johnson, "Your Brain on Video Games," *Discover*, July 2005, 40.
4. Ibid.
5. C. Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier, "Action video game modifies visual selective attention," *Nature* 423 (2003), 534-537.
6. Ibid., 536.
7. Jeffrey Goldsmith, "This is Your Brain on Tetris," *Wired*, Issue 2.05, May 1994, 2.
8. Lori O'Keefe, "Media Exposure Feeding Children's Violent Acts," *American Academy of Pediatrics News*, January 2002.
9. Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds," *A Kaiser Family Foundation Study*, March 2005.
10. Jeanne B. Funk, et. al. "An Evidence-Based Approach to Examining the Impact of Playing Violent Video and Computer Games," *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education*, Vol. 2, Issue 4 (November 2002), University of Toronto Press.
11. Craig Anderson, "Violent Video Games Increase Aggression and Violence," U.S. Senate Testimony, Hearing on The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children, Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 106th Congress, 1st Session.
12. David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 1995) and David Grossman and G. DeGaetano, Stop

Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence (New York: Crown Books, 1999).

13. Statement of Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, given before the New York State Legislature, October 1999, www.fradical.com/statement_of_lieutenant_colonel_dave_Grossman.htm.
14. Ibid.
15. Johnson, *Discover*, 41.

"Is It True That Whites Have a Higher IQ Than Blacks, Per The Bell Curve?"

In *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, the authors maintain that whites have a higher IQ than blacks, but I would not label the authors racist. What do you think?

Thank you for your question. You deserve a longer answer than I can give you in an e-mail, but perhaps I can give you some perspective and let you read further if you are interested.

The Bell Curve (by Hernstein and Murray) derives its conclusions about IQ scores from the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Other researchers (e.g., *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth*) question whether that test and the assumptions made from developing a bell-shaped curve are valid. The AFQT probably best provides a test of the level of schooling not necessarily IQ. And the authors of Inequality believe there has been a good deal of statistical

mashing and stretching in order to form the bell-shaped curve you find in the book.

The argument of the authors in *The Bell Curve* is that IQ is a better predictor of life outcomes than the usual measure of socioeconomic status (SES). One concern is that Hernstein and Murray define SES very narrowly (level of education, income, parents occupations). Each factor was given equal weight even though it is generally assumed that parental income has a much greater effect than parental education on a childs life outcome.

As I hope you can see, there is some question about the methodology and statistical analysis used in *The Bell Curve*.

So while we can perhaps agree that American blacks score lower than American whites on standard IQ tests, that may be due as much or more to SES.

This is the classic debate of nature versus nurture. I dont think *The Bell Curve* proves that most of lifes outcomes are due to nature.

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Terrorist Attack in London

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The recent terrorist attack in London once again reminds us that we are still engaged in a war on terrorism. For some reason we seem to forget this fundamental fact. The March 2004

bombing in Madrid was a reminder. The July terrorist attack in London was another. Yet there is abundant evidence that we still have not learned some fundamental lessons in our war on terrorism.

I was on two different talk shows (one as host, one as guest), and I was struck by the number of times I heard comments about bringing the terrorists to justice. But let me ask a basic question: is a terrorist a common criminal?

If terrorists are only common criminals, then biblically speaking, they should merely be dealt with by their host governments. In Romans 13, the Apostle Paul says, "he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil."

Paul's teaching on government shows that criminals are those who do evil and threaten the civil peace. Any outside threat to the existence of the state is not a criminal threat but an act of war which is also to be dealt with by the government.

In other words, criminals threaten the state from within, while foreign armies threaten the state from outside. In the case of seeking domestic peace, Paul outlines how governments will approve of good works, but that governments should bring fear to those who are wrongdoers.

When terrorists attack, we should not view them as criminals but as foreign soldiers who attempt to threaten the very existence of the American government or the British government. To borrow a phrase from President Bush, we should

not try to "bring them to justice," we should "bring justice to them."

Another important lesson we must learn is the need to place our governments on a war footing. That is, there are certain steps governments must take if we are to truly win the war on terrorism. At the outset, we need to develop the mindset that we are fighting a war with radical Muslim terrorists (often called Islamofascists). We can't negotiate with them as some of the callers to my talk show suggested. They are enemy combatants willing to die for their perverted religious views.

Governments shouldn't negotiate with them or bring them to justice. Governments must fight a war on terrorism. This requires governments to press their advantages over terrorists in terms of military hardware, intelligence gathering, and technological applications. It also demands that our governmental leaders think clearly about what terrorism is and how it is being advanced by Muslim terrorists around the world.

The terrorist attack in London (as well as the bombing in Madrid) also reminds us of the role each of us can play in stopping terrorism. Each involved citizens multiplies the eyes and ears of the government. These attacks were not high tech attacks using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. They used bombs and timers. An alert citizen might have discovered these bombs before they went off.

To prevent future attacks, we must pay attention to our surroundings and those around us. That doesn't mean we need to be paranoid of everything and suspicious of everyone. But it does mean that we need to be alert.

One terrorist expert I interviewed said that a successful terrorist attack occurs when all the pieces of the puzzle come together. Terrorism is like a jigsaw puzzle with lots of pieces that all must be present for success. This includes

funding, organizers, explosives, location, a plan of operation, research, a dry run, trusted people, etc. Alert citizens who report suspicious activity can help law enforcement thwart the plans of terrorists.

Countering terrorism in the 21st century will not be easy, but understanding, resolve, and alertness are key ingredients in our success. This is our generation's challenge. We need to meet it with wisdom and boldness.

The Roots of Freedom

What is freedom? What are the roots of freedom? Kerby Anderson looks at the Christian roots of freedom along with the writings of the key writers in the Western tradition.

What is freedom? What are the roots of freedom? Answering these questions is not as easy as it may seem. They require some thought and reflection, which for most of us, is a precious commodity.

Fortunately, some of the hard work has been done for us by professor John Danford in his book *Roots of Freedom: A Primer on Modern Liberty*. The material in this book was originally material that was broadcast on Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in the late 1980s. Only later did some suggest that the material should be published so that citizens in a free society could also benefit by his work in describing the roots of freedom.

So how does John Danford describe a free society?

 People would surely differ, but what is meant here is a

society in which human beings are not "born into" a place—a caste or an occupation, for example—but are free to own property, to raise children, to earn a living, to think, to worship, to express political views, and even to emigrate if desired, and to do so without seeking permission from a master.{1}

Obviously we all have some constraints on us, but human freedom in a free society would certainly involve the freedom to be able to do the things mentioned above.

Once we define a free society, we can easily see something very disturbing. "Free societies have been rare in human history. They also seem to be fragile—more fragile than were the dynasties or empires of the ancient world."{2}

In the past, freedom was rare often because of economic necessity. There is little or no freedom for a person who must work every waking hour just to survive. In the ancient world, a free man was free because another was enslaved. A free man was free because he did not need to work for a living.

By the end of the eighteenth century, economic necessity ceased to be the main obstacle to freedom in many places. Yet there were still very few free societies, because political power was often concentrated in the hands of a king or dictator (or perhaps in the hands of a few in the ruling class).

Today we have few kings, but we still have many dictators. Free societies also still somewhat rare today. Consider that there are nearly 200 countries in the United Nations, and yet it is probably fair to say that fewer than 50 could truly be called free societies (with functioning democracies).

If nothing else, this study of the roots of freedom should make us thankful we live in a free country. Free societies are rare in history, and they are still somewhat rare today. We

should never take for granted the political and economic freedom we enjoy.

Christian Roots

Danford discusses the roots of liberty in his chapter on "Premodern Christianity." Although we take many of these assumptions (borrowed from Christianity) as basic and obvious, they are important contributions that provide the foundation for the political freedom we enjoy today.

The first contribution from Christianity was its teaching about the value of the individual. In the Greek and Roman empires, the individual counted for little. "A particular individual was of no consequence when measured against the glory and stability of the empire."{3}

Jesus and his followers taught men and women to think of themselves as significant in the eyes of God. This foundational principle of the dignity and sanctity of human beings was in stark contrast to the prevailing ideas of the day.

Another aspect of this principle was the belief that God was not just the god of a city, or a tribe, or even a nation. The God of the Bible is God over all human beings and savior of all individuals. The belief in the universality of God along with the emphasis on the individual provided an important foundation for liberty because it was "incompatible with the ancient tendency to subordinate the individual entirely to the state or empire."{4}

A second contribution of Christianity involves the linear idea of history. Ancient writers "understood the passage of time in terms of the seasonal rhythms of the natural world."{5} Christianity brought a different perspective by teaching that history is linear. The story of the Bible is the story, after all, of the beginning of the world, human sinfulness, Christ

coming to the world, and the eventual culmination of history.

The concept of linear history leads to the idea that circumstances can change over time. If the change is progressive, then over the course of human history there can be progress. "The notion of progress is itself a modern idea, but its roots can be discerned in the Christian doctrine that God enters historical time to save mankind."{6}

A third contribution of Christianity is the principle of the separation of faith from the political realm. Today this is referred to as the separation of church and state.{7} Such an idea was unthinkable in the ancient world. In those cultures, kings and priests were closely connected.

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees if it was lawful to pay the poll tax (Matt. 22:15-21), He responded by telling them "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Although it would be many centuries before the full implications of this doctrine were clear, the seeds of spiritual freedom can be found in this Christian teaching.

The fourth contribution of Christianity is the belief in objective truth. While it is true that other philosophers spoke of truth, a Christian perspective on truth is nevertheless an important, additional contribution.

For example, if there is no truth, then "there is no such thing as a just or proper foundation for political rule: whoever gets the power is by definition able to determine what is just or unjust, right or wrong."{8}

In our postmodern world that rejects the idea of objective or absolute truth, all history is merely the history of class struggle. "There is no escape from the endless quest for power, and no space, protected by walls of justice, where genuine freedom can be experienced."{9}

This nation was founded on the principle (as articulated in the Declaration of Independence) that there are self-evident truths. As Jesus taught his disciples, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in England in 1588, and was educated at Oxford in the early 1600s. He was influenced by such men as Francis Bacon (serving as Bacon's secretary for a time) as well as events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A principal influence was the religious war and conflict of the time (e.g., the Thirty Years War, conflicts in England between Anglicans and Puritans). "Hobbes's two great preoccupations [were]: peace as a goal of the civil order, and a new political science as the means to that goal."{10}

He developed five key principles in his political science. The first is that individuals are more fundamental than any social order. To understand humans, he would argue, we must go back to a "state of nature" which would represent the condition human beings would be in if all the conventions and laws of political society were removed.

Hobbes also argued that humans are equal politically. "No one can be viewed as politically superior, because every human being is vulnerable to violent death at the hands of his fellows."{11} The natural condition of mankind, he says, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."{12}

Hobbes therefore argues in his second principle that the natural need for self-preservation is the only true reason people live in political communities. In other words, we live in political communities to satisfy individual needs of human nature such as life and security.

Third, Hobbes argues that because these needs are universal (and scientifically demonstrable), they provide a basis for

agreement and a peaceful political order. He argues that we should "be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself."{13}

Fourth, since political society exists for self-preservation, no one can ever give up the right to self-defense. A cardinal principle of a liberal society is that no man can be compelled to confess a crime or to testify against himself in court.

Finally, all legitimate government rests on a contract consented to (at least tacitly) by individuals. Hobbes calls this agreement a "covenant" because it is an open-ended contract, a promise that must be continually fulfilled in the future.

Hobbes also argued that a sovereign must enforce this covenant because "covenants without the sword are but words."{14} But though he justified a powerful government or sovereign, it was a perspective that was challenged by others like John Locke who believed that even the sovereign must be limited.

John Locke

John Locke was the son of a Puritan who fought with Oliver Cromwell. Though he was not an orthodox Puritan like his father, he was nevertheless a sincere Christian who believed that the Bible was "infallibly true."

Locke argued in his *Two Treatises of Government* that men form societies "for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property."{15} On the one hand, he wrote that material things are not owned by anyone but exist in common for all men. "God, as King David says, (Psalm 115:16) has given the earth to the children of men, given it to mankind in common."{16} But on

the other hand, he also acknowledged that we do take possession of things and thus make them our property.

He that is nourished by the acorns he picked under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. Nobody can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask then, When did they begin to be his? When he digested? Or when he ate? Or when he boiled? Or when he brought them home? Or when he picked them up? And 'tis plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labor put a distinction between them and common. That added something to them more than nature, the common mother of all, had done; and so they became his private property.{17}

Locke also argued that land is ultimately worthless until labor it added to it. He even goes on to argue that wealth is almost wholly the product of human labor (he says 999/1000 of the value of things is the result of labor).

He also argued that "Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent."{18} He acknowledged that each man or woman is born free and becomes a member of a commonwealth by agreeing to accepts its protections, but most commonly this is done by what Locke call "tacit consent."

Finally, Locke also focused his concern about the possibility of an oppressive government, so he insisted on the necessity of limiting the sovereign power as much as possible. The legislature cannot "take from any man any part of his property without his own consent."{19}

Locke also insisted on one final limitation of the power of government: the citizenry. He writes, "yet the legislative being only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends, there remains still in the people of supreme power to remove or

alter the legislative, when they find the legislative to act contrary to the trust reposed in them."{20}

American Liberty

The ideas of freedom found their way to the American shore as disruptions of the English civil war drove many English subjects to the New World. In their travels, "they took with them as much of the system of English liberty as would survive the Atlantic crossing."{21}

Some of the settlers established civil compacts (or what Locke would later call social contracts). Perhaps the best known is the Mayflower Compact, which was a political covenant binding the pilgrims together into "a civil body politic." Most of these American settlements involved self-government simply because the powers that originally granted them their charters were thousands of miles away.

America's founding document is the Declaration of Independence. The ideas of John Locke can certainly be found within this document. The Declaration states the principle from Locke that "all men are created equal." It also follows his thinking by stating "That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

All the writers during the founding period (Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton) were "deeply learned in English history, political history generally, and the history of political thought back to Aristotle and Plato. References to Cicero, Tacitus, and Plutarch dot their pages, along with frequent allusions to republics as diverse as Venice, Holland, Geneva, Sparta, and Rome."{22}

Alexander Hamilton, writing in *The Federalist Papers*, said that the American people would decide "whether societies of

men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."{23}

James Madison, in *The Federalist Papers*, addressed two key issues in American government: factions and limiting governmental power. He suggested that the large federal republic made it more difficult for factions to gain power and oppress others.

Limiting the power of government was accomplished by separating power. "Ambition must counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place."{24} The framers pursued "the policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests" to these various branches of government.

As an extra precaution, the framers also divided the legislature (because it was expected to be the most powerful and dangerous branch) into two different houses. They also decided to "render them, by different modes of election and different principles of action, as little connected with each other as the nature of their common functions and their common dependence on the society will admit."{25}

They further protected individual rights by adding the Bill of Rights. These amendments explicitly deny power to the government to interfere with specific individual freedoms.

As we can see, the rights and freedoms we enjoy today developed over time through Christian influence and key writers in the Western tradition.

Notes

1. John W. Danford, *Roots of Freedom: A Primer on Modern Liberty* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), xiv.
2. Ibid., xiv-xv.

3. Ibid., 13.

4. Ibid., 14.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 15-16.

7. See my article, "The Separation of Church and State" on the Probe Web site at www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4218097/k.32BB/Separation_of_Church_and_State.htm.

8. Ibid, 18.

9. Ibid., 20.

10. Ibid., 77.

11. Ibid., 83.

12. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 76.

13. Ibid, 80.

14. Ibid., 106.

15. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Second Treatise, Par. 123, 395.

16. Ibid., Par. 25, 327.

17. Ibid., Par 28, 329-330.

18. Ibid., Par. 95, 375.

19. Ibid., Par. 138, 406.

20. Ibid., Par. 149, 413.

21. Danford, 146.

22. Ibid., 149.

23. Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), No. 1, 33.

24. Ibid., No. 51, 322.

25. Ibid.

Ten Commandments in America

June 27, 2005

The Supreme Court has spoken and has essentially stuttered. How any sane person can make any sense of their two rulings on the Ten Commandments is beyond me. A divided court struck down displays in two Kentucky courthouses, but ruled a Ten Commandments monument on state government land in Texas was acceptable.

So why was a six foot granite monument on the grounds of the Texas Capitol constitutional? Perhaps they saw it acceptable because it is one of seventeen historical displays on the twenty-two-acre lot. So five justices determined it to be a constitutional tribute to the nation's legal and religious history.

On the other hand, what is unconstitutional are copies of the Ten Commandments in Kentucky courthouses hanging alongside documents such as the Bill of Rights, the Star-Spangled Banner, and a version of the Congressional Record declaring 1983 the Year of the Bible. Anyone looking for a clear line of constitutionality will not find it in this confused muddle of court cases.

And anyone who doesn't think the members of the court are openly hostile to religion need only read just a few lines of the opinion rendered by Justice John Paul Stevens. He couldn't even accept the Texas Ten Commandments monument placed there over forty years ago by a secular institution. The monument is not a work of art and does not refer to any event in the history of the state, he wrote. The message transmitted by Texas chosen display is quite plain: This state endorses the divine code of the Judeo-Christian God.

Fortunately, other justices noted that one monument among many

others is hardly an endorsement. You can stop to read it, you can ignore it, or you can walk around it. Chief Justice William Rehnquist argued that the monument's placement on the grounds among secular monuments was passive, rather than confrontational. But that logic seemed lost on many of the justices.

The Supreme Court's inconsistency in this case shows that many of the justices have clearly lost their way. Justice Antonin Scalia addressed the lack of any clear principle in this case in his scholarly dissent. He declared, "What distinguishes the rule of law from the dictatorship of a shifting Supreme Court majority is the absolutely indispensable requirement that judicial opinions be grounded in consistently applied principle."

In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled against the posting of the Ten Commandments in the public schools in the case of *Stone v. Graham*. They ruled that the preeminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature. At least in 1980 we knew where the court stood on posting religious symbols in public places. This time they confused an already complex issue. According to Justice David Souter, the liberal justices were trying to establish official religious neutrality.

Justice Scalia listed various ways in which higher beings are invoked in public life, from "so help me God" in inaugural oaths to the prayer that opens the Supreme Court's sessions. He asked, "With all of this reality (and much more) staring it in the face, how can the court possibly assert that the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality? Perhaps trying to mandate neutrality is the problem."

When we look at the Founding Fathers we see they were anything but neutral when it came to addressing the influence of the Ten Commandments on our republic. For example, twelve of the original thirteen colonies incorporated the entire Ten

Commandments into their civil and criminal codes.{1}

John Quincy Adams stated, "The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal [code] as well as a moral and religious code. These are laws essential to the existence of men in society and most of which have been enacted by every nation which ever professed any code of laws." He added that "Vain indeed would be the search among the writings of [secular history] . . . to find so broad, so complete and so solid a basis of morality as this decalogue lays down."{2}

Notes

1. Matthew Staver, The Ten Commandments Battle Continues To Gain Steam, *National Liberty Journal*, December 2001.
2. John Quincy Adams, *Letters of John Quincy Adams, to His Son, on the Bible and Its Teachings* (Auburn: James M. Alden, 1850), 61.
3. George Washington, Farewell Address (Philadelphia), September 17, 1796.
4. William Holmes McGuffey, *Eclectic Reader* in D. James Kenney, Whats Happening to American Education in Robert Flood, *The Rebirth of America* (Philadelphia: Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, 1986), 122.

On September 19, 1796, in his Farewell Address, President George Washington said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports."{3}

William Holmes McGuffey, considered the Schoolmaster of the Nation, once said, "The Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus are not only basic but plenary."{4}

It is more than just a little ironic that the Supreme Court that ruled against posting the Ten Commandments in public places actually has its own display of the Ten Commandments. Engraved in the stone above the head of the Chief Justice are the Ten Commandments with the great American eagle protecting

them. Moses is included among the great lawgivers in the sculpture relief on the east portico. And sessions begin with the invocation, "God save the United States and this honorable court."

So what can Christians do? First, we should be in prayer about this important issue and pray for future Supreme Court justices who will someday replace those who made these rulings.

Second, we should express our opinions by talking to friends, writing a letter to the editor, and educating people around us about the importance of the Ten Commandments in America.

Third, we should encourage Congress to pass the Constitutional Restoration Act which uses Article III, Section 2 of the Constitution to limit the appellate jurisdiction of the federal courts in areas like the Pledge of Allegiance and the Ten Commandments. Congress has the power to remove power from judges.

Judges who use their power to remove the Ten Commandments should have their power removed from them. Passing this legislation will accomplish that purpose.

Separation of Church and State

Wall of Separation

When Thomas Jefferson first used the phrase "wall of

separation," it is certain that he never would have anticipated the controversy that surrounds that term two centuries later. The metaphor has become so powerful that more Americans are more familiar with Jefferson's phrase than with the actual language of the Constitution.{1}

In one sense, the idea of separation of church and state is an accurate description of what must take place between the two institutions. History is full of examples (e.g., the Inquisition) of the dangers that arise when the institutions of church and state become too intertwined.

But the contemporary concept of separation of church and state goes far beyond the recognition that the two institutions must be separate. The current version of this phrase has come to mean that there should be a complete separation between religion and public life.

At the outset, we should state the obvious: the phrase "separation of church and state" is not in the Constitution. Although that should be an obvious statement, it is amazing how many citizens (including lawyers and politicians) do not know that simple fact.

Since the phrase is not in the Constitution and not even significantly discussed by the framers (e.g., *The Federalist Papers*), it is open to wide interpretation and misinterpretation. The only clear statement about religion in the Constitution can be found in the First Amendment and we will look at its legislative history later in this article.

Thomas Jefferson used the phrase "separation of church and state" when he wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. Then the phrase slipped into obscurity. In 1947, Justice Hugo Black revived it in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*. He wrote that the First Amendment "was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and State." He added that this wall "must be kept high and impregnable."{2}

The wall metaphor revived by Justice Black has been misused ever since. For example, the wall of separation has been used to argue that nearly any religious activity (prayer, Bible reading, moment of silence) and any religious symbol (cross, creche, Ten Commandments, etc.) is impermissible outside of church and home. Most of these activities and symbols have been stripped from public arenas. As we will see, it doesn't appear that Jefferson intended anything of the sort with his metaphor.

It's also worth noting that six of the thirteen original states had official, state-sponsored churches. Some states (Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and South Carolina) even refused to ratify the new Constitution unless it included a prohibition of federal involvement in the state churches.

History of the Phrase (part one)

So what was the meaning of "separation of church and state" and how has it changed? Some history is in order.

The presidential campaign of 1800 was one of the most bitterly contested presidential elections in American history. Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist John Adams (who served as Vice-President under George Washington). During the campaign, the Federalists attacked Jefferson's religious beliefs, arguing that he was an "atheist" and an "infidel." Some were so fearful of a Jefferson presidency, they buried their family Bibles or hid them in wells fearing that President Jefferson would confiscate them.{3}Timothy Dwight (President of Yale College) even warned a few years before that if Jefferson *were* elected, "we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire."{4} These concerns were unwarranted since Jefferson had written a great deal in the previous two decades about his support of religious liberty.

In the midst of these concerns, the loyal Republicans of the Danbury Baptist Association wrote to the president congratulating him on his election and his dedication to religious liberty. President Jefferson used the letter as an opportunity to explain why he did not declare days of public prayer and thanksgiving as Washington and Adams had done so before him.

In his letter to them on New Year's Day 1802, Jefferson agreed with their desire for religious freedom saying that religious faith was a matter between God and man. Jefferson also affirmed his belief in the First Amendment and went on to say that he believed it denied Congress (or the President) the right to dictate religious beliefs. He argued that the First Amendment denied the Federal government this power, "thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."

It appears that Jefferson's phrase actually came from the 1800 election. Federalist ministers spoke against Jefferson "often from their pulpits, excoriating his infidelity and deism."{5} Republicans therefore argued that clergymen should not preach about politics but maintain a separation between the two.

We might add that a century and a half before Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptists, Roger Williams erected a "hedge or wall of separation" in a tract he wrote in 1644. Williams used the metaphor to illustrate the need to protect the church from the world, otherwise the garden of the church would turn into a wilderness.{6} While it might be possible that Jefferson borrowed the metaphor from Roger Williams, it appears that Jefferson was not familiar with Williams' use of the metaphor.{7}

Jefferson used his letter to the Danbury Baptists to make a key point about his executive power. In the letter, he argued that the president had no authority to proclaim a religious holiday. He believed that governmental authority belonged only to individual states. Essentially, Jefferson's wall of

separation applied only to the national government.

History of the Phrase (part two)

Although the Danbury letter was published in newspapers, the "wall of separation" metaphor never gained much attention and essentially slipped into obscurity. In 1879 the metaphor entered the lexicon of American constitutional law in the case of *Reynolds v. United States*. The court stated that Jefferson's Danbury letter "may be accepted almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effects of the [First] Amendment thus secured."{8} Although it was mentioned in this opinion, there is good evidence to believe that Jefferson's metaphor "played no role" in the Supreme Court's decision.{9}

In 1947, Justice Hugo L. Black revived Jefferson's wall metaphor in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*. He applied this phrase in a different way from Thomas Jefferson. Black said that the First Amendment "was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and State." He added that this wall "must be kept high and impregnable."{10}

Daniel Dreisbach, author of *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State*, shows that Black's wall differs from Jefferson's wall. "Although Justice Black credited the third president with building the 'wall of separation,' the barrier raised in *Everson* differs from Jefferson's in function and location."{11}

The wall erected by Justice Black is "high and impregnable." On the other hand, Jefferson "occasionally lowered the 'wall' if there were extenuating circumstances. For example, he approved treaties with Indian tribes which underwrote the 'propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen.'"{12}

There is also a difference in the location of the two walls. Whereas Jefferson's "wall" explicitly separated the

institutions of church and state, Black's wall, more expansively, separates religion and all civil government. Moreover, Jefferson's "wall" separated church and the federal government only. By incorporating the First Amendment nonestablishment provision into the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Black's wall separates religion and civil government at all levels—federal, state, and local.{13}

Jefferson's metaphor was a statement about federalism (the relationship between the federal government and the states). But Black turned it into a wall between religion and government (which because of the incorporation of the Fourteenth Amendment could also be applied to state and local governments).

First Amendment

How did we get the wording of the First Amendment? Once we understand its legislative history, we can understand the perspective of those who drafted the Bill of Rights.{14}

James Madison (architect of the Constitution) is the one who first proposed the wording of what became the First Amendment. On June 8, 1789 Madison proposed the following:

> *"The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed."*

The representatives debated this wording and then turned the task over to a committee consisting of Madison and ten other House members. They proposed a new version that read:

> *"No religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed."*

This wording was debated. During the debate, Madison explained "he apprehended the meaning of the words to be, that Congress should not establish a religion, and enforce the legal observation of it by law, nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience."

Representative Benjamin Huntington complained that the proposed wording might "be taken in such latitude as to be extremely hurtful to the cause of religion." So Madison suggested inserting the word "national" before the word "religion." He believed that this would reduce the fears of those concerned over the establishment of a national religion. After all, some were concerned America might drift in the direction of Europe where countries have a state-sponsored religion that citizens were often compelled to accept and even fund.

Representative Gerry balked at the word "national," because, he argued, the Constitution created a federal government, not a national one. So Madison withdrew his latest proposal, but assured Congress his reference to a "national religion" had to do with a national religious establishment, not a national government.

A week later, the House again altered the wording to this:

> *"Congress shall make no law establishing religion, or to prevent the free exercise thereof, or to infringe the rights of conscience."*

Meanwhile, the Senate debated other versions of the same amendment and on Sept. 3, 1789, came up with this wording:

> *"Congress shall make no law establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion."*

The House didn't like the Senate's changes and called for a conference, from which emerged the wording ultimately included

in the Bill of Rights:

> *"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."*

As we can see, Congress was attempting to prevent the establishment of a national religion or a national church with their drafting of the First Amendment.

Separation, Sponsorship and Accommodation

How should the government relate to the church? Should there be a separation of church and state? Essentially there are three answers to these questions: separation, sponsorship, and accommodation.

At one end of the spectrum of opinion is strict separation of church and state. Proponents of this position advocate the complete separation of any religious activity (prayer, Bible reading) and any religious symbol (cross, Ten Commandments) from government settings. Richard John Neuhaus called this "the naked public square" because religious values are stripped from the public arena.{15}

Proponents of this view would oppose any direct or indirect benefit to religion or religious organizations from the government. This would include opposition to tuition tax credits, education vouchers, and government funding of faith-based organizations.

At the other end of the spectrum would be sponsorship of religious organizations. Proponents would support school prayer, Bible reading in public schools, and the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms and public places. Proponents would also support tuition tax credits, education vouchers, and funding of faith-based organizations.

Between these two views is accommodation. Proponents argue

that government should not sponsor religion but neither should it be hostile to religion. Government can accommodate religious activities. Government should provide protection for the church and provide for the free expression of religion. But government should not favor a particular group or religion over another.

Proponents would oppose direct governmental support of religious schools but would support education vouchers since the parents would be free to use the voucher at a public, private school, or Christian school. Proponents would oppose mandated school prayer but support programs that provide equal access to students. Equal access argues that if students are allowed to start a debate club or chess club on campus, they should also be allowed to start a Bible club.

We should reject the idea of a "naked public square" (where religious values have been stripped from the public arena). And we should also reject the idea of a "sacred public square" (where religious ideas are sponsored by government). We should seek an "open public square" (where government neither censors nor sponsors religion but accommodates religion).

Government should not be hostile toward religion, but neither should it sponsor religion or favor a particular faith over another. Government should maintain a benevolent neutrality toward religion and accommodate religious activities and symbols.

Notes

1. Barbara Perry, "Justice Hugo Black and the Wall of Separation between Church and State," *Journal of Church and State* 31(1989): 55.
2. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S., 16, 18.
3. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time,* vol. 3, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 481.
4. Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present*

Crisis, reprinted in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 1991), 1382.

5. Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) 111.

6. Roger Williams, "Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered," in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (Providence, RI: Providence Press, 1866), 1:392.

7. Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B Eerdmans, 1996), 72.

8. *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145, 164.

9. Robert M. Hutchins, "The Future of the Wall," in *The Wall between Church and State*, ed. Dallin H. Oaks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 17.

10. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S., 16, 18.

11. Daniel Dreisbach, Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 125.

12. Derek H. Davis, "Wall of Separation Metaphor," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 45(1), Winter 2003.

13. Dreisbach, Thomas Jefferson, 125.

14. The details of the debate on the First Amendment can be found in the Annals of Congress. *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States.* "History of Congress." 42 vols. Washington, D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1834-1856.

15. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984).

See Also:
- ["I Have Some Questions on the Separation of Church and State"](#)

"I Have Questions about the Marriage Test"

I took the [Marriage Test](#) by Kerby Anderson. A couple questions….

1) On the age question (#7), how do you score if you are between 30 and 40 years of age?

2) If this is my 2nd marriage to the SAME PERSON, how do I score question #3?

3) Again, considering this is my second marriage to the same person, how do I add up years married (#8)? We made it 7 years the first time, 5 years this time, but were pretty involved in each other's life during the 5 years we were divorced.

4) Question # 11 asks about agreeing with each other's attitudes. I think we do mostly agree, it is just usually a long, verbal battle to figure that out.

This was a very interesting test. I am anxious to see how to score those questions listed above.

Thank you for your e-mail. The marriage test we aired is based on the work of Howard Markman at the University of Denver. I assume that it will eventually be put in a book and will then answer some of the questions you are asking.

In the mean time, let me do my best to guess what the answers to your questions might be to the marriage test.

1. On the age question (#7), I assume you would receive 0 points if you are between 30 and 40 years of age. You receive a -1 if you are under 30. You receive +1 if you are over 40,

and you receive +2 if you are over 60.

2. On the previous marriage question (#3), I assume you would still give yourself a -1 because you had a previous marriage even though it was to the same person.

3. On the years of marriage question (#8), I assume you would add up the total years married to the same person. In your case, that would be 12 years. Of course, if you want to add the 5 years you were divorced then the number would be 17 years. It wouldn't make any difference in the score you would give your marriage.

4. On the conflicting attitudes question (#11), you would probably assume that you mostly agree with each other (+2 points) even if it takes awhile to reach agreement. If the conflict is too strong, then perhaps you should give your marriage 0 points.

Thank you for writing. I hope this helps.

Kerby Anderson
Probe Ministries

"Is It OK to Accept a Lottery-Funded Scholarship?"

I live in a state that has an education lottery. When the matter was up for a vote, I opposed it. So is it wrong for me (or at least inconsistent) to accept college scholarship money from that same lottery?

Thank you for writing. Your question would fit into the category of "Christian liberty." I address this in more detail

in my article

Since the Bible does not say such things as "Thou shalt not gamble" or "Thou shalt not receive a scholarship from lottery money," this question falls into the area of moral neutrality.

The Apostle Paul articulates the principles guiding our liberty in Romans 14-15. The specific example that he uses involves the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. While this issue is of no moral concern today, it does provide key biblical principles which we can apply in determining our response to issues not specifically addressed in the Bible.

One of the principles he develops is that each Christian must decide what is right or wrong for him or her when dealing with an issue of moral neutrality. Paul teaches that if you believe a particular action to be wrong for you, then it is wrong. He says in Romans 14:4, I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

He taught that all things were clean. In other words, there was no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols (it was morally neutral). But he also teaches that if a person believes it is sinful to indulge in a practice, then it is indeed sinful for them.

Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5). If there is doubt, then it is better to refrain from participating rather than engaging in what has become a sinful action for the person. Doubt or uncertainty is a sufficient reason to refrain from a particular activity or behavior.

I sense from your question that you may feel it is wrong for you to accept scholarship money from this source. If so, then that is reason enough not to accept a scholarship. However, if you can receive the money with a clear conscience (Romans 14:6), I would think you are free to do so.

Kerby Anderson
Probe Ministries

Media and Discernment

We live in the midst of a media storm, and Christians need to develop discernment in their consumption of various media (TV, movies, music, videos, computer, etc).

Media Exposure

We live in the midst of a media storm. Every day we are confronted by more media messages than a previous generation could even imagine.

For example, more homes have TV sets (98 percent) than have indoor plumbing. In the average home the television set is on for more than six hours a day. Children spend more time watching television than in any other activity except sleep.{1} Nearly half of elementary school children and 60 percent of adolescents have television sets in their bedrooms.{2}

But that is just the beginning of the media exposure we encounter. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimates that the average teenager listens to 10,500 hours of music during their teen years.{3} Families are watching more movies than every before since they can now watch them on cable and satellite and rent or buy movies in video and DVD format.

The amount of media exposure continues to increase every year. Recent studies of media usage reveal that people spend more

than double the time with media than they think they do. This amounts to nearly twelve hours a day total. And because of media multitasking, summing all media use by medium results in a staggering fifteen hours per day.{4}

Student use of the Internet has been increasing to all-time levels. A study done at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found the following:{5}

- Nearly 90 percent of the students access the Internet every day.
- Students spent over ten hours per week using IM (instant messaging).
- Those same students spent over twenty-eight hours per week on the Internet.
- Nearly three-fourths spent more time online than they intended.

In addition to concerns about the quantity of media input are even greater concerns about the quality of media input. For example, the average child will witness over 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders before he or she is 18 years old. And consider that the average child views 30,000 commercials each year.

A study of adolescents (ages 12-17) showed that watching sex on TV influences teens to have sex. Youths were more likely to initiate intercourse as well as other sexual activities.{6}

Over 1000 studies (including reports from the Surgeon General's office and the National Institute of Mental Health) "point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children."{7}

To put it simply, we are awash in media exposure, and there is a critical need for Christians to exercise discernment. Never has a generation been so tempted to conform to this world (Rom. 12:1-2) because of the growing influence of the proliferating forms of media.

Biblical Discernment

Although the Bible does not provide specific instructions about media (you can't find a verse dealing with television, computers, or DVDs), it nevertheless provides broad principles concerning discernment.

For example, the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2:22 instructs us to "Flee from youthful lusts." We should stay away from anything (including media) that inflames our lust. Paul also goes on to say that in addition to fleeing from these things, we should also "pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace." We should replace negative influences in our life with those things which are positive.

Paul says in Colossians 3:8, "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Now, does that mean you could never read something that has anger or rage or slander in it? No. After all, the Bible has stories of people who manifest those traits in their lives.

What Paul is saying is that we need to rid ourselves of such things. If the input into our lives (such as through media) manifests these traits, then a wise and discerning Christian would re-evaluate what is an influence in his or her life.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." We should focus on what is positive and helpful to our Christian walk.

We are also admonished in Romans 13:13 to "behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy."

As Christians, we should develop discernment in our lives. We can do this in three ways: stop, listen, and look. Stop what

you are doing long enough to evaluate the media exposure in your life. Most of us just allow media to wash over us everyday without considering the impact it is having on us.

Second, we should listen. That is, we should give attention to what is being said. Is it true or false? And what is the message various media are bringing into our lives?

Finally, we should look. We need to look at the consequences of media in our lives. We should rid ourselves of influences which are negative and think on those things which are positive.

Worldview of the News Media

Of all the forms of media, the news media have become a primary shaper of our perspective on the world. Also, the rules of journalism have changed in the last few decades. It used to be assumed that reporters or broadcasters would attempt to look at events through the eyes of the average reader or viewer. It was also assumed that they would not use their positions in the media to influence the thinking of the nation but merely to report objectively the facts of an event. Things have changed dramatically in the news business.

The fact that people in the media are out of step with the American people should be a self-evident statement. But for anyone who does not believe it, there is abundant empirical evidence to support it.

Probably the best-known research on media bias was first published in the early 1980s by professors Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman. Their research, published in the journal *Public Opinion*{8} and later collected in the book *The Media Elite,*{9} demonstrated that reporters and broadcasters in the prestige media differ in significant ways from their audiences.

They surveyed 240 editors and reporters of the media elite—*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Their research confirmed what many suspected for a long time: the media elite are liberal, secular, and humanistic.

People have always complained about the liberal bias in the media. But what was so surprising is how liberal members of the media actually were. When asked to describe their own political persuasion, 54 percent of the media elite described themselves as left of center. Only 19 percent described themselves as conservative. When asked who they voted for in presidential elections, more than 80 percent of them always voted for the Democratic candidate.

Media personnel are also very secular in their outlook. The survey found that 86 percent of the media elite seldom or never attend religious services. In fact, 50 percent of them have no religious affiliation at all.

This bias is especially evident when the secular press tries to cover religious events or religious issues. Most of them do not attend church, nor do they even know people who do. Instead, they live in a secularized world and therefore tend to underestimate the significance of religious values in American lives and to paint anyone with Christian convictions as a "fundamentalist."

Finally, they also found that the news media was humanistic in their outlook on social issues. Over 90 percent of the media elite support a woman's so-called "right to abortion" while only 24 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "homosexuality is wrong."

For a time, members of the media elite argued against these studies. They suggested that the statistical sample was too small. But when Robert Lichter began to enumerate the 240 members of the news media interviewed, that tactic was quickly set aside. Others tried to argue that, though the media might

be liberal, secular, and humanistic, it did not affect the way the press covered the news. Later studies by a variety of media watchdogs began to erode the acceptance of that view.

A second significant study on media bias was a 1996 survey conducted by the Freedom Forum and the Roper Center.{10} Their survey of 139 Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents showed a decided preference for liberal candidates and causes.

The journalists were asked for whom they voted in the 1992 election. The results were these: 89 percent said Bill Clinton, 7 percent George Bush, 2 percent Ross Perot. But in the election, 43 percent of Americans voted for Clinton and 37 percent voted for Bush.

Another question they were asked was, "What is your current political affiliation?" Fifty percent said they were Democrats, 4 percent Republicans. In answer to the question, "How do you characterize your political orientation?" 61 percent said they were liberal or moderately liberal, and 9 percent were conservative or moderately conservative.

The reporters were also asked about their attitudes toward their jobs. They said they see their coverage of news events as a mission. No less than 92 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is to educate the public." And 62 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is sometimes to suggest potential solutions to social problems."

A more recent survey by the Pew Research Center further confirms the liberal bias in the media. They interviewed 547 media professionals (print, TV, and radio) and asked them to identify their political perspective. They found that 34 percent were liberal and only 7 percent were conservative. This compares to 20 percent of Americans who identify themselves as liberal and 33 percent who define themselves as conservative.{11}

It is also worth questioning whether a majority of media professionals who labeled themselves as moderate in the survey really deserve that label. John Leo, writing for *U.S. News and World Report*, says that it has been his experience "that liberal journalists tend to think of themselves as representing the mainstream, so in these self-identification polls, moderate usually translates to liberal. On the few social questions asked in the survey, most of the moderates sounded fairly liberal."[{12}]

Once again we see the need for Christians to exercise discernment in their consumption of media.

Dealing with the Media

Christians must address the influence of the media in society. It can be a dangerous influence that can conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Therefore we should do all we can to protect against its influence and to use the media for good.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media: Philippians 4:8, which we quoted above, and Colossians 3:2–5:

> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Here are some suggestions for action.

First, control the quantity and quality of media input. Parents should set down guidelines and help select television programs at the start of the week and watch only those. Parents should also set down guidelines for movies, music, and other forms of media. Families should also evaluate the

location of their television set so that it is not so easy to just sit and watch TV for long hours.

Second, watch TV with children. One way to encourage discussion with children is to watch television with them. The plots and actions of the programs provides a natural context for discussion. The discussion could focus on how cartoon characters or TV characters could solve their problems without resorting to violence. What are the consequences of violence? TV often ignores the consequences. What are the consequences of promiscuous sex in real life?

Third, set a good example. Parents should not be guilty to saying one thing and doing another. Neither adults nor children should spend long periods of time in front of a video display (television, video game, computer). Parents can teach their children by example that there are better ways to spend time.

Fourth, work to establish broadcaster guidelines. No TV or movie producer wants to unilaterally disarm all the actors on their screens for fear that viewers will watch other programs and movies. Yet many of these TV and movie producers would like to tone down the violence, even though they do not want to be the first to do so. National standards would be able to achieve what individuals would not do by themselves in a competitive market.

Fifth, make your opinions known. Writing letters to programs, networks, and advertisers can make a difference over time. A single letter may not make a difference, but large numbers of letters can even change editorial policy. Consider joining with other like-minded people in seeking to make a difference in the media.

While the media has a tremendous potential for good, it can also have some very negative effects. Christians need wisdom and discernment to utilize the positive aspects of media and

to guard against its negative effects.

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Making Moral Choices — From A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson addresses making moral choices using the Bible and biblical principles, using both philosophical and practical approaches.

Love and Biblical Morality

 A Christian view of morality is based upon the assumption that God exists and has revealed Himself to the human race. He has chosen to reveal Himself in nature (Psalm 19, Romans 1) and in human conscience (Romans 2:14-15). He has also revealed Himself through the Bible (Psalm 119, 2 Timothy 3:16) and in the person of Jesus Christ (John 10:30, Hebrews 1:1-4).

God's character is the ultimate standard of right and wrong. And even though the Bible was written long before the development of genetic engineering or modern media, it nevertheless provides principles that can be used to evaluate the morality of social, scientific, and technological issues.

Biblical morality can be developed from learning to live God's way according to biblical principles. Though the Christian

life is much more than a set of rules or principles, these principles do provide moral boundaries for behavior.

Biblical morality is also based upon love that has its source in God. Jesus was asked by the teachers of the law which was the most important commandment. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

The two most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. Essentially all biblical principles rest upon this foundation. And these principles can be found in God's revelation in the Bible. God's character as expressed in God's Word should be diligently applied to every area of life.

Jesus also taught Christians to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44-45): "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." As his opening phrase suggests, this was not the common practice of the day. In fact, it was completely contrary to the concept of love practiced in that day or even in our day.

The apostle Paul teaches that love is "the law of Christ" and thereby supreme and sufficient (Galatians 5:14; 6:2). He also teaches that love is the foundation of Christian obedience. Even if we manifest the gifts of the Spirit and do good works, they do not profit us unless they are done in love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

He also teaches that God shows His love to us in that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8) and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 6:37-39). And this is not just a theological truth, but the "love of Christ controls us" (2

Corinthians 5:14) and provides us with an ability to live the Christian life.

Knowing God's Will

How do we make proper moral choices based upon biblical principles? The Bible does provide biblical guidelines on a vast array of issues. Christians also have the liberty to make individual moral choices in areas of moral neutrality. Ultimately, making moral choices involves discerning the will of God in one's life.

Whole books have been written on how we can know the will of God, but we can summarize a few key principles here.

First, we can know God's will through the Bible. Before considering any other way to discern God's will, one should ask whether the Bible has already provided guidance in this area. The Bible is full of God's specific commands and principles.

A teenager doesn't have to ask if he should get drunk; the Bible has already addressed that issue (Ephesians 5:18). An unmarried couple doesn't need to ask if they should live together before they marry. Again, the Bible has addressed the topic (1 Corinthians 6:18).

The Bible provides boundaries and barriers to our moral actions. We are to stay within those moral boundaries. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:6), told them "Do not go beyond what is written."

A second way we discern God's will is through prayer. We are commanded to bring our requests before God. In Philippians 4:6 we are told: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

If we are earnestly reading the Bible and seeking God's will, He will reveal it to us, often through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We read in Romans 8:27 that "The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

A third way we discern God's will is through our conscience. If our conscience is troubling us about a particular action or behavior, then we should refrain from that activity. Paul says that each person "must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). He adds that "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

The opposite is not necessarily true. In other words, conscience is a good stop sign but not a green light. A troubled conscience is sufficient justification to refrain, and a guilty conscience is reason enough to stop a particular action or behavior.

A clear conscience is no justification for proceeding. The Bible teaches that, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). We can easily deceive ourselves into sin.

Christians should strive to have a good conscience before God and man (Acts 24:16). A troubled conscience is reason to avoid an action, but a clear conscience may not be sufficient justification to proceed.

Christian Liberty

What about times when the Bible does not clearly seem to speak to a particular action? These areas of moral neutrality are still governed by biblical principles that guide our Christian liberty.

Even though a particular action may not be prohibited in Scripture, it still may be offensive to others because of their social, ethnic, or religious background. Another

person's family background or spiritual maturity is also a consideration Christians must make.

The Apostle Paul articulates the principles guiding our liberty in Romans 14-15. The specific example that he uses involves the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. While this issue is of no moral concern today, it does provide key biblical principles which we can apply in determining our response to issues not specifically addressed in the Bible.

The first principle is that Christians are not to have a judgmental attitude toward one another in regard to issues that are morally neutral. Paul says in Romans 14:3 that the "one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat" nor should the "one who does not eat . . . judge the one who eats." In other words, whether you participate in or refrain from a morally neutral activity, you should not be judgmental of the other person.

No one has the right to force their moral conclusions on others when the Bible does not provide clear principles on the matter. Paul asks in Romans 14:4, "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" Christians are instructed to decide these matters for themselves as they consult the Bible and their conscience.

Second, each Christian must decide what is right or wrong for him or her. Paul teaches that if you believe a particular action to be wrong for you, then it is wrong. He says in Romans 14:4, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

He taught that all things were clean. In other words, there was no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols (it was morally neutral). But he also teaches that if a person believes it is sinful to indulge in a practice, then it is indeed sinful for them.

Each person "must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). If there is doubt, then it is better to refrain from participating rather than engaging in what has become a sinful action for the person. Doubt or uncertainty is a sufficient reason to refrain from a particular activity or behavior.

A key test of Christian obedience is whether a person can do so "for the Lord" (Romans 14:6). Christians are to "live for the Lord" because "we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). If one cannot participate in an activity while serving the Lord, then he or she should refrain. Paul says that "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

A third principle is whether a morally neutral activity would be "an obstacle or a stumbling block" to another believer (Romans 14:13). Christians should be aware of their actions on the Christian walk of others around them. While we may have liberty in Christ to participate in an action or behavior, another believer might be offended or adversely affected by what we do.

Paul teaches that we have a moral responsibility to other believers. He says, "we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength" (Romans 15:1). In order to do so we may have to limit our Christian liberty.

At the same time there is a balance between enjoying our liberty in Christ and trying not to give offense. If one believes he or she can participate in an activity, then one should do so with that firm "conviction before God" (Romans 14:22). But it would be wise not to participate publicly but privately for the sake of a believer who might be hurt by one's actions (Romans 14:15).

A final principle is how a particular action or behavior will affect the individual believer's walk with the Lord. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 that; "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me,

but I will not be mastered by anything."

Although these morally neutral practices are lawful, they may not be profitable and could actually master (or enslave) a person. There is nothing in the Bible about such things as poor nutrition, addiction to caffeine, or watching lots of television, yet most would agree that such behaviors are not profitable. In fact, they are frequently debilitating to the individual. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that whether "you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Honesty and Biblical Morality

Although the Bible admonishes us to be honest and to tell the truth, honesty seems to be at an all-time low. One study of high school students found that 71 percent of them admitted to cheating on an exam at least once in the last twelve months. And 92 percent of them said they lied to their parents in the last twelve months while 79 percent said they did so two or more times. So what does the Bible say about honesty and truth?

The Old Testament calls upon the people of God to deal honestly with one another. Leviticus 9:35 says "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity." Likewise, Proverbs 11:1 warns that "A false balance is an abomination to the Lord." Believers are to use honest weights and be honest in their dealings with others.

A righteous person does not "take a bribe against the innocent" (Psalm 15:5). Isaiah (5:23) pronounces judgment on those "who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right."

The New Testament admonishes Christians to "have a good conscience" and desire to conduct themselves "honorably in all things" (Hebrews. 13:18). Paul said he attempted to always

maintain "a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men" (Acts 24:16). Christians should "have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Honesty also requires telling the truth. The Ten Commandments forbids both the swearing of false oaths and the bearing of false testimony (Exodus 20:7, 16; Deuteronomy 5:11, 20; cf. Leviticus 19:12; Jeremiah 7:9). In the Old Testament, false witnesses were to suffer the same punishment that they had hoped to inflict upon the others (Deuteronomy 19:16-21).

Telling the truth also involved more than false testimony in a court. Believers are not to spread false reports (Proverbs 12:17; 14:5, 25) or report the truth maliciously or engage in slander (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 26:20).

Speaking evil is prohibited (Psalm 34:13; Proverbs 24:28; Ephesians 4:31; James 4:11; 1 Peter 3:10), and it disqualifies a person from God's favor (Psalm 15:3) and from a leadership position in the church (1 Timothy 3:8; Titus 2:3).

In the Old Testament, oaths and vows were used many times. Abraham (Genesis 21:22-34), Jacob (Genesis 25:33; 28:20), Joseph (Genesis 50:5), Joshua (Joshua 6:26), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11), Saul (1 Samuel 14:24), David (1 Samuel 20:17), Ezra (Ezra 10:5), and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:25) all swore oaths or vows. The swearing of these oaths and vows underscores the seriousness of telling the truth and following up on one's commitment.

We need truth telling today like never before. Perhaps the greatest battle in society today is a battle over truth. Voters are skeptical of politicians. Proponents of various biomedical procedures (abortion, cloning) often redefine terms and mislead the public about the true nature of the procedures they advocate. We need Christians to set an example by being honest and telling the truth.