On Engaging Culture

In the late 1940s, conservative Christians were called to come out of the forts to which they had retreated under the onslaught of modernistic thinking and to re–engage their culture. The call was heard, and evangelical Christians have been increasingly involved in academia, the arts, the media, medical ethics, politics, and other strategic areas of our culture. Of course, there's also been significant involvement in pop culture with examples ranging from Christian trinkets sold in Christian bookstores to some pretty good music.

A phrase that is often used for this cultural involvement is "engaging culture." In fact, that phrase forms a third of Probe's abbreviated mission statement: "renewing the mind, equipping the church, engaging the world." What does it mean to "engage" culture? The phrase might give the impression that Christians stand outside their culture and need to re–enter it. This is a simplistic understanding. With the exception of a few such as the Amish, we are all embedded in American culture. We buy food from the same grocery stores as non-Christians and eat the same kinds of food. We watch the same ballgames, wear the same kinds of clothes, drive the same kinds of cars, speak the same language, visit the same museums, take advantage of the same medical care–we could go on and on. In fact, even the Amish don't stand totally outside American culture. Participation is a matter of degree.

To note this participation is not to denigrate it; this is the way life is on this planet. People have divided into different groups and developed different cultures, and within those cultures there are both Christians and peoples of other faiths or no faiths at all.

Christians have always had to deal with the issue of living in a world that isn't in tune with Christian beliefs and morality. When we become actively involved in our culture, our

differences become more acute. Given these differences, how are we to "engage" our culture? What should that look like? It's doubtful whether those who first sounded the evacuation order would approve of how deeply some Christians have embedded themselves in contemporary society. Polls by the Barna Group show how much evangelicals look like their non-Christian neighbors. What is a proper involvement in culture?

A new book on the subject has gained a lot of attention: *Culture Making* by Andy Crouch. Crouch presents two sets of concepts which together form a framework for how we might interact with our culture. He names five strategies and two ways of employing these strategies.

First, the five strategies for interacting with culture are condemning, critiquing, copying, consuming, and cultivating. *Condemning* is finding fault with a thing or practice or person. *Critiquing* refers to analyzing culture. *Copying* is bringing cultural goods into our own subculture and forming a parallel culture. *Consuming* is simply enjoying the fruits of our culture. *Cultivating* refers to creating and nurturing. I'll come back to cultivating later.

Second, the two ways of *employing* the strategies Crouch calls *postures* and *gestures.* These are metaphors taken from our physical stances and motions. *Posture* is the way one stands when not paying attention to how one is standing. Some people have a very erect posture and some slouch. *Gestures* are ad hoc motions we make throughout the day. I need the book on my desk, so I pick it up. I greet someone by shaking hands. I get someone's attention by waving my arms over my head. I don't constantly use the gestures of arm waving or hand shaking or picking up; I only use them when needed.

Now let's put the strategies together with the stances. The first four of the strategies are the ones most commonly practiced. All of them have their places as gestures. Occasionally we need to *condemn*. Some things are bad, and we

need to say so. *Critiquing* is something we need to do as well from time to time. Some law is being debated, for example, and those involved have to analyze the proposal from a variety of angles. *Copying* our culture is something we do sometimes that is okay. Because we live alongside non-Christians in our broader culture, we will be influenced to some extent by musical styles or styles of clothing. In the area of sports, some churches have softball teams and compete against teams from other churches. *Consuming* is something we all do routinely. I go to movies that don't have distinctly Christian messages. I eat at a local Italian restaurant without checking the religious credentials of the owners or employees. I drive on our interstate system without worrying about the fact it wasn't created with distinctly Christian purposes in mind.

A serious problem for Christians is that we often allow these *gestures* to become *postures.* That is, what should only be an occasional behavior becomes a lifestyle or character trait. For example, some people adopt a posture of *condemnation*. They condemn constantly. You've seen the facial expression: eyebrows up, piercing eyes staring, head shaking. Such people seem incapable of finding anything good in culture.

Other people adopt a posture of *critiquing*. Everything is put under the microscope for analysis. Nothing is simply enjoyed. Occupying one's time with critiquing leaves no place for actually bringing about change.

The posture of *copying* is often seen in our Christian subculture. Whatever is new in clothing or hair styles or music, we're all over it. On our t-shirts we print Christian slogans (sometimes cheapening the gospel by a cheesy use of company logos, such as T-shirts with "Christ is King" in the style of the Burger King crown logo). Christian lyrics are written for the latest styles in music. We master the latest marketing techniques. When we are always copying, we are getting our cues from people who don't share our values. Another problem is that we are always following behind. This

posture also reveals a separatist mindset; we can enjoy "their" music, but we have to bring it over the wall into "our" world.

Consuming as a posture results in us becoming indiscriminant in what we "eat." Others are always deciding for us what is good. There is such a concern with keeping up with the latest, with not being left behind, that we are often unaware of how what we consume affects us. A posture of consuming also leaves little room for creating something new.

These strategies are the same ones non-Christians employ. The difference is the values which determine *how* they are employed. All of *our* condemning, critiquing, copying, and consuming are to be governed by scriptural norms.

If we stop here, we will miss the major point of Andy Crouch's book. While these strategies have their places, there's one which we can leave out completely to our detriment and the detriment of our society. That is *cultivation.* Cultivating involves creating and nurturing. Crouch uses the metaphor of gardening to illustrate. The gardener looks at what is there—landscape, sunlight, etc.—and considers what could be grown. Weeds are removed, the soil is tilled, and the seeds are planted. Water is provided to enable growth. This is the stuff of culture making. We aren't just to react to what is there, but to bring new things into existence and to care for what is there that is good.

Crouch has some questions for Christians:

> *I wonder what we Christians are known for in the world outside our churches. Are we known as critics, consumers, copiers, condemners of culture? I'm afraid so. Why aren't we known as cultivators—people who tend and nourish what is best in human culture, who do the hard and painstaking work to preserve the best of what people before us have done? Why aren't we known as creators—people who dare to think and do*

> *something that has never been thought or done before, something that makes the world more welcoming and thrilling and beautiful?*

I suspect that one problem some Christians might have with this has to do with eschatology. Those who hold to a premillennial, pretribulational view of end times see this world as being doomed for destruction, and some wonder why we should put any effort into cultural engagement beyond witnessing for Christ. A big problem with that is that no one knows when the end is coming. In the meantime, cars and factories spew pollution into the air that is harmful to our health and to the well–being of other living things. Cancer still ends lives way too soon and is often attended by much suffering. The decay of inner cities is depressing to its inhabitants. Are Christians engaged in making cars that don't pollute? Fighting cancer? Cleaning up and reversing the decay of declining neighborhoods?

To some, this will sound suspiciously like the "social gospel" of the mid-twentieth century. It isn't. For one thing, it is grounded in Christian theology. We are created in the image of *the* Creator and have been made creative ourselves. For another, because we are made in the image of God we should care about the health and well-being of all people. Consider, too, that God Himself is interested in beauty (Ex. 28:2, 40).

Most of us will never invent something that will drastically alter people's lives. We won't do anything really big like find the cure for Alzheimer's or solve the nation's economic crisis. But we can do small things. We can tutor a child who has trouble reading, fix up our yards and houses so they aren't eye-sores to our neighbors, join a local civic chorale or orchestra. In short, it's just a matter of using our talents to make our world a better place, and in doing so to enrich the lives of other people and point to the glory of God.

In doing so, we may also find that non-Christians are more apt to listen to our reason for doing so.

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"Your Comments About Eating Animals Are Unintelligent and Illogical"

I read your response to the question "Why Did God Allow Animals to be Eaten and Sacrificed?" and found it to be one of the most unintelligent arguments on any subject that I have ever read. Your "logic" draws conclusions in very convoluted ways. Recognizing an animal's right to life does not drag man down to the level of a beast. If ALL life is valued then human life is valued more. There would be no "'open season' on man to cure overpopulation problems…" as you suggest. There is no ultimate NEED for humans to get their diet from animals. Even Daniel recognized that he could be as healthy as [email ends here]

Thanks for writing. Jimmy isn't able to respond to your email, so I'll take a shot at it.

I'm really surprised you found this "the most unintelligent arguments on any subject [you] have ever read." You should read some of the letters we get!

Upon what do you base an animal's right to life? The answer to

that will depend in a significant way upon your worldview. We are Christians, so our authority is the Bible where we learn about the places of humankind and other living beings in God's order.

Because we're to be good stewards of God's creation, we are not to destroy life willy nilly. As Jimmy wrote in his article, there is a hierarchy. I think you'd probably agree that we needn't shed tears over pulling up plants when they are being a problem. Killing animals should be for good reasons, not just for killing's sake. You said we don't need to eat animals. Maybe not, but I don't see why we need to eat animals in order to do so. If God gave us that freedom, we can engage in it (Gen. 9:1-3).

Jimmy's concern about man being pulled down has historical precedent. The loss of a belief in the sacredness of human life has given us abortion and euthanasia. Can you imagine a hundred years ago having to pass a law to prevent doctors from sticking sharp objects into the skulls of partially-delivered babies to suck their brains out and kill them? That would have been unthinkable. But people think they should be able to do that. What does that say about the value of human life? And if Darwinism is correct, then there is no qualitative difference between humans and animals, just a difference of degree.

Yes, Daniel and his friends did well on a vegetarian diet. But there's no hint in the text that he did that because he thought it wrong to eat meat. The Babylonians' meat could very well have been obtained as a part of idol worship.

The bottom line is that we have been given permission to eat any living (non-human) thing. Animals don't have the same "rights" we have. To make a case that animals shouldn't be used for food because they have a right not to, requires a reason for such a right. On what do you base such a right?

Rick Wade

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Does It Matter What We Believe?

Does *what* we believe matter, or just *that* we believe? A study recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, suggests that most religious people in America think *what* they believe isn't so important.{1}

According to the report, eighty-three percent of people identifying themselves with mainline Protestant churches believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. That might not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the changes in mainline churches over the last century.

But what would you say if you knew that fifty-seven percent of people identifying themselves as evangelicals believe that many religions can lead to eternal life? Fifty-seven percent! That means the majority of evangelicals are what we call "religious pluralists." Are you surprised? To add to our embarrassment, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have stronger convictions about their beliefs being the true ones than do evangelicals.

Some findings in the survey were real head-shakers. For example, thirteen percent of evangelicals surveyed believe God is an impersonal force. It might be a little reassuring to learn that evangelicals don't have a corner on the "confused beliefs" market. Six percent of atheists surveyed believe in a personal God, and twelve percent believe in heaven! What are we to make of this?

Whatever it might mean precisely, it at least means that specific beliefs are the property of the believer, not of the religion itself. Fidelity to the beliefs of particular

religions (or irreligion, in the case of atheism) means much less today than in the past. I can associate myself with a given group, but I retain the right to decide for myself what I should believe.

It's understandable, in a sense, why people think this way, including evangelicals. This pluralistic mentality infuses our social consciousness. We aren't to exclude people of other races or the other gender from all the multitudinous areas of society. Businesses are forbidden to discriminate on the basis of "race, color, national origin, religion, or sex."{2} I'm not arguing against any of this. I'm simply pointing to our social mentality which requires (or aims at) the leveling out of differences. The refusal to extend special status is applied to religious beliefs as well. But this doesn't mean we simply tolerate people of different beliefs; now we're supposed to affirm their beliefs!

In addition to this pluralist mentality there is the serious problem for evangelicals of the reduction of doctrinal teaching in churches. David Wells lamented this loss in his 1993 book, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* He was spurred on to write the book after having a student in his seminary class on theology ask him how he could justify spending so much money on a class that "was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church."{3}

One problem some people have with a strong concern for doctrine is that it tends to divide Christians. In so far as we *do* segregate ourselves from other Christians over non-essential beliefs we are in error. Unity is very important. But nowhere in Scripture are we taught that unity is to be preserved regardless, at the expense of truth. After exhorting the Ephesians to be unified in the bond of peace, Paul lists what we are to be unified around: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:3-6). We aren't to be united around the conviction that

when it comes to religion, to each his or her own.

Another reason for a reluctance to insist on doctrinal integrity is the postmodern mentality about truth. This issue is being played out now in discussions about what is called the "emerging church." The desire to correct an overzealous modernism in its confident claims of truth is showing itself in *some* Christians who align themselves with this movement in a diminishing of the importance of doctrinal commitments. The attempt to avoid both absolutism and relativism has them walking a tightrope which too easily swings toward a pluralist mentality.

What does it mean to give up on the importance of specific doctrinal beliefs? First, and very obviously, we have abandoned biblical Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul states specific beliefs that are essential: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (verses 3-5). Jesus made the bold and definitely non-politically correct claim that he was the *only* way to God (John 14:6). Paul says that salvation comes to those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). Throughout both Old and New Testaments, we are presented with claim after claim presented as being true.

Second, we must hold fast to the historic teachings of biblical Christianity if we are to have anything to offer the world. One of the most significant results of liberal watering down of Christian distinctives is that, over time, attendance in mainline churches dwindled; they had nothing to offer that was different from what people could get outside the church.

Wells notes that "the great sin of Fundamentalism is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow." Whereas evangelicals once strongly opposed doctrinal decline in liberalism, now, Wells says, "evangelicals, no less than

the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of 'life'."{4} We're doing well in the arena of social relief; we're doing very poorly in training our people in basic Christian beliefs *as beliefs that are true for all people for all time.*

Wells notes these consequences of the loss of doctrinal conviction. First is simply the loss of conviction. What do we stand for? You've heard it before: A person [or church] that stands for nothing will fall for anything. Second is the loss of what might be accomplished when spurred on by a theological vision. Is being nice and doing good the substance of our marching orders? Third is the loss of any really meaningful sense of what "evangelical" means. Fourth is the loss of unity with the spinning off of individual interests.

If Christianity doesn't have *the* truth about how one might obtain eternal life, it has nothing more to offer than religious experience (whatever that might be for a given individual). It has lost all its substance. Since it *claims* to be the only way to God, what has been aptly said many times bears repeating: either it is true *for* all, or it is not true *at* all.

Notes

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant, June 2008; religions.pewforum.org
2. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html.
3. David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 4.
4. Ibid., 129, 131.

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“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to Do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”

I have a question about some of the new age mentality that I have encountered in the more recent months. As apologetics is a bit of a hobby for me, I love learning what other people think and believe. It seems that as I ask around more and more, people are always saying the same thing. In more words they always seem to say “I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody.” I know that this is by no means a new or uncommon answer, but it seems to be growing to me. Usually I address this with a series of questions which will cause them to backtrack and correct themselves, something like this: It is not all right to hurt people? Do you count as a person? Are you allowed to hurt yourself? Is emotional harm all right? How did you determine that it was not all right to hurt people? Who enforces this rule? Are you making a connection between church and state? How did the world come into existence? And so on. My philosophy is that sooner or later they will be forced to acknowledge that their view is full of holes, yet it appears to me that this way doesn’t work. I actually should have realized this sooner, because I now realize that those people really do not know what they believe, and that their choices are based on emotions. Thus, I am asking you how you would suggest responding to the view that “It is all right to do anything as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody”?

I’m afraid you’ve hit the wall of the skeptical postmodern

mentality. When a person doesn't believe anyone can know what is true about anything, and adopts the "true for me" mentality, the results are an amazing batch of contradictory ideas and no reason to try to make them consistent. People toss together beliefs according to what seems right at the moment, changing beliefs like changing outfits; ideas are subject to fashion just as clothes are. After trying to reason with people who think as you have described, you want to bang someone's head against the wall – theirs or your own (I don't suggest either!).

Because on the level of ideas contradictory beliefs can be held with such amazing ease, one typically cannot convince a person on that level. I say "typically" because some can be convinced at least that their ideas are inconsistent and that that is a problem. You just have to try drawing the person into a conversation and see what happens. For many it takes real life situations to drive home the point.

I recommend you find a copy of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There* and focus especially on the last section: "Speaking Historic Christianity Into the Twentieth-Century Climate." He deals with this issue there. One of his main points is that any religion or philosophy which isn't Christian must result in some kind of inconsistency in a person's life because we were made by God to live in God's universe. False beliefs put us at odds with the universe and with ourselves. So, for instance, a person who says there is no difference between good and evil will be quite upset if you pour boiling water on him. He might even say you were wrong! Of course, I don't recommend actually pulling off such stunts to prove a point! What one can do, however, is gently (I Pe. 3:15) question a person about an inconsistency between what the person says she believes and how she acts. It's like turning a light on and letting the other person see the problem for herself.

One thing we apologists easily forget is tact. One person defined it as "the ability to make a point without sticking

someone with it." Work toward encouragement and very subtle enlightenment rather than conquering in your manner. Be committed to truth, but also be committed to people and to showing the attractiveness of truth to them rather than whipping them with it.

If you have any questions after reading Schaeffer's book (or at least the above-mentioned segment of it) write to me directly.

Rick Wade

See Also:

As Long As It Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else by Rick Wade

"Can We Trust Wescott and Hort's Work on the Greek Text?"

I have heard much of the KJV-only debate and have read Probe's articles "The Debate Over The King James Version" and "Which Version Of The Bible Is Most Accurate?". I thought I had this issue settled in my mind until I heard Pastor Chuck Smith say that Wescott and Hort seemed to be unsaved based on comments he quoted from their writings. I need to know if the beliefs of Wescott and Hort are compatible with that of evangelical Christianity and where a "layman" can obtain source information that can be trusted and understood.

The question of Westcott and Hort's orthodoxy has come up a

few times in the past, but I haven't pursued it. If they were the only New Testament scholars who endorsed the text which underlies the newer translations, we might have reason to hold them suspect. But they aren't. Conservative scholarship has been behind the newer translations such as the NASB, the NIV, and the ESV (English Standard Version).

A helpful Web site which has a number of articles on the subject of textual criticism is www.skypoint.com/~waltzmn/.

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As Long As it Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else – A Biblical Critique of Modern Ethics

Rick Wade considers a common idea behind the ethical thinking of many people. He identifies the inconsistencies in this approach and compares it to a biblically informed ethical system. As Christians, we should bring a Christ centered perspective to our ethical decisions.

What ethical principle guides our society these days? Clearly the Bible isn't the norm. What is?

As I see it, people generally don't try to justify their actions. We want to do something, so we do it. And if we're criticized by someone else, how do we respond? The one justification I hear over and over again is, "I can do whatever I want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else."

Do a quick search on the Internet using the phrase "hurt

anyone else." Here's a blog by a motorcycle rider who says it's no one else's business whether he wears a helmet because it doesn't hurt anyone else.{1} Here's another one where the topic is some kind of staph infection that seems to be spreading among gay men. The writer says he or she's a "big gay rights supporter and definitely [believes] that a person should be true to their own sexuality (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else)." The writer goes on to raise a question about whether certain sexual activity is okay from a public health perspective.{2} Now there's a dilemma.

"As long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." On the surface, that looks like a pretty good rule. I can think of things we'd all agree are morally acceptable that we should avoid if others could be hurt. There's nothing wrong with swinging a baseball bat around, unless you're in a roomful of people. In Scripture we're admonished to give up our freedoms if necessary to save the conscience of weaker believers (1 Corinthians 8).

Problems with the Rule

As a fundamental rule of life, "as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else" is a pretty skimpy ethical principle. There are several problems with it.

First, if there are no concrete ethical principles that apply across the board, how do we measure hurt? Some things are obvious. Swinging a bat in a roomful of people will have immediate and obvious negative consequences. But physical hurt isn't the only kind. We need to know what constitutes "hurt" in order to apply the "as long as" principle. So, one question to ask a person who touts this approach to life is, How do you decide whether something is hurtful or not? Without concrete ethical norms, the "as long as" rule is empty.

Second, this rule faces a problem similar to one faced by utilitarian ethics. *Utilitarianism* seeks to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But how can a

person predict the outcome of an action? It's difficult to work out a greatest good calculus. The "as long as" rule doesn't even go as far as utilitarianism. The latter at least seeks the good of others (in principle, anyway). The former only seeks to avoid harming them. So the question becomes, How can you predict who will be hurt or how?

Here's another thought. Consider the influence others have had on *you*, including those who did what they wanted "as long as it didn't hurt someone else." What about the young man who was just enjoying his high school prom night with a little partying and wrecked his car, killing someone's daughter? Or how about the couple who had a sexual relationship apart from the responsibilities of marriage, and then parted over jealousy or a changed mind and carried the scars of that relationship into others? Maybe you've had to deal with the ramifications of such experiences, yours or your spouse's. Maybe you've had to try to learn on your own how to behave like a grownup because your dad never buckled down in the serious business of life but just had fun, forgetting that he was teaching you by word and example how to live.

When hearing this rule espoused, I can't help wondering how many people even *try* to figure out the effects of their actions on others. I mean, we might give a moment's thought to whether something will hurt anyone in the immediate setting or within a short period of time. But do we think beyond the immediate? How do our actions as young people affect our children not yet born? Or what does it mean for parents if their teenage daughter engages in a hard night of partying and winds up in a coma because of what she's imbibed? Such things do happen, you know?

One more objection before giving a thumbnail sketch of biblical teaching on the matter. When a person speaks of not hurting others, what about that person him- or herself? Is it acceptable to hurt ourselves as long as we don't hurt others? I'm not talking about taking measurable risks that we are

confident we can handle. I'm talking about the array of things people do and justify with the "as long as" principle: doing drugs, engaging in "safe" sex apart from marital commitment, cheating on taxes, spending years following childish dreams without giving serious thought to the future, even living a very shrunken life.

That last one is important to note because ethics isn't just a set of rules given to prevent harm; it also has to do with guiding us into fulfilled lives. The "as long as" rule can justify a seriously diminished life. Most of us have encountered people (maybe our own teenagers!) who could be doing so much better in life than they are, and when challenged they respond, "What does it matter? I'm not hurting anybody else." Maybe not, but they're sure hurting themselves.

A Biblical Ethic

What does the Bible say about these things? Scripture calls us to put others ahead of ourselves. We aren't to cause others harm. More than that, we're to seek others' good. We're given the ultimate example of sacrifice in Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing" for our benefit (Philippians 2:6-8). We're told to give up things we can legitimately enjoy if they hurt other people (1 Corinthians 8).

Furthermore, we're given real ethical content: Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't take someone else's wife. Do good to others. Feed the hungry. Practice justice grounded in the righteousness of God.

Then there's the matter of our own lives. Is the "as long as" principle sufficient to encourage us to develop and use the abilities God has given us? A couch potato might truly not be hurting anyone else, but he's living a small life. Just seeking to do good to others can be a motivation to get up and

get busy and do ourselves some good as a result.

The “as long as” rule pushes personal liberty almost to the limit. It puts me at the center of the world. I can do whatever I want, and furthermore, you’d better not do anything that I find hurtful. I stated the rule in the first person in the opening paragraph (“I can do whatever I want”) deliberately. For some reason we don’t apply it as liberally to others as we do to ourselves!

Without ethical content, however, it gives no direction at all. It really has no place in the Christian life. Our lives are to be governed by an ethics grounded in the nature and will of God which takes into account a biblical view of human nature, a biblical call to protect others and seek their good, and the divine project of redemption that seeks to save and build people up in the image of Christ, including ourselves.

This vision of life makes the “as long as” rule look rather paltry, doesn’t it? We can do better.

Notes

1. TheLedger.com, (see: tinyurl.com/34m9mf).
2. MyFolsom.com (see: tinyurl.com/2jp32o).

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See Also:

“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”

Can People Do the Right Things Out of Compassion and Not Because of a Moral Law?

I have a question about moral law. Everyone knows what pain feels like and everyone knows what sorrow feels like, etc., so isn't it possible for humans to not want to cause others to feel these things because they know how it feels to themselves and not necessarily because of a moral law?

Thanks for your note. You asked a good question.

I think your reasoning would work with someone who has a tender conscience and doesn't want others to hurt. But we all know there are people who don't care whether others hurt. So while the motivation to not want to hurt others could prevent you and like-minded people from doing others harm, others who don't have that motivation will have no constraints. And, I have to add, if the typically tender-hearted person has a day when he or she doesn't care, what will be his/her motivation to do good? If someone responds that it doesn't matter what a person feels like, that it's good to not make others suffer, then we're back with a moral law again.

A fixed moral law, grounded in the nature and will of God, taught in Scripture, and reflected in His universe, provides an objective standard against which we can measure our actions, regardless of our personal motivations.

Thanks again for writing. Write again with other questions, if you like. Or if you think my answer isn't correct, write back and we'll talk about it!

Rick Wade

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Echoes of a Voice

Rick Wade explores how we hear echoes of a supernatural voice calling us through justice, relationship, beauty and spirituality.

Is Anybody Listening?

We spend so much time defending our beliefs and making a case for the faith, and we wonder why people won't listen. We have great arguments and evidences, and it's all so obviously true to us, but they give it as much attention as *we* might if asked to consider some ancient Sumerian religion. Maybe they hear it filtered through preconceived negative ideas of Christianity. Think of the very vocal atheists who think that Christianity is not just old and useless; they think it's downright dangerous. Another problem is that people really don't know about Jesus and what He taught. We live in a society which has little understanding of Christianity outside the churchand, unfortunately, inside it, too, in too many cases.

Maybe we should consider changing the order in which we make a case for Christ.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century scientist and apologist, said that we should "make [Christianity] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and *then* show that it is."{1} Theologian John Stackhouse argues in his book *Humble Apologetics* that today we have to address the question of *plausibility* before that of *credibility.* "'*Might* it be

true? Is Christian argument something I should seriously entertain even for a moment?'"{2}

Of course, Christianity has to be true to be worthwhile, but in some cases it could be better to postpone arguments for the truth of the faith in favor of simply putting it on display. If I tell someone I have a diamond in my pocket, before arguing that it *is* a diamond and not some kind of fake, maybe I need to pull it out and show them to get their interest.

What are some important issues in most everyone's life that could pique people's interest? For his book *Simply Christian,* Anglican bishop and Bible scholar N. T. Wright chose justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty. I'll draw from that book in this article.

There's another important dimension, namely, living out the gospel. Are the things we talk about *real*? Do we live them out across the spectrum of our lives' activities?

In the discussion that follows, I'll talk first about the four subjects just mentioned. Then I'll highlight a very important theme in Wright's book, that of the meeting of heaven and earth. Finally, we'll turn to the matter of Christians as the living voices of God on earth, heralding the day of final redemption, and showing how Christianity applies in some important areas.

Justice and Spirituality

N. T. Wright says we hear "echoes of a voice" calling to us from many directions. To hear these echoes correctly is to hear the voice of God. By encouraging people to pause and focus on these echoes, we can help prepare them to hear a case for the truth of Christianity, if a case needs to be made at all.

One of those echoes is justice. Everyone hears it, even

children. Let one child get to stay up later at night than another, and you'll hear it: "That's not fair!"

We want things to be right, to be in proper order, but we live in a world so often out of order. Racism, religious oppression, laws which serve only the powerful: we can multiply examples. We try to bring about justice, but it slips through our fingers.

Some say the echo we're hearing is just a dream, that there can be no justice. Others say there is such a thing as justice, but it's from another world and cannot be attained here. Still others say it's the voice of Someone speaking to us from elsewhere. God is calling to us, telling us what is right and wrong, and bidding us to pursue justice.

Spirituality is another echo. Wright tells a parable of a dictator who believes it isn't safe to have water coming from so many sources in his kingdom, so he decides to cover with concrete all the land that once was marked by springs and provide one water source for all the people. This is safer, he thought. It's controlled. In time, however, the waters of the springs begin to break through the concrete, and soon they erupt all over the place.

The water in this parable is spirituality, and the dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our culture for a few centuries, that of naturalism.

As much as the "dictator" of naturalism hates it, spirituality is breaking out all over these days. Many religions are now practiced in America. Spirituality and the supernatural are regular themes on TV and in the movies. Bookstores sell scads of books on the subject. It's cool to be spiritual.

Why has this happened? People are hearing something, although many aren't hearing it correctly. Wright says that the formerly "hidden spring" of spirituality "[points] away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the

possibility that we humans are made for more than this."{3} There is more to us than what can be studied scientifically.

Relationships and Beauty

After dealing with spirituality, Wright turns to relationships. He wonders, "How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?"{4}

It's obvious that we are made to live in relationships with other people. In the realm of relationships, we hear the echo of a voice telling us something very important about ourselves.

We find our meaning in the context of a society, small or large, including intimate relationships. Maybe especially so. Marriage is still popular even though so many marriages end in divorce. Many couples just live together in an attempt to avoid the messiness of divorce. We seek good relationships, but plan on failed ones.

And even good relationshipsincluding marriageshave to end, because death, that great separator, comes to all. We fear it, but we can't do anything about it.

Not only marriages struggle, but so do larger societies, especially democratic ones. We want to trust people, indeed we have to. But we're let down and cynicism is bred. Wright says that in Britain, more people vote on reality TV shows than in elections.

What keeps driving us to be so closely involved with other people despite all the risks? Christians have an explanation. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. That's for later.

What about the echo of beauty? Is beauty important to people? Not everyone is a patron of the arts, to be sure. But people put time and money into making their homes attractive places

to live. Even a person who doesn’t care about such things will be found outside on Saturday washing his car.

Yet for all our love of beauty, we find it difficult to capture. Artists paint canvas after canvas trying to get it right. Beauty is transient and incomplete. My wife often draws my attention to the late afternoon Texas sky. The sun, partly hidden behind clouds of white and grey shoots out a fiery glow of brilliant orange and red and yellow. And in a matter of seconds the colors change and then are gone.

The common belief about beauty is that it is in the eye of the beholder. But if that says it all, then nothing is beautiful in itself. Shared experiences of beauty with other people are just happenstance; their subjective response just happens to accord with ours at the moment.

But I don’t think that idea exhausts the truth. We behave and talk as though some things are beautiful in themselves.

Through the transient beauty of our world, could we be hearing the echo of a real voice whispering to us of a beauty that will remain?

Jesus: Where Heaven and Earth Meet

What explanation does Christianity offers for those “echoes of a voice” we’ve been discussing?

The bottom line is this: The death and resurrection of Christ provides a context within which these things come to fruition, where His creation will not be ultimately frustrated by the fallenness of the world.

One of the central motifs of Wright’s book is the meeting of heaven and earth. When he speaks of heaven, Wright is speaking of the supernatural realm where God is; he has in mind more two different realms than two spatial locations.

Wright describes three views of the way God and the world relate. Option 1, he calls it, is the belief that God and the world are identical; what is called *pantheism*. Option 2 is the belief that there is a great gulf between God and the world, what has been called *deism.* Option 3 is the belief that, while God and the world are distinct, their realms meet and even overlap at times.

In Christ, heaven and earth meet in their fullest, most profound way. Jesus, the full embodiment of God, became man; Emmanuel, God with us, is what Isaiah called Him. "In listening to Jesus," Wright says, "we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along."{5}

In his ministry and his death, Jesus took on the powers of darkness. The victory He won didn't only serve to get us into heaven. In defeating evil he won a victory over injustice, spiritual deadness, broken relationships, and an ugly world among other things. His victory applies to us. Being a Christian isn't about leaving this fallen world behind to join God in a disembodied state way out there in heaven. Jesus has set us free and made us new creations, empowered by His Spirit to work at restoring creation in the here and now. We know that this work won't be completed until Jesus comes again and establishes a new heaven and new earth. However, we are to enter into His victory now. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Jesus prayed (Matt. 6:10).

Jesus is the one who both makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty, and who makes them possible.

Living in the Future Today

So what do we do? What does this have to do with the matter of plausibility I discussed at the beginning of this article? I

noted that people who won't hear a case made for the truth of Christianity might be open to hearing what it has to say about such significant matters as justice and relationships and others. I also noted, however, that people have to see them being worked out in our own lives individually and corporately.

In 1 Cor. 3:16 Paul tells us that we are individually temples of the Spirit. In Eph. 2:21 he says that the whole church forms a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was where God dwelled among His people. Now, *we* are God's temple, the place where God dwells. In us because of the Spirit within us, heaven and earth meet. And the Spirit, who is our constant companion, enables us to continue Jesus' work, to "begin the work of making God's future real in the present."{6}

We participate in the life of the church: we read and speak the Word; we engage in worship and prayer; and we partake of the Lord's Supper. In all these things, we declare that God is engaged in this world.

And as a result, God's Spirit is at work through us to set the world to rights. Justice should be demonstrated by the church, and it *will* be complete one day.

We discover true spirituality, that we can partake in both the earthly and heavenly realms, because we are body and spirit. Both parts of our nature find their fulfillment in a proper relationship with God.

We are given a new relationship with God, and the Spirit works in us to show the love of Christ to others and hence to establish and maintain good relationships with people.

And through the church, the Spirit works to restore beauty to this world and to free it from corruption. One day God will restore beauty completely in remaking creation to be what it is supposed to be.

John Stackhouse writes that "We live in a time-between-the-times,' in which people raised in a more or less Christian culture now are reacting against it. Christianity seems to receive greater disdain and resistance than other religions.{7} How can we get them to listen?

As Christians, Wright says, we are "workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty."{8} "We are called not only to listen to the echoes of the voice . . . but to be people through whom the rest of the world comes to hear and respond to that voice as well."{9}

When people see us living this way, maybe they will stop long enough to listen to our reasons.

Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 187.
2. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.
3. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 20.
4. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 29.
5. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 92.
6. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 124.
7. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 51-52.
8. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 189.
9. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 218.

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Life in a Secular Culture – Christian Worldview Living in a Secular World

Rick Wade looks at the similarities and the differences between the views offered by our secular culture and a Christian, biblical worldview. Understanding the significant differences will help us choose to think biblically about situations we face in our secular society.

We get our cues about how to live from the society in which we live. Maybe I should say the societies in which we live since, in this day and age, we can find ourselves moving back and forth between very different worlds. Christians belong to the mini-societies of our churches which might extend beyond the walls of our church to define our friendships, our social lives. We also live and work and play in a secular society which is sending us messages constantly about how to live, how to talk, what to wear; in short, what is important in life.

Secular means that which is defined apart from anything religious. Peter Berger, a sociologist, put it this way: By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols…. It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation. In other words, secularism works its fingers into all of life, including the ideas we hold. Secularization also refers the consciousness of individuals who decreasingly view the world with a religious perspective. So the influence of religion declines in society and in us individually as we think about life with lessor with no reference to God. {1}

Without God shaping its vision, what does our society teach us about how to think and act? Think about it. How are *we* shaped

by the culture in which we live? Just identifying a few things can be a start to combating the corrosive effects of secularism in our lives.

Here are a few things that come to mind.

My society tells me that *my* experience and *my* opinion are all-important (and it thinks of opinion as a purely subjective thing). No one else has the right to set the rules for me. And, if there's a God (and most Americans believe there is), He (or She or It) pretty much leaves us to make our own choices. So I am supposed to refer first to my own tastes and desires when making choices. And that's what really happens when I'm not thinking about it. Vocation, where I live, what music I listen to, what church I attend—it's all up to me. Yes, I know that there are a number of legitimate reasons we make choices that are different from those others make. The point is, should our individual tastes and desires be our primary criteria?

I noted that my society tells me my own experience and opinion is all-important. It's interesting, though, that it wants to decide what choices I can have! We'll see that in some of the next examples.

My society tells me how to dress. We're told that we should express ourselves, our own individuality, in how we dress. The result? People wearing spandex or spandex-tight clothes who have no business doing so; young men wearing their pants down around their thighs; young women showing us all the contours of their bodies. And we're supposed to be expressing ourselves? Looks like a whole lot of conformity to me. Even worse, while we're told to express ourselves, clothes designers and stores are the ones who decide what our choices are. I hear this most often from young women. Their choice in clothing is either sexy or dressing like mom.

My society tells me that I *deserve* good things, so I spend

money on things I might not even *want,* much less really *deserve.* Gratitude for what we have isn't high on the list of virtues these days. Gimme more . . . because I *deserve* it (and I'll go into debt to get it)!

My society teaches me what is funny. The greatest influences on my sense of humor were Bill Cosby and Robin Williams. Who else remembers Cosby talking about smearing Jell-O on the floor of his house to protect him from the monster, or about having his tonsils removed? And when *Mork and Mindy* was all the rage in the 70s, I'd gather with my friends each week to get another dose of Williams's crazy performances.

Now understand that I'm not saying it's necessarily wrong to model our humor on others, even on people who aren't Christians. But what is the character of our humor today? The humor I see routinely on TV and movies is sarcastic put-downs. That's become so much the norm that if anyone objects to it, they're made fun of for being so touchy!

My society also tells me my religion isn't all that important. It has its place, of course, but that place shouldn't be public, at least not until there's some horrible disaster and prayer becomes acceptable. So religion is to stay out of politics and social issues, but is permitted in tragedies such as the recent mine disaster in Utah. To *whom* we pray is irrelevant, of course. You have your God and I have mine.

One place where I see the insignificance of religion in our cultural attitude is on web sites that ask for information about me including my vocation. Religion isn't typically an option (and I'm being generous in saying typically; I can't remember *any* giving me that option). My only choice is Other. The result is that in public I tend to fall into line and keep my religious convictions out of the conversation. Even in our *private* lives religion should mind its manners. One shouldn't be fanatical, you know.

Unfortunately, polls indicate that Christian beliefs are apparently insignificant to *Christians* as well with respect to how they live. The polls I read indicate that people claiming to be born-again don't live any differently than their non-Christian neighbors. We've let the segmenters win. Keep your religion in your church, we're told, and we do just that.

My society tells me that economics is all-important. I wonder if there's anyone else out there who wishes that in a State of the Union address a president would say something like, Our economy is strong, but morally we're in rough shape. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for that! It's the economy, stupid, was a phrase heard often in Bill Clinton's campaign against President Bush in 92. Well, the economy is important, of course. But is it the *most* important thing in individual and social life? Is the U.S. doing just fine as along as the economy is strong?

My society tells us we're free to do what we want in our sexual relationships, that we aren't to be instructed by archaic religious notions. But then, of course, we're told what is expected by society. We've been taught well that a kiss is followed immediately by a romp in the bed. How many times have you seen on TV or in the movies where a man and woman fall into that first embrace and *don't* immediately fall onto the couch or bed or floor? I think of the scene in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* where a woman is astonished to hear that a man and woman have decided to wait till marriage to have sex. Yes, we're free to do whatever we please (the church has nothing to say about such things—that is, as long as what we please doesn't include abstaining and we don't champion monogamy as loudly as homosexuals champion their, um, lifestyle.

My society tells me what constitutes success. Although you can often see stories through the media about the great things average people do, you also are kept up-to-date on the life and times of Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and soccer star

David Beckman. In minute detail. Day after day. Do I really *care* about the latest entry in Rosie O'Donnell's blog? No disrespect intended, but I'm not sure why Ms. O'Donnell's opinions and comings and goings are important enough to make the headlines. Success is doing one's best to accomplish the tasks God has given or those clearly in keeping with the commands and wisdom of God.

My society tells me that objections to crudeness are puritanical; that manners are relics of a by-gone era (since life is all about *me*, while manners are about *others*).

It tells women that the notion of being under a man's headship or devoting herself to her children above her own interests is a throw-back to oppressive days.

It tells parents that they need to let their children determine their own values.

I could go on and on. My point in all this isn't mainly to bemoan the state of our society, but to consider how our secular society tells *us* how to live, and how much of its instruction we swallow and follow without even realizing it. We are definitely going to be shaped by our society, but that shaping shouldn't be mindless.

A few decades ago Christian writers made much of the idea that there shouldn't be a division between the sacred and the secular, that all of life should be infused with the sacred. Our society works against that. And quite frankly, I think the message has been lost to a significant extent in the church. We like our things, so without even thinking about it, we conform our notions of the sacred to the secular. We make Christianity relevant by adjusting it to our circumstances and desires.

Rather than seeing the secular world, the world we can see and touch, through a sacred lens, we're more apt to look at the sacred through a secular lens. May God help us to see all of

life—including our clothes, our humor, our entertainment, our vocation, our relationships, and all the rest—through the eyes of God, as belonging to Him, and give us the resolve to bring them under His lordship.

Note

1. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 107-108.

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