

# Worldview and Truth

Each day Christians are confronted with a bewildering array of choices in ethics, actions, and lifestyles. The only way to make sense of this data is to have a consistent worldview. And Christians should be operating from a biblical worldview. As we will see, that is often not the case.

The Barna Research Group conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only 4 percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that 9 percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.[\[1\]](#)

Everyone has a worldview, but relatively few people (even religious people) have a biblical worldview. This explains a great deal about behavior. One reason so few people act like Christians is because they don't think like Christians. Behavior results from our values and beliefs. Thinking biblically about the issues of life should ultimately result in living biblically in society. Conversely, not thinking biblically should result in not living biblically within society.

Nancy Pearcey, in her latest book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, tells the story of Sarah, a practicing Christian who worked for years as a counselor for Planned Parenthood. She did not try to talk women out of an abortion, but merely was content to make sure they knew what they were doing. She said that after she graduated from college, "My Christianity was reduced to a thin veneer over the core of a secular worldview. It was almost like having a split personality."[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, there are millions of Sarahs in the world who willingly live with a split personality. The split is between the sacred and the secular. Or the split is between fact and

value. In their personal lives they try to live as Christians, but in their public world they think and act just like the non-Christians around them. They do not have a Christian worldview even though they are Christians.

Now you might wonder where the pastors are in all of this. After all, shouldn't pastors and church leadership be calling people to think and behave according to Christian principles? It turns out that part of the problem is the lack of sound biblical teaching about a biblical worldview.

The Barna Research Group found in a nationwide survey of senior pastors that only half of the country's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview. The gap among churches is reflected in the outcomes from the nation's two largest denominations. Southern Baptists had the highest percentage of pastors with a biblical worldview (71 percent), while the Methodists were lowest (27 percent).[{3}](#)

Obviously we need to do a better job within the church thinking about the array of issues that confront us from a biblical perspective. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that we have not been doing this effectively.

## **Absolute Truth**

One of the foundational aspects of a Christian worldview is the matter of absolute truth. The Bible rests upon belief in it. Yet surveys by George Barna show that a minority of born again adults (44 percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (9 percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.[{4}](#)

Even more disturbing is the growing evidence that even adults have abandoned their belief in absolute truth. By a three-to-one margin adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends

on the circumstances.{5}

Social scientists as well as pollsters have been warning that American society is becoming more and more dominated by moral anarchy. Writing in the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim said in *The Day America Told the Truth* that there was no moral authority in America. "We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect." {6}

Researcher George Barna, writing ten years later in his book *Boiling Point*, concludes that moral anarchy has arrived and dominates our culture today. {7} His argument hinges on a substantial amount of attitudinal and behavioral evidence, such as rapid growth of the pornography industry, highway speeding as the norm, income tax cheating, computer hacking, rampant copyright violations (movies, books, and recordings), increasing rates of cohabitation and adultery, Internet-based plagiarism, etc {8}.

When asked the basis on which they form their moral choices, nearly half of all adults cite their desire to do whatever will bring them the most pleasing or satisfying results. Although the Bible should be the basis of our moral decision-making, the survey showed that only four out of every ten born again Christian adults relies on the Bible or church teaching as their primary source of moral guidance. {9}

The survey also found that the younger generation was even more inclined to support behaviors that conflict with traditional Christian morals. "Among the instances in which young adults were substantially more likely than their elders to adopt a nouveau moral view were in supporting homosexuality, cohabitation, the non-medicinal use of marijuana, voluntary exposure to pornography, profane language, drunkenness, speeding and sexual fantasizing." {10}

Clearly, Christians are neither thinking nor behaving as Christians. And a large part of the problem centers on this abandonment of a belief in absolute truth. If Christians believe that morality is relative and determined by the situation, then they have changed biblical moral principles. Today there is a critical need for Christians to think and act biblically in every area of life.

## De-conversion

You have no doubt known of young people who go off to college and end up rejecting their faith. The story is more common than we might imagine. Nancy Pearcey, in her book *Total Truth*, tells the story of two such people.[\[11\]](#)

One said, "In my senior year of high school I accepted Jesus as my Savior and became a born-again Christian. I had found the One True Religion, and it was my duty—indeed it was my pleasure—to tell others about it, including my parents, brothers and sisters, friends, and even total strangers."[\[12\]](#)

But his religious convictions waned when he confronted the theory of evolution. The student underwent "a de-conversion in graduate school six years later when I studied evolutionary biology." Who is this person? He is Michael Shermer, the director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine. He has dedicated his life to debunking Christianity and defending evolution against people who believe in intelligent design.

Another prominent atheist tells a similar story. "I was a born-again Christian. When I was fifteen, I entered the Southern Baptist Church with great fervor and interest in the fundamentalist religion." But he also found that his religious convictions were adversely affected by the theory of evolution. He says that he left the church "at seventeen when I got to the University of Alabama and heard about

evolutionary theory.”[{13}](#)

This person described his encounter with evolution as an “epiphany” and was enthralled with the implications of evolution. Who is this person? He is E.O. Wilson, Harvard professor and founder of sociobiology (which attempts to explain everything in life from an evolutionary process).

Sadly, these stories are repeated year after year at universities throughout this country. The students who go through this de-conversion may not grow up to become famous skeptics or atheists like the ones we just mentioned. But they will grow up without a solid, Christian faith.

Teenagers who are raised in stable Christian homes, educated in Christian schools, all too often go to college and reject their Christian faith. They fall prey to the naturalistic, evolutionary foundation of modern education. Or they adopt one of the current intellectual or cultural fads on campus.

So how are we to better prepare these young people for their college experience? A key element is to teach a Christian worldview. As our secular culture becomes more hostile to Christian ideas, it is more difficult to live out our Christian worldview consistently. When the culture was more hospitable to Christian values, a Sunday school understanding of Christianity could survive. Now we live in a culture hostile to those values. A rudimentary understanding of Christianity in such a hostile culture will soon wilt and die.

Young people, and youth ministry to young people, must be more intentional if Christian beliefs are to survive. Teaching a Christian worldview and training young people in the basics of apologetics are absolutely crucial if their faith is to survive.

# Dichotomy of Truth

A Christian worldview should encompass all of reality. But the world today (and even most Christians) has divided truth into two categories. Francis Schaeffer used the concept of a two-story building. Science and reason are found on the lower story. Religion and morality can be found in the upper story.

Nancy Pearcey says that the upper story is the realm of private truth. This is where we hear people say such things as “that may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me.” Or to put it another way, the lower story is modernism, while the upper story is postmodernism.

This dichotomy of truth has served to marginalize Christianity. When Christians attempt to speak to moral issues of the day, their perspective is dismissed because critics believe that it is in the realm of private truth. So when they speak on subjects ranging from bioethics to science to public policy, the world perceives these comments as merely subjective value assumptions.

Unfortunately, Christians have also accepted this dichotomy of truth. They assume that science deals with facts and their faith deals with values. And they also assume that the two can exist simultaneously and independently of each other.

A good illustration of this can be found in a recent article in which a young writer described her first day in a theology class at a Christian high school. “My theology teacher drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other side. He informed us that the two are as divided as the two sides of the blackboard—the *heart* is what we use for religion, and the *brain* is what we use for science.”[\[14\]](#)

Even more disturbing was the fact that in a classroom of some two hundred students, she was the only one who objected to the teacher’s division of truth. Sadly, this is how more and more

Christians have decided to deal with the conflicting and confusing facts of the modern world. And this is how we are supposedly “preparing” young people for college and society.

We need to give young people more than just a “heart” religion which will most certainly fail to equip them for the hostility towards Christianity found in modern society. They need a “brain” religion that includes at least training in worldview and apologetics.

Christian education and youth ministry must be more than opening the session in prayer. It must address this dichotomy of truth that places science and reason on one story of the building and leaves religion and morality on another story of the building. If we don't address this problem, we will continue to turn out students who are Christians in their private life but essentially secular in their public life. And ultimately, their brains win out over their hearts so they end up living and thinking like non-Christians.

## **Christian Worldview**

There are many elements to a Christian worldview, and the Probe Web site is full of articles that will help you in the development of a Christian worldview. A key verse in this endeavor is Mark 12:30: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Jesus is telling us that we cannot live with a dichotomy of truth. We are to love God with our heart, soul, and mind. We cannot live our Christian life out on two different floors of a building where science and reason are on one story of the building and religion and morality are on another.

Jesus is also telling us that we must strive to know God intimately. He describes this as a whole-hearted, consuming desire to know God. Christianity isn't a hobby; it's a

lifestyle. We are to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Another important verse is 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." The apostle Paul wrote these words because he knew how important it was for Christians to have a Christian worldview in the midst of the pagan, secular culture of his day.

Notice that he describes the Christian mind in terms of warfare. We are engaged in a battle of worldviews and must be prepared for battle. We are to put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, he is our commander in this battle of worldviews.

Another key verse is Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." The apostle Paul's words warn all Christians not to be "taken captive" by false philosophy. How true that is especially for young people headed off to college.

When we consider these last two verses, we notice an interesting contrast. Either we take every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5) or we run the risk of being taken captive (Col. 2:8) by false philosophies.

A final verse is 1 Peter 3:15: "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." The Greek word *apologia* is where we get our word apologetics. It does not mean to apologize. But it does mean to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.



Christianity requires both offense and defense. While 2 Corinthians 10:5 focuses on the “offensive” nature of Christianity, 1 Peter 3:15 focuses on its “defensive” nature. We must always be ready to give an answer for our faith as we engage a world that is often hostile to the Christian worldview.

## Notes

1. “A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person’s Life,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 1 Dec. 2003.
2. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Crossway Books, 2004).
3. “Only Half of Protestant Pastors Have a Biblical Worldview,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 12 Jan. 2004.
4. “The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 12 Dec. 2000.
5. “Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 12 Feb. 2002.
6. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991).
7. George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point* (Ventura, Calif.: Gospel Light, 2001).
8. “Research Predicts Mounting Challenges to Christian Church,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 16 Apr. 2001.
9. “Practical Outcomes Replace Biblical Principles as the Moral Standards,” *The Barna Update* (Ventura, Calif.), 10 Sept. 2001.
10. Ibid.
11. Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 223-4.

12. Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000), 2-3.

13. E. O. Wilson, "Toward a Humanistic Biology," *The Humanist* 42 (September/October 1982), 40.

14. Mary Passantino, "The Little Engine That Can," *Christian Research Journal*, April 2003.

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## **"What Does the Bible Say about Interracial Marriages?"**

**What does the Bible say about interracial marriages, and what are your thoughts on this subject?**

The Bible does not prohibit interracial marriages, but that has not stopped people in the past from trying to "make" the Bible teach that it is wrong.

Here are some biblical principles that apply to race and interracial marriage:

1. We are one in Christ Jesus. The Bible teaches that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

2. We are one in creation. Acts 17:26 – "He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation."

We know that racial differences amount to very small changes in skin color (amount of melanin in skin), eye shape, hair color and texture. The differences that exist are often created by those with prejudices against particular groups of people.

The Bible does teach that Christians are not to be unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14). But that applies to the spiritual condition of your intended marriage partner.

Mixed marriages (due to cultural or social differences) may face problems. So it would be wise to seek premarital counseling to consider how these differences might affect your communication in marriage and other important issues.

I hope that answers your question.

Kerby Anderson

Probe Ministries

**See Also *Probe Answers Our Email:***

**[“My Racist Parents Disapprove of My Boyfriend”](#)**

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## **“What Are Some Examples of Historical Revisionism?”**

Dear Kerby,

I have heard you discuss the topic of historical revisionism on radio. I told my son about this, and he doesn't believe it.

## **Do you have some examples of how our history has been revised from the original?**

Many historians have wanted to secularize our founders. Take this quote from W.E. Woodward. He wrote that "The name of Jesus Christ is not mentioned even once in the vast collection of Washington's published letters."[{1}](#)

Anyone who has read some of Washington's writing knows he mentions God and divine providence. But it isn't too difficult to also find times in which he mentions Jesus Christ. For example, when George Washington wrote to the Delaware Indian Chiefs (June 12, 1779) he said: "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are. Congress will do every thing they can to assist you in this wise intention."[{2}](#)

Other examples are also available. For example, a well-worn, handwritten prayer book found among Washington's personal writings after his death had the name "Jesus Christ" used sixteen times. [{3}](#)

Often historical revisionism is done by selective omission. Consider this famous quote from a book on American history by Kenneth Davis.[{4}](#) In 1775, Patrick Henry asked, "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" Davis then picks up the quote again with the final statement by Patrick Henry: "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

Technically the quote is correct, but what is missing is very important. The entire quote should read: "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God. I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

Davis does the same thing when he cites the Mayflower Compact. "We whose names are under-written . . . do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid."

Some important points are omitted. The section should read: "We whose names are under-written having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith and honor of our king and country, a voyage to the first colonie in the Northern parts of Virginia do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid."

Some of the best documented cases of historical revision were provided by the work of Paul Vitz and funded by the U.S. Department of Education. He notes that "One social studies book has thirty pages on the Pilgrims, including the first Thanksgiving. But there is not one word (or image) that referred to religion as even a part of the Pilgrims' life."

[{6}](#)

Another textbook said that "Pilgrims are people who take long trips." They were described entirely without reference to religion. One reference said the Pilgrims "wanted to give thanks for all they had" but never mentioned that it was God to whom they wanted to give thanks.[{7}](#)

Historical revisionism is a sad fact of American education today. Students are not getting the whole story, and often references to religion and Christianity are left out.

Kerby Anderson

Probe Ministries

## Notes

1. W.E. Woodward, *George Washington: The Image and the Man* (New York: Boni and Liverlight, 1926), 142.
2. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1932), Vol. XV, 55.
3. *Manuscript Prayer-Book Written by George Washington* (Philadelphia, 1891).
4. Kenneth C. Davis, *Don't Know Much About History* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 61.
5. Davis, 21.
6. Paul Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1986), 3.
7. Vitz, 18-19.

## Suggested Reading

David Barton, *Original Intent* (Aledo, TX: WallBuilders Press, 1996), Chapter 16.

Paul Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1986)

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# Sex Education

Christians are increasingly confronted with arguments in favor of sex education in the public schools. Often the arguments sound reasonable until the scientific reports that advocate these programs are carefully analyzed. I am going to be

discussing a number of these studies and will conclude by providing a biblical perspective on sex education.

I want to begin by looking at reports released by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood. One of these reports was entitled, "Teenage Pregnancy in Developed Countries: Determinant and Policy Implications."

Alan Guttmacher was president of Planned Parenthood from 1962 until his death in 1974, so it is not surprising that the Guttmacher report supports the Planned Parenthood solution to teenage pregnancy. The Guttmacher report concludes that the adolescent pregnancy rate in the U.S. is the highest among developed nations and implies that this rate will decline if sex-education programs are instituted and contraceptive devices are made readily available.

There are a number of problems with the report, not the least of which is the close connection between the Guttmacher Institute and Planned Parenthood. But even if we ignore this policy-making symbiosis, we are still left with a number of scientific and social concerns.

First, the authors of the report selected countries that had lower adolescent pregnancy rates than the U.S. and looked at the availability of contraceptive devices. But what about countries like Japan, which has a very low teenage pregnancy rate but does not have a national sex-education program? Japan was excluded from the final "close" comparison of countries. In a footnote, Charles Westoff says that "conservative norms about early marriage and premarital sex may explain this phenomenon better than the availability of fertility control." So we are given only a selected look at developed countries; those with conservative morality (like Japan) were excluded.

Second, the researchers cite statistics that make a case for sex education but seemingly ignore other statistics of concern to society at large. For example, the Guttmacher report

suggests we can learn a great deal from Sweden's experience with sex education, which became compulsory in 1954. While it has a much lower teenage pregnancy rate than the U.S., Sweden has paid a heavy price for this rate. Here are a few crucial statistics that should have been cited along with the Guttmacher report.

From 1959 to 1964, the gonorrhea rate in Sweden increased by 75 percent, with 52 percent of the reported cases occurring among young people. Between 1963 and 1974, the number of divorces tripled and the number of people bothering to get married dropped 66 percent. By 1976, one in three children born in Sweden was illegitimate, despite the fact that half of all teenage pregnancies were aborted.

So while it is true that the teenage pregnancy rate in Sweden is down, the percentages of venereal disease, illegitimate births, and teenage disillusionment and suicide are up.

## **School-Based Health Clinics**

With more than one million teenage girls becoming pregnant each year, family-planning groups are pushing school-based health clinics (SBCs) as a means of stemming the rising tide of teenage pregnancy.

These groups argue that studies of teen sexuality demonstrate the effectiveness of these clinics. Yet a more careful evaluation of the statistics suggests that SBCs do not lower the teen pregnancy rate.

The dramatic increase in teen pregnancies has not been due to a change in the teen pregnancy rate but rather to an increase in the proportion of teenage girls who are sexually active (28 percent in 1971, 42 percent in 1982). The approximately \$500 million in federal grants invested in sex-education programs since 1973 has not reduced the number of teen pregnancies. So proponents now argue that health clinics located in the public



schools can reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by providing sex information and contraception.

The most oft-cited study involves the experience of the clinic at Mechanics Arts High School in St. Paul, Minnesota. Researchers found that a drop in the number of teen births during the late 1970s coincided with an increase in female participation at the SBCs. But three issues undermine the validity of the study.

First, the Support Center for School-Based Clinics acknowledges that "most of the evidence for the success of that program is based upon the clinic's own records and the staff's knowledge of births among students. Thus, the data undoubtedly do not include all births."

Second, an analysis of the data done by Michael Schwartz of the Free Congress Foundation revealed that the total female enrollment of the two schools included in the study dropped from 1268 in 1977 to 948 in 1979. The reduction in reported births, therefore, could be attributed to an overall decline in the female population.

Finally, the study shows a drop in the teen birth rate, not the teen pregnancy rate. The reduction in the fertility rate was probably due to more teenagers obtaining an abortion.

A more recent study cited by proponents of clinics is a three-year study headed by Dr. Laurie Zabin at Johns Hopkins University. She and her colleagues evaluated the effect of sex education on teenagers. Their study of two SBCs showed a 30 percent reduction in teen pregnancies.

But even this study leaves many unanswered questions. The size of the sample was small, and over 30 percent of the female sample dropped out between the first and last measurement periods. Moreover, the word abortion is never mentioned in the brief report, leading one to conclude that only live births were counted. On the other hand, an extensive national study

done by the Institute for Research and Evaluation showed that community-based clinics used by teenagers actually increase teen pregnancy. A two-year study by Joseph Olsen and Stan Weed (*Family Perspective*, July 1986) found that teenage participation in these clinics lowered teen birth rates. But when pregnancies ending in miscarriage or abortion were factored in, the total teen pregnancy rates increased by as much as 120 pregnancies per 1000 clients. Olsen and Weed's research had been challenged because of their use of weighting techniques and reliance on statewide data. But when they reworked the data to answer these objections for a second report, the conclusion remained.

School-based health clinics are not the answer. They treat symptoms rather than problems by focusing on pregnancy rather than promiscuity. And even if we ignore the morality of handing out contraceptives to adolescents, we are left with a claim that cannot be substantiated.

## **Planned Parenthood**

Planned Parenthood has been running ads in newspapers around the country that adopt a lesson from George Orwell and engage in a heavy dose of "newspeak." One ad, for example, contains an impassioned plea for the continued legalization of abortion by defeating what they call "compulsory pregnancy laws."

I take it that by "compulsory pregnancy laws," they mean anti-abortion laws. But the ads seem to imply that the people who want to stop the killing of unborn babies are also bent on coercing women into getting pregnant. That is not what the ads really mean, but isn't it a bit odd to label laws against abortion "compulsory pregnancy laws?"

Another ad carries the title, "Five Ways to Prevent Abortion (And One Way that Won't)." According to the ad, outlawing abortion won't stop abortions. But it will. While it may not stop all abortions, it certainly will curtail hundreds of

thousands that are now routinely performed every year. And it will force many women who presently take abortion for granted to consider what they are doing.

But what are some of the ways Planned Parenthood suggests will stop abortion? One of their proposals is to "make contraception more easily available." The ad states that, since the early 1970s, Title X for national family planning has been supported by all administrations except the Reagan and Bush administrations. The ad therefore encourages readers to lobby for increased funding of Title X.

By the way, Planned Parenthood has been the largest recipient of Title X grants. In other words, the solution to abortion requires we give more of our tax dollars to Planned Parenthood.

Foundational to this proposal is a flawed view of teenage sexuality that sees cause-and-effect in reverse order. Accepting a distorted fatalism that assumes teenage promiscuity as inevitable, Planned Parenthood calls for easy access to birth control. But isn't it more likely that easy access to contraceptives encourages easy sex? Another proposal listed in the ad is to "provide young people with a better teacher than experience." As commendable as that suggestion may sound, what is really being proposed is increased funding for sex-education courses in public schools and the community. Again, notice the presupposition of this proposal. The ad writers assume promiscuity and propose further sex education in order to prevent pregnancy. The emphasis is on preventing pregnancy, not preventing sexual intercourse.

Hasn't Planned Parenthood ignored a better option? Isn't chastity still the most effective means of preventing pregnancy as well as a multitude of sexual diseases? Shouldn't we be encouraging our young people to refrain from sex before marriage? Shouldn't we teach children that premarital sex is immoral?

Arguments for sex education frequently ignore the reality of human sinfulness. We simply cannot teach sexuality in the schools and expect sexual purity unless we also teach moral principles. The greatest problem among young people today is not a lack of education, but a lack of moral instruction.

## **Parental Notification**

Next I want to focus on state laws that require parental notification when minor children are given prescription birth-control drugs and devices.

Opponents refer to these requirements as “squeal rules” and denounce them as an invasion of privacy. This reaction illustrates how far our society has deviated from biblical morality.

High-school students must routinely obtain parental consent in order to go on field trips, participate in athletics, or take driver’s education classes. Many school districts even require parental consent before a student can take a sex-education class. But opponents of parental notification believe these regulations constitute an invasion of privacy.

Critics argue that such regulations will not change the sexual mores of our teenagers. Perhaps not, but they do encourage parental involvement and instruction in the area of sexual morality. The moral burden is placed upon the parent rather than the family- planning clinic.

Without such rules, government ends up subverting the parent’s role. Each year taxpayers subsidize thousands of family-planning clinics that provide medical treatment and moral counsel, yet balk at these meager attempts to inform parents of their involvement with their children.

Ultimately, who has authority over teenagers: the clinics or the parents? Opponents of these “squeal rules” would have you believe that these clinics (and ultimately the government) are

sovereign over teenagers. But parents are not only morally but legally responsible for their children and should be notified of birth-control drugs and devices dispensed to teenagers.

But even more important than the question of authority is the question of morality. Premarital sex is immoral. Just because many teenagers engage in it does not make it right. Statistics are not the same as ethics, even though many people seem to have adopted a "Gallup poll" philosophy of morality.

Critics of the squeal rule believe government should be neutral. They argue that government's responsibility does not include "squealing" to teenagers' parents. But in this situation an amoral stance is nothing more than an immoral stance. By seeking to be amoral, government provides a tacit endorsement of immorality. Secretly supplying contraceptives through government-subsidized clinics will not discourage premarital sex. It will encourage teenage sexual promiscuity.

Again, critics of the squeal rule see cause-and-effect acting in only one direction. They contend that the fact of sexually active teenagers requires birth control clinics. But isn't the reverse more accurate? The existence of birth control clinics, along with the proliferation of sex-education courses, no doubt contributes to teenage promiscuity.

Experience with these rules shows that parental notification will increase parental involvement and thus reduce teenage pregnancy and abortion. Parents should not be denied the opportunity to warn their children about the medical, social, and moral effects of premarital sex.

Make no mistake—parental notification laws will not stop teenage promiscuity; secrecy, however, will do nothing but ignite it.

## A Biblical Perspective

I would like to conclude with a biblical discussion of sex education. As Christians, we need to understand the basic assumptions behind the movement to place sex-education programs and clinics in public schools.

Proponents of sex education often make naturalistic assumptions about human sexuality. They tend to argue as if young people were animals in heat who are going to have sexual relations despite what is taught at home, in church, and in school. The Bible clearly teaches that we are created in the image of God and have the capacity to make choices and exercise self-control. Sex-education advocates would have us believe that young people cannot exercise sexual control; thus we must capitulate to the teenager's sexual urges.

A second false assumption is the tendency of sex-education programs to ignore human sinfulness. Although we are created in the image of God, we all are born with a sin nature. Frequently, sex education panders to that fallen nature.

We cannot teach sexuality and expect sexual purity without also teaching moral principles. Most sex-education programs present data in a so-called value neutral way. But, in trying to be amoral, these programs become immoral. Human sexuality must be related to moral values. Young people need information about sex, but it must be placed in a moral context. The greatest problem among young people today is not a lack of education about sex, but a lack of moral instruction about sex.

I believe we are involved in a moral civil war over teenage sexuality. Here is how we lost a number of battles. First, the old morality was declared passe. The sexual revolution in the 1960s made words like virginity, celibacy, purity, and chastity seem out of date. In previous generations, peer pressure kept young people from sex; today, peer pressure

pushes them into it.

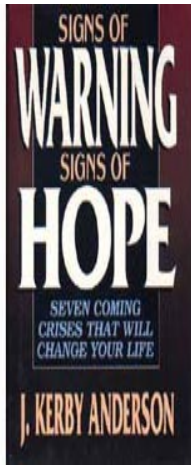
We lost a second battle when we turned sexuality over to scientists and took it away from moralists and theologians. Alfred Kinsey's studies "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" (1948) and "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" (1953) presented comprehensive statistics, but no moral reflection. Today, discussions about sex are supposed to be done in value-neutral settings. Inevitably, demographics determine morality.

What is the solution? Christians must reassert their parental authority and instruct their children about God's view of sex. We must teach them to flee fornication just as Joseph did in the Old Testament. We must teach them to avoid temptation by making no provision for the flesh. We must teach them to exercise self-control in every area of their lives, including the sexual. In other words, we must educate them about the dangers of premarital sex and the wisdom of obeying God's commands regarding human sexuality. Instead of capitulating to teenager's sexual urges, as sex-education advocates want us to do, we should provide them with biblical principles and moral leadership in the area of sexuality.

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## **Mid-Life Transition**



Each year more than three million baby boomers turn 40. Now there is nothing magical about turning 40 per se, but turning 40 does signal the beginning of a time of introspection and re-evaluation that generally occurs during the 40-something years.

Millions of people will encounter a mid-life transition in the 1990s. Why does this occur? How does it affect people? And how can Christians marshal the emotional and spiritual resources to deal with these changes? These are just a few of the questions we will address and attempt to answer.

The leading edge of the baby boom has been the first group to hit this time of transition. Born in the late '40s and early '50s, they lived in new houses, built on new streets, in new neighborhoods, in the new American communities known as the suburbs.

When they headed off to school, they sat in new desks and were taught about Dick and Jane by teachers fresh out of college. They grew up with television and lived in a world brimming with promise. In the '60s they graduated from high school and enrolled in college in record numbers. Then they landed jobs at good salaries in a still-expanding economy and bought homes before housing prices and interest rates went through the roof.

Unlike the baby boomers born after them, the leading edge achieved, in large part, the American dream. They weren't smarter or more talented. Their success was due simply to



being born earlier. But even though they have achieved a degree of financial success, many are beginning to encounter a crisis of purpose. They are like the cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker*. The husband turns to his wife over the breakfast table and says, "The egg timer is pinging. The toaster is popping. The coffeepot is perking. Is this it, Alice? Is this the great American dream?"

Millions in this generation will no doubt repeat these questions in the next two decades. Is this it? Is this the great American dream? Add to these questions others like: Where is my life going? Is this all I am ever going to achieve?

In some ways, these are strange questions coming from the leading edge boomers who enjoy the fruits of the American economy. They have achieved a measure of success and yet they are asking questions that signal a coming crisis of purpose. So why a crisis of purpose? And why now?

## **The Age 40 Transition**

As it enters mid-life, the baby boom generation remains an enigma. Its members rejected the values of their parents and changed the structure of their families in ways unimaginable to a previous generation. But they must now shoulder adult responsibilities and assume positions of leadership (if they aren't already in them). Put another way: the baby boom stands at a point of transition. This is not the first time this generation has collectively faced a point of transition. When the leading-edge boomers began turning 30, they hit what psychologist Daniel Levinson calls the "Age 30 Transition." The struggle of leaving childhood and entering the adult years was worked out in a period of stagnant wages and appreciating house prices. Ultimately the collective angst of the boom generation turned Gail Sheehy's book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* into a runaway bestseller. Among other things, the book assured the baby boomers that they were not

alone in their confrontation with a major lifestage.

The leading edge of this generation is now in the midst of a more significant transition: the mid-life transition. Turning 40 is no more a predictor of change than turning 30 was. But somewhere in that time period, mid-life re-evaluation begins. It is a stage in which men and women begin to evaluate and question their priorities and deal with their dreams and aspirations.

While this transition is both somber and serious, some have attempted to inject some levity into the discussion. Lawyer Ron Katz found the YUPPIE designation an inaccurate description of his friends' lifestyle. So he coined, somewhat facetiously, yet another acronym to describe boomers at this stage. No longer rolling stones, but not yet the grateful dead, they're MOSS—middle-age, overstressed, semi-affluent suburbanites.

According to Katz, MOSS (or MOSSY, if you prefer the adjective) is what YUPPIES have become in the 1990s. As Katz says, a MOSS is "41 years old; more overstressed than overworked; affluent but doesn't feel that way." A MOSS also is beginning to understand why the world hasn't changed more over the past 25 years; [and] hopes that the world changes somewhat less over the next 30 years.

And while some social commentators want to discount the existence of a mid-life crisis, psychologists and sociologists assure us that something is indeed taking place. It is not merely media hype or self-fulfilling prophecy. During the years of mid-life, a substantial re-evaluation is taking place.

In actuality, the transition to mid-life is gradual. There are no major landmarks or signposts that signal our entry into this new and uncharted domain. Perhaps that is why there are so many jokes about turning 40 even though nothing of any

significance actually happens on one's 40th birthday. Turning 40 provides a visible demarcation of a gradual process.

## **The Seasons of a Man's Life**

In the preface of his book *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, Daniel Levinson says, "Adults hope that life begins at 40—but the great anxiety is that it ends there." Fearing this may be true, many baby boomers are beginning to become "frantic at forty- something." They are making a transition from the years of their youth to a time of adulthood without any hope or optimism.

In his book, Daniel Levinson describes a number of developmental stages in adult life. He delineates an early adult era from the mid-20s to the late 30s. He also discusses a middle adult era from the mid-40s to the early 60s. What is in-between is what he calls the years of mid-life transition. He sees these years as a bridge between young adulthood and senior membership in one's occupational world.

The psychological study done by Levinson focused on men between the ages of 35 and 45. He found that about 80 percent of those studied went through a time of personal crisis and re-evaluation during this mid-life transition. Levinson argued that the 20 percent that did not encounter a struggle were in a state of denial and would go through this transition later. This raises the first of two assumptions in these studies.

While the stages and themes documented by these studies are descriptive, they are by no means normative. As a Christian, I reject a deterministic model which predicts that everyone will go through a certain stage. While writing an earlier book on the subject of death and dying, I found that not all people go through the same psychological stages of grief. Christians, for example, who have come to terms with their own mortality and the mortality of their loved ones can face death and agree with the apostle Paul that it is better "to be absent from the

body and present with the Lord.” Likewise, people who have come to grips with their place in the world may not face a wrenching mid-life crisis.

A second assumption has to do with the subjects of these studies. The major studies of adult development (including Levinson’s study) used male subjects born before the 1930 depression. Comparable studies for women were not done, and studies of baby boomers have not been done.

The men in the study have at least three things in common. They grew up in stable families; they had realistic goals for their lives; and they became adults in an expanding economy. Few experienced divorces in their families. Most had simple goals like “being able to provide for their families” and “being a good father.” They also built their careers in a flourishing economic climate.

These assumptions are not true for the baby boom generation. They grew up in less-stable families and now are raising families in a world where divorce is very common. Baby boomers have much greater expectations and thus have personal goals that are much more difficult to fulfill. And baby boomers reached adulthood when the economy was shrinking.

Such differences make it difficult to apply these studies directly to the boom generation. While some investigators argue that talk about a true mid-life “crisis” is overblown, most believe the current generation will be even more susceptible to a crisis than the previous one.

## **New Roles**

In his research, Levinson discovered a number of themes that surface during the time of mid-life transition. The first is that mid-life transition involves adapting to new roles and responsibilities. By the time you are in your 30s, you are expected to think and behave like a parent. You can postpone

this for awhile, and the boom generation has been fairly successful at postponing adulthood by extending the period simply called "youth." Boomers extended adolescence into their 20s and even into their 30s. Now they are facing different and more demanding sets of roles and expectations. They are taking senior positions in their jobs and must provide care for both their children and their aging parents.

A man in his 40s is usually regarded by people in their 20s as a full generation removed. He is seen more as a parent than as a brother. In the minds of those who are younger, he is "Dad" rather than "buddy." This message comes first as a surprise and then as an irritation to a man in mid-life.

Another way to look at this transition is to use the definitions of generations used by Spanish philosopher Jos Ortega y Gasset. He identifies five generations: childhood, youth, initiation, dominance, and old age.

The Initiation generation includes the time of mid-life transition and leads to what he calls the Dominant Generation, where individuals are expected to assume the mantle of leadership, authority, and responsibility. According to Ortega y Gasset, the Initiation and Dominant generations are the two most crucial ones. The relations between them and the successful passing of authority from one to another affect the fate of society. During the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century, this transition from the older generation to the younger generation will be taking place.

## **Mortality**

The second stage of mid-life transition involves dealing with our own mortality. In mid-life we become increasingly aware of death. Living in a death-denying culture shields us from a sense of our own mortality. And being young further heightens our sense of indestructibility. Teenagers and young adults tend to think of themselves as "bullet-proof" and destined for

immortality. But by the age of 40, we have seen many people not much older than ourselves succumb to cancer and heart attacks. Many of us have seen death in our own families. The death of a parent is a clear signal that we are now on our own. It also reminds us how short life really is.

People going through this transition not only face a crisis of mortality; they face a crisis of growing old. Baby boomers are entering what I call the "Ache Age." Vigorous exercise is followed by hurting muscles that seem to stay sore longer. Cuts and bruises that used to heal almost overnight take much longer to heal. Such physiological reminders also focus our attention on our own mortality.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has identified five different stages of grief. Although these describe the psychological stages of a patient who is dying, they correlate remarkably well with the feelings people go through in mid-life. Whether it is the death of an individual or the death of their dreams, the emotional feelings are often the same.

## **Culminating Events**

A mid-life transition surfaces from a culminating event. This event serves as a marker for a conclusion of young adulthood. It may be a very obvious one like a promotion or being fired from a job. But it also might be something that no one would be able to identify, not even our spouses. It is a milestone that helps us see that one of our life's dreams is not going to be realized, and it provides an estimate for future success or fulfillment.

In *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, Daniel Levinson argues that the dreams we have are so compelling that nothing short of total success will satisfy. In other words, there is no such thing as modest success. Frequently, the culminating event is seen as evidence of flawed success and often as total failure.

To those on the outside looking in, a man may seem like he has reached the pinnacle of success. But they can't see into his irrational mind affected by sin. He may have dreams that are hopelessly unrealistic, especially in youth.

It may be that a man is the president of a very successful company, but nevertheless feels like a failure because his dream was to be President of the United States. A man who is very athletic and runs marathons feels unfulfilled because his dream was to play in the NBA. A woman who is one of the top salespeople in the company may feel inadequate because she wanted a family and cannot have kids.

## **Intense Introspection**

Fourth, mid-life transition involves intense introspection. A consistent pattern of adult life is an early struggle in adulthood to achieve a measure of success followed by a mid-life appraisal of one's values and philosophy of life. A man around 40 begins to reassess the meaning of life and begins reconsidering the fate of his youthful dreams. He is asking major questions like: Is this all I am going to do the rest of my life? Is this all I am going to achieve?

Many people find that what they thought was going to make them happy isn't making them happy. They enjoyed law school and the first few years of law. But the thought of practicing law for the rest of their life is not very fulfilling. They enjoyed the first few years selling life insurance, but the thought of selling insurance for another 30 years sounds more like torture than a career.

This is a time when an individual shines a light on his or her accomplishments and sets an agenda for the second half of life. There may or may not be major mid-course corrections depending on the evaluation.

## **Leaving a Legacy**

Finally, a mid-life transition involves leaving a legacy. As we come to grips with our own mortality, we inevitably desire immortality, which is “one of the strongest and least malleable of human motives.” Leaving a legacy means finding a form of immortality by leaving something behind. One is reminded of Woody Allen’s quip that he didn’t want to be immortal by leaving something behind; he wanted to be immortal by not dying. But since that is not possible, then an individual seeks to leave a legacy, and that quest usually forms the core of the second half of a person’s life.

Successful resolution of mid-life comes from determining what legacy—possessions, memories, ministry—we will leave behind. The legacy may encompass family, work, or all of society. It may involve contributions as a parent, spouse, leader, or mentor. These elements of the legacy define the path we will take in the second half of our lives.

## **Application**

These then are the basic themes of the mid-life transition. For the Christian, there are two points of application. First is a personal application. If you are going through mid-life, recognize that you are going to be in a daily battle over three issues.

First, you will have a daily battle with your thoughts. We need to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We will also have a daily battle with temptation. A key verse to memorize is 1 Corinthians 10:13. And finally we will have a daily battle with sin and must confess our sins (1 John 1:8-9).

The second point of application is to our personal ministry. If we are attentive to this mid-life transition, we will be able to minister to millions of people who will go through



this struggle. The 1990s might be the greatest time for harvest in this generation. Until now, most baby boomers have had few struggles. As they confront mid-life, many will be asking important questions that can lead to evangelistic opportunities.

Here are two ways you can help. First, a knowledge of the transition can ease the struggle. Daniel Levinson says knowing the transition is coming is an important antidote to its effects. So a knowledge of this transition can help you reach out.

Second, a knowledge of the Bible can help you to minister. A generation that has been impervious to the gospel may be more willing to listen as it asks the fundamental questions of life. If we reach out in love with a biblical message, we can make a difference.

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## Cyberporn

This article has been updated.

Please see Kerby Anderson's new article [Pornography](#).

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# “What About Those Who Have Not Heard?”

**What happens to those who have not heard about Jesus and therefore cannot choose or reject Him?**

The Bible does not give a complete answer to the question. But there are certain principles that are contained in the Bible; so, although we may not be totally dogmatic on this subject, neither can we say that we must be agnostic toward it. There is sufficient information given so that we can gain a good perspective on it.

First, God never intended anyone to be out of fellowship with Him. Heaven was intended to be man's destination. God is holy and loving and wants everyone to repent (Exod. 34:6-7; Jonah 4:10-11; 2 Peter 3:9). Though He is a just and righteous God, He's also a loving God.

Second, God's nature prevents Him from being unfair. The Bible teaches that God judges fairly (Gen. 18:25; Psalm 7:11, 9:18; 1 Peter 1:17). In His infinite justice, He will be much fairer than we, with our limited understanding of justice, could possibly be.

Third, man is not in total ignorance or spiritual darkness. The Bible clearly teaches that man has an awareness both of God and of eternity (Psalm 19:1-4; Eccl. 3:11; John 1:9; Acts 14:15-17; Rom. 1:18-21, 2:15). It was the Roman sage Seneca who said, “God is near you, is with you. A sacred Spirit dwells within us, the Observer and Guardian of all our evil and all our good. There is no good man without God.” [Quoted in J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 53.]

However, this God-consciousness is not enough. Man must have more information than this in order to be saved. The Christian

message is in jeopardy at either extreme. If God-consciousness is sufficient for salvation, then the Bible's revelation is unnecessary. This is wrong because the Bible places such an importance in bringing the message of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard (Rom. 10:14). But if the Bible is the only way a person can be saved, then we are back to our initial question about those who haven't heard.

In these cases, we have a fourth principle: God will provide the necessary information to those who seek Him. God rewards those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6). He will give anyone who earnestly seeks Him enough information to make a decision (1 Chron. 15:2; Psalm 9:10; Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:13; Acts 8:30-31). God sent Peter to a Roman official named Cornelius to tell him about Jesus (Acts 10). It is also possible that God may work faith in a person's heart so that, like Job, he may say, "I know that my Redeemer lives," without knowing the identity of the Redeemer.

Fifth, the responsibility for a decision concerning this information belongs to each one of us. We are ultimately responsible for the course we choose. No one can make the decision for us. As C.W. Hale Amos wrote, "From what we know, respecting the terms of salvation, we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that no man can perish except by his own fault and deliberate choice." [Ibid., 54.]

We do not have a complete answer to this question. The above principles indicate that God wants all of us to repent, that He is a fair judge, that He will give all of us enough information, and that we are responsible for the decision we make based on that information.

But there is not a totally clear picture about what happens to those who have not heard. This should give us all the more reason to make sure, if we are Christians, that we do what we can to share the Good News with all people or, if we are not Christians, we make a decision for Jesus Christ today. If we

are not completely sure that we are believers, we should make sure by a conscious decision. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, “If you are worried about the people outside [of Christianity], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself.” [C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1972), 50.]

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See answers by  
[Sue Bohlin](#)  
and [GotQuestions.org](#)

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# Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

*Utilitarianism is an ethical system that determines morality on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. A modern form of utilitarianism is situation ethics. Kerby Anderson examines the problems with this ethical system, and evaluates it from a biblical perspective.*



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

You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.

In this article, we are going to talk about the philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness.

Philosophers refer to it as a “teleological” system. The Greek word “telos” means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.

Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism gets its name from Bentham’s test question, “What is the use of it?” He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” in Joseph Priestly’s *Treatise of Government*.

Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been called the “utilitarian calculus.” An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham’s hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple

to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

## Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."[\[1\]](#)

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.” {2}

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him “that all previous moralists were superseded.” He believed that the principle of utility “gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life.”{3}

Mill modified Bentham’s utilitarianism. Whereas Bentham established an *act* utilitarianism, Mill established a *rule* utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time.

## **Analysis of Utilitarianism**

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.

Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine

revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does *not* justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia.

The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.



A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the action itself.

## **Situation Ethics**

A popular form of utilitarianism is *situation ethics* first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name.<sup>{4}</sup> Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the *agape* (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."<sup>{5}</sup>

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. "Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that "no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever."[6](#)

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So some of those around him accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, "If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does?*"[7](#)

Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an "end justifies the means" philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

## **Analysis of Situation Ethics**

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different

definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act.

Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well.

The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the "good thing" or the "right thing." Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, "We can't always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try."<sup>8</sup> But according to his ethical system, we have to *know* the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no

consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that "There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death." The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an "ends justifies the means" ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, "Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?" His response is "May it never be!"

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God's revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

## Notes

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, printed in 1781 and published in 1789 (Batoche Books: Kitchener, ON Canada, 2000), 14.

2. Ibid.

3. John Stuart Mill, "Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education," *Autobiography, 1873* (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14).

4. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

5. Ibid., 70.

6. Ibid., 120.

7. Ibid., 121.

8. Ibid., 136.

# “How Should a Christian View Civil Disobedience?”

How should a Christian view civil disobedience? Doesn't Paul's command to submit to governmental authority in Romans 13 preclude civil disobedience?

As I have said in [my article](#) on the subject, we are to obey government (Romans 13). But that is NOT an absolute command. If there was never a time when we would disobey government, then government would be God.

So the key question is *when* do we disobey government. I believe that the Scriptures teach that we obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29) when there is a direct, specific command given by government that would force us to disobey a direct command of Scripture. The Bible provides cases of this in the Old Testament (Hebrew midwives, many instances in the book of Daniel, etc.) and the New Testament (Acts 5).

The historical cases of Corrie Ten Boom, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King would all fit as examples. Erwin Lutzer (*Measuring Morality*) and Norman Geisler (*Christian Ethics*) deal with the issue of civil disobedience and obedience to Scripture in their books, if you would like to read more on the subject.

Your question about Romans 13 is more difficult. I take it that the Apostle Paul is giving a general principle rather than a universal pronouncement. Usually it is the case that “rulers hold no terror for those who do right.” But that is not always the case. There certainly are (and have been) tyrannical leaders.

It's instructive, though, that Paul says this at a time when a corrupt leader (Nero) was in office. If nothing else it should remind us how much worse government leaders can be.

Nevertheless, we are to obey those in authority (Romans 13) and pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2). Just as there are exceptions to total obedience (civil disobedience), so there are exceptions to leaders who “hold no terror.”

I might also encourage you to revisit [my article on the Probe web site](#) and a recent Breakpoint commentary by Chuck Colson on “Caesar and Christ” ([www.breakpoint.org](http://www.breakpoint.org)). I hope this helped a bit. God bless you.

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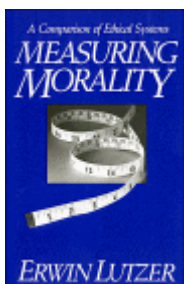
## Cultural Relativism

*Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.*

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



## John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and

justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as *cultural relativism*.<sup>[1]</sup> Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception,

even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” within which humans must live.<sup>{2}</sup> Gertz believed that “Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics.”<sup>{3}</sup>

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

## **William Graham Sumner**

A key figure who expanded on Dewey’s ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: “World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways.”<sup>{4}</sup> In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.



Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

## **Melville Herskovits**

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."[\[5\]](#) In other words, a person's judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that “the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice.”<sup>[6]</sup> Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

# Evolutionary Ethics

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics*, states his perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."<sup>[7]</sup> He denies the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.[{8}](#)

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.[{9}](#) The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's [article](#) on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.[{10}](#)

## **Evaluating Cultural Relativism**

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge

individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God's character, revealed in the Bible provides a reliable measure for morality.

## Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).

2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 1997, 53:323.

4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.

5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15.

6. *Ibid.*, 56.

7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.

8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).

10. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "[Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality](#)"

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