The Rise of the Nones - Reaching the Lost in Today’s America

Steve Cable addresses James White’s book The Rise of the Nones in view of Probe’s research about the church.

Probe Ministries is committed to updating you on the status of Christianity in America. In this article, we consider James White’s book, The Rise of the Nones, Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated. His book addresses a critical topic since the fastest-growing religious group of our time is those who check “none” or “none of the above” on religious survey questions.

Let’s begin by reviewing some observations about Christianity in America.

From the 1930’s into the early 1990’s the percentage of nones in America was less than 8%. But by 2012, the number had grown to 20% of all adults and appears to be increasing. Even more alarming, among those between the ages of 18 and 30 the percentage grew by a factor of three, from 11% in 1990 to nearly 32% in 2012.

Another study reported Protestantism is no longer the majority in the U.S., dropping from 66% in the 1960’s down to 48% in 2012.

The nones tend to consider themselves to be liberal or moderate politically, in favor of abortion and same-sex marriage being legal, and seldom if ever attend religious services. For the most part, they are not atheists and are not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. However, among those who believe in “nothing in particular,” 88% are not even looking for a specific faith or religion.

One report concludes, “The challenge to Christianity . . . does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religions. They’re not thinking about religion and rejecting
it; they are not thinking about it at all."\(^4\) In fact, the 2011 Baylor survey found that 44% of Americans said they spend no time seeking “eternal wisdom,” and a Lifeway survey found that nearly half of Americans said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

As White notes, these changes in attitude come in the wake of a second major attack on traditional Christian beliefs. The first set of attacks consisted of:

1. Copernicus attacking the existence of God
2. Darwin attacking God’s involvement in creation, and
3. Freud attacking our very concept of a creator God.

The second storm of attacks focuses on perceptions of how Christians think in three important areas.

1. An over entanglement with politics linked to anti-gay, sexual conservatism, and abrasiveness
2. Hateful aggression that has the church talking in ways that have stolen God’s reputation, and
3. An obsession with greed seen in televangelist transgressions and mega-pastor materialism, causing distrust of the church.

These perceptions, whether true or not, create an environment where there is no benefit in the public mind to self-identifying with a Christian religious denomination.

**Living in a Post-Christian America**

A 2013 Barna study\(^5\) shows America rapidly moving into a post-Christian status. Their survey-based study came to this conclusion: over 48% of young adults are post-Christian, and “The influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s youngest Americans.”\(^6\)

White suggests this trend is the result of “three deep and fast-moving cultural currents: secularization, privatization, and pluralization.”\(^7\)

**Secularization**

Secularization teaches the secular world is reality and our thoughts about the spiritual world are fantasy. White states: “We seem quite content to accept the idea of faith being privately engaging but culturally irrelevant.”\(^8\) In a society which is not affirming of public religious faith, it is much more difficult to hold a vibrant, personal faith.

**Privatization**

Privatization creates a chasm between the public and private spheres of life, trivializing Christian faith to the realm of opinion. Nancy Pearcy saw this, saying, “The most pervasive thought pattern of our times is the two-realm view of truth.”\(^9\) In it, the first and public realm is secular truth that states, “Humans are machines.” The second and private realm of spirituality states, “Moral and humane ideals have no basis in truth, as defined by scientific naturalism. But we affirm them anyway.”\(^10\)

**Pluralization**
Pluralization tells us all religions are equal in their lack of ultimate truth and their ability to deliver eternity. Rather speaking the truth of Christ, our post-modern ethic tells us we can each have our own truth. As reported in our book, *Cultural Captives*{11}, about 70% of evangelical, emerging adults are pluralists. Pluralism results in making your own suit out of patches of different fabrics and patterns and expecting everyone else to act as if it were seamless.

White sums up today’s situation this way: “They forgot that their God was . . . radically other than man . . . They committed religion functionally to making the world better in human terms and intellectually to modes of knowing God fitted only for understanding this world.”{12}

This combination of secularization, privatization and pluralization has led to a mishmash of “bad religion” overtaking much of mainstream Christianity. The underlying basis of the belief systems of *nones* is that there is a lot of truth to go around. In this post-modern world, it is considered futile to search for absolute truth. Instead, we create our own truth from the facts at hand and as necessary despite the facts. Of course, this creates the false (yet seemingly desirable) attribute that neither we, nor anyone else, have to recognize we are sinners anymore. With no wrong, we feel no need for the ultimate source of truth, namely God.

**If You Build It, They Won’t Come**

We’ve been considering the beliefs and thinking of the *nones*. Can we reach them with the gospel, causing them to genuinely consider the case for Christ?

We are not going to reach them by doing more of the same. Statistics indicate that we are not doing a good job of reaching the *nones*.

As James White notes, “The very people who say they want unchurched people to . . . find Jesus resist the most basic . . . issues related to building a relationship with someone apart from Christ, . . . and inviting them to an open, winsome, and compelling front door so they can come and see.”{13}

Paul had to change his approach when addressing Greeks in Athens. In the same way, we need to understand how to speak to the culture we want to penetrate.

In the 1960's, a non-believer was likely to have a working knowledge of Christianity. They needed to personally respond to the offer of salvation, not just intellectually agree to its validity. This situation made revivals and door-to-door visitation excellent tools to reach lost people.

Today, we face a different dynamic among the *nones*. “The goal is not simply knowing how to articulate the means of coming to Christ; it is learning how to facilitate and enable the person to progress from [little knowledge of Christ], to where he or she is able to even consider accepting Christ.”{14}

The rise of the *nones* calls for a new strategy for effectiveness. Today, cause should be the leading edge of our connection with many of the *nones*, in terms of both arresting their attention and enlisting their participation.

Up through the 1980s, many unchurched would respond for salvation and then be incorporated into the church and there become drawn to Christian causes. From 1990 through the 2000s, unchurched people most often needed to experience fellowship in the body before they were ready to respond to the gospel. Today, we have *nones* who are first attracted to the causes addressed by Christians. Becoming involved in those causes, they are attracted to the community of believers and gradually
they become ready to respond to the gospel.

We need to be aware of how these can be used to offer the good news in a way that can penetrate through the cultural fog. White puts it this way, “Even if it takes a while to get to talking about Christ, (our church members) get there. And they do it with integrity and . . . credibility. . . Later I’ve seen those *nones* enfolded into our community and before long . . . the waters of baptism.”[15]

Relating to *nones* may be outside your comfort zone, but God has called us to step out to share His love.

**Combining Grace and Truth in a Christian Mind**

Every day we are on mission to the unchurched around us. James White suggests ways we can communicate in a way that the *nones* can understand.

We need to take to heart the three primary tasks of any missionary to an unfamiliar culture. First, learn how to communicate with the people we are trying to reach. Second, become sensitized to the new culture to operate effectively within it. Third, “translate the gospel into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.”[16]

The growth of the *nones* comes largely from Mainline Protestants and Catholics, right in the squishy middle where there is little emphasis on the truth of God’s word. How can we confront them with truth in a loving way?

The gospel of John tells us, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”[17] Jesus brought the free gift of grace grounded in eternal truth. As we translate the gospel in today’s cultural context for the *nones*, this combination needs to shine through our message. What does it look like to balance grace and truth?

• If we are communicating no grace and no truth, we are following the example of Hinduism.

• If we are high on grace – but lacking in truth, we give license to virtually any lifestyle and perspective, affirming today’s new definition of tolerance.

• On the other hand, “truth without grace: this is the worst of legalism . . . - what many *nones* believe to be the hallmark of the Christian faith.” The real representative of dogma without grace is Islam.” In a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity, they said that as Muslims, they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.

• Grace is the distinctive message of Christianity but never remove it from the truth of the high cost Christ paid. Jesus challenged the religious thought of the day with the truth of God’s standard. Recognizing we cannot achieve that standard, we are run to the grace of God by faith.

To communicate the truth, we need to respond to the new questions *nones* are asking of any faith. As White points out, “I do not encounter very many people who ask questions that classical apologetics trained us to answer . . . Instead, the new questions have to do with significance and meaning.” Questions such as, “So, what?” and “Is this God of yours really that good?”

We need to be prepared to “give a defense for the hope that is within us” in ways that the *nones* around us can resonate with, such as described in our article *The Apologetics of Peter* on our website.
Opening the Front Door to Nones

The *nones* desperately need the truth of Jesus, yet it is a challenge to effectively reach them. “Reaching out to a group of people who have given up on the church, . . . we must renew our own commitment to the very thing they have rejected - the church.”[18] The fact that some in today’s culture have problems with today’s church does not mean that God intends to abandon it.

The church needs to grasp its mandate “to engage in the process of ‘counter-secularization’ . . . There are often disparaging quips made about organized religion, but there was nothing disorganized about the biblical model.”[19] We all have a role to play in making our church a force for the gospel in our community.

It must be clear to those outside that we approach our task with civility and unity. Our individual actions are not sufficient to bring down the domain of darkness. Jesus told us that if those who encounter the church can sense the unity holding us together they will be drawn to its message.

How will the *nones* come into contact with the unity of Christ? It will most likely be through interaction with a church acting as the church. As White points out, “If the church has a “front door,” and it clearly does, why shouldn’t it be . . . strategically developed for optimal impact for . . . all *nones* who may venture inside?”[20] Surveys indicate that 82 percent of unchurched people would come to church this weekend if they were invited by a friend.

One way we have a chance to interact with *nones* is when they expose their children to a church experience. Children’s ministry is not something to occupy our children while we have church, but is instead a key part of our outreach to the lost *nones* in our community. “What you do with their children could be a deal breaker.”

In today’s culture, we cannot overemphasize the deep need for visual communication. Almost everyone is attuned to visually receiving information and meaning. By incorporating visual arts in our church mainstream, “it has a way of sneaking past the defenses of the heart. And nones need a lot snuck past them.”[21]

We need to keep evangelism at the forefront. “This is no time to wave the flag of social ministry and justice issues so single-mindedly in the name of cultural acceptance and the hip factor that it becomes our collective substitute for the clear articulation of the gospel.”[22]

White clearly states our goal, “Our only hope and the heart of the Great Commission, is to stem the tide by turning the nones into wons.”[23]

Notes

3. General Social Survey conducted over multiple years by the National Opinion Research Center and accessed through the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com).
6. Ibid.
Coddling of the American Mind

Drawing on the book The Coddling of the American Mind, Kerby Anderson examines the insanity on college campuses where students cannot handle ideas and people they disagree with.

In this article we will talk about what is happening on college campuses, and even focus on why it is happening. Much of the material is taken from the book, The Coddling of the American Mind. [1]

Greg Lukianoff was trying to solve a puzzle and sat down with Jonathan Haidt. Greg was a first amendment lawyer working with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). He was trying to figure out why students (who used to support free speech on campus) were now working to prevent speakers from coming on campus and triggered by words or phrases used by professors.

Greg also noticed something else. He has suffered from bouts of depression and noticed some striking similarities with some of the comments by students. He found in his treatment that sometimes he and others would engage in “catastrophizing” and assuming the worst outcome. He was seeing these distorted and irrational thought patterns in students.

After a lengthy discussion they decided to write an article about it for The Atlantic with the title,
“Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions.” The editor suggested the more provocative title, “The Coddling of the American Mind.” The piece from *The Atlantic* was one of the most viewed articles of all time and was then expanded to this book.

That book used the same title: *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Jonathan was on *Point of View* last year to talk about the book. The authors believe that these significant psychological changes that have taken place in the minds of students explain much of the campus insanity we see on campus today.

They point out that two terms rose from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are small actions or word choices that are now thought as a kind of violence. Trigger warnings are an alert the professors now must use if they may be discussing a topic that might generate a strong emotional response.

Before we talk about some of the insight in the book, it is worth mentioning that though there is a psychological component to all of this insanity, there is also an ideological component. When the original article appeared, Heather MacDonald asked if “risk-adverse child-rearing is merely the source of the problem. For example, why aren’t heterosexual white males demanding safe spaces?”[2] They all had the same sort of parents who probably coddled many of them.

It would probably be best to say that the mixture of psychological deficits also with the liberal, progressive ideological ideas promoted on campus have given us the insanity we see today. We have had liberal teaching on campuses for a century, but the problem has become worse in the last decade because of the psychological issues described in the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

### Three Untruths (Part 1)

The book can easily be summarized in three untruths that make up the first three chapters of the book. The first is the “Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Weaker.” Nietzsche’s original aphorism was, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” The younger generation has turned this idea on its head.

It is true that some things are fragile (like china teacups), while other things are resilient (and can withstand shocks). But they also note that some things are *antifragile*. In other words, they actually require stressors and challenges to grow. Our muscles are like that. Our immune system is like that. And university education is supposed to be like that. Students are supposed to be challenged by new ideas, not locked away in “safe spaces.”

Unfortunately, most young people have been protected by a culture that promotes what they refer to as “safetyism.” It has become a cult of safety that is obsessed with eliminating threats (whether real or imagined) to the point where fragility becomes expected and routine. And while this is true for the millennial generation (also called Generation Y), it is even truer for the iGen generation (also called Generation Z) who are even more obsessed with safety.

Part of the problem in these untruths is what they call “concept creep.” Safety used to mean to be safe from physical threats. But that has expanded to the idea that safety must also include emotional comfort. In order to provide that comfort, professors and students a few years ago introduced the idea of creating “safe spaces” for students. And in order to keep those students emotionally safe in the classroom, professors must issue “trigger warnings” so these students don’t experience trauma during a classroom lecture or discussion.
The second untruth is the “Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings.” You can get yourself in some difficult circumstances quickly if you always trust your emotions. It is easy in this world to get frustrated, discouraged, and even depressed. Psychologists have found that certain patients can get themselves caught in a feedback loop in which irrational negative beliefs cause powerful negative feelings. We are seeing that on college campuses today.

Psychologists describe “the cognitive triad” of depression. These are: “I’m no good” and “My world is bleak” and “My future is hopeless.” Psychologists have effective ways of helping someone break the disempowering feedback cycle between negative beliefs and negative emotions. But very few adults (parents, professors, administrators) are working to correct mistaken ideas.

Three Untruths (Part 2)

In a college classroom, students are apt to make some sweeping generalization and engage in simplistic labeling of the lecture or reading material. In that case, we would hope that a professor would move the discussion by asking questions or even challenging the assertion.

Instead, many professors and colleges go along with the student comments. In fact, many even argue that any perceived slight adds up to what today are called “microaggressions.” In many cases, slights may be unintentional and actually wholly formed from the listener’s interpretation.

Here is how it develops. First, you prevent certain topics from being discussed in class. Next, you prevent certain speakers from coming to campus because they might present a perspective that aggrieved students believe should not be discussed. In the book is a chart illustrating how many speakers have been disinvited from universities. Five years ago, the line jumps up significantly.

The third untruth follows from that assumption. It is the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People.” The authors argue that “the human mind is prepared for tribalism.” They even provide psychological research demonstrating that. But that doesn’t mean we have to live that way. In fact, conditions in society can turn tribalism up, down, or off. Certain conflicts can turn tribalism up and make them more attentive to signs about which team a person may be on. Peace and prosperity usually turn tribalism down.

Unfortunately, in the university community, distinctions between groups are not downplayed but emphasized. Distinctions defined by race, gender, and sexual preference are given prominence. Mix that with the identity politics we see in society, and you generate the conflict we see almost every day in America.

The authors make an important distinction between two kinds of identity politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. epitomized what could be called “common-humanity identity politics.” He addressed the evil of racism by appealing to the shared morals of Americans using the unifying language of religion.

That is different from what we find on college campuses today that could be called “common-enemy identity politics.” It attempts to identify a common enemy as a way to enlarge and motivate your tribe. Their slogan sounds like this: Our battle for identity and survival is a battle between good people and bad people. We’re the good guys and need to defeat the bad guys.

An Example: Evergreen State College

One good example of how these untruths play out can be found at what happened on a college campus in Olympia, Washington. The entire story is described in chapter five but also is featured
prominently in the opening chapter of the book *No Safe Spaces* and in the movie with the same title.

Just a few years ago, Evergreen State College was probably best known as the alma mater for rapper Macklemore and Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*. That all changed with an email biology professor Bret Weinstein sent.

In the past, the school had a tradition known as the “National Day of Absence.” Usually, minority faculty and students leave the campus for a day to make a statement. But in 2017, the college wanted to change things and wanted white students and faculty to stay away from campus.

Professor Weinstein argued in an email that there is a difference between letting people be absent and telling people “to go away.” And he added that he would show up for work. When he did, he was confronted by a mob of students. When the administration tried to appease the demonstrators, things got worse.

Weinstein has described himself as a political progressive and left-leaning libertarian. But his liberal commitments did not protect him from the student mob. The campus police warned him about a potential danger. The next morning, as he rode his bike into town, he saw protesters poised along his route tapping into their phones. He rode to the campus police department and was abruptly told: “You’re not safe on campus, and you’re not safe anywhere in town on your bicycle.” Weinstein and his wife eventually resigned and finally received a financial settlement from the university.

The Evergreen students and faculty displayed each of the three great untruths. The Untruth of Fragility (What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker) came from a faculty member who supported the protesters and addressed some of her faculty colleagues in an angry monologue. She warned, “I am too tired. This [blank] is literally going to kill me.” A student at a large town hall meeting verbalized her anxiety and illustrated the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (Always trust your feelings). She expressed, “I want to cry. I can’t tell you how fast my heart is beating. I am shaking in my boots.”

And the whole episode illustrates the Untruth of Us Versus Them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people). The students and faculty engaged in common-enemy identity politics by labeling a politically progressive college and liberal professors as examples of white supremacy. One student (who refused to join the protest) later testified to the college trustees, “If you offer any kind of alternative viewpoint, you’re the enemy.”

**What Can We Do?**

The book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, identifies many disturbing trends on college campuses that are beginning to spill over into society. What can we do to stem the tide?

Obviously, the long-term solution to the insanity on campus and in society is to pray for revival in the church and spiritual awakening in America. But there are some practical things that must be done immediately.

First, college administrators must get control of their campus. The riots at some of these universities resulted in violence and property destruction. Often the campus police and even the local police failed to take action. Sadly, the university administration rarely took action afterwards.

Some form of deterrence would have prevented future actions on the University of California, Berkeley campus. Instead, the inaction established a precedent that likely allowed the conflict at Middlebury College. Students not only shut down the lecture, but they assaulted one of the campus
professors. Once again, no significant action was taken against the students and outside agitators. The problem will get worse if there is no deterrence.

Second, professors must get control of their classrooms. Students cannot be allowed to determine what subjects cannot be taught and what topics cannot be discussed. The authors of this book are concerned about the tendency to encourage students to develop extra-thin skins just before they enter into the real world. Employers aren’t going to care too much about their feelings. Students don’t have the right not to be offended.

Third, we need to educate this generation about free speech. One poll done by the Brookings Institute discovered that nearly half (44%) of all college students believe that hate speech is NOT protected by the First Amendment. And since many students label just about anything they don’t like as hate speech, you can see why we have this behavior on college campuses. More than half (51%) of college students think they have a right to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. A smaller percentage (19%) of college students think it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

Finally, the adults need to make their voice heard. We pay for public universities through our tax dollars. Parents send their kids off to some of these schools. We should not tolerate the insanity taking place on many college campuses today.

The authors have identified certain concerns that colleges and universities need to address. They remind us how hostile the academic world has become, not only to traditional Christian values, but also to mere common sense. We need to pray for what is taking place in the college environment.

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**Social Media**

*Kerby Anderson assesses how social media’s influence is changing our brains and the way we think. He also provides an overview of censorship within social media.*

The influence of social media in our society has increased dramatically in the last decade. This leads to two very important questions. First, how are the various forms of social media and these digital devices affecting us? Second, should we respond to the documented examples of censorship on these social media platforms?
More than a decade ago, social scientists and social commentators expressed concern about how the Internet in general and social media in particular was influencing us. Nicholas Carr raised this question in an *Atlantic* article entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He observed that “Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory.” He believed this came from using the Internet and searching the web with Google.

He later went on to write a book with the arresting title, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. He surveyed brain research that helped to explain why we don’t read as much and why it is so hard to concentrate. The Internet and social media are retraining our brains. He says, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”

A developmental psychologist at Tufts University put it this way. “We are not only what we read. We are how we read.” The style of reading on the Internet puts “efficiency” and “immediacy” above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

You might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says: “The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions.”

The proliferation of social media has also begun to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler made this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid.” He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the “8 Minute Meditation.” The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that “most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes.”

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter was reducing the time of concentration to 140 words (back when that was the word limit). He showed how Twitter was constantly tuning “the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time.” He concluded that “[I]f you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 word mark.”

Not only is there a problem with concentration; there is a problem with distraction. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

Another problem is what is called “continuous partial attention.” People who use mobile devices often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren’t multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their digital devices.

There is also the concern that social media and digital devices are reducing our creativity. Turning on a digital device and checking social media when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.” That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be
These new media platforms present a challenge to us as Christians. As we use these new forms of media, we should always be aware of their influence on us. They can easily conform us to the world (Romans 12:2). Therefore, we should make sure that we are not taken captive (Colossians 2:8) by the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the principle set forth in Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

A wise Christian will use discernment when approaching the various social media platforms. They provide lots of information and connect us with people around the world. But we should also guard against the worldly influence that is also promoted on many of these platforms.

**Social Media Censorship**

Big Tech companies have been censoring content for many years. Many years ago, the National Religious Broadcasters began monitoring censorship on these social media platforms through their John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech. Even back then, their report concluded that “The free speech liberty of citizens who use the Internet is nearing a crisis point.”

A recent Senate hearing provided lots of additional examples. Senator Marsha Blackburn asked why her pro-life ad was pulled during the 2018 campaign because Twitter deemed it “inflammatory.” It is worth noting that she did receive an apology from the executive who added that they made a “mistake on your ad.” Senator Ted Cruz pointed to a Susan B. Anthony List ad that was banned. It had a picture of Mother Teresa with her quote: “Abortion is profoundly anti-woman.” At the top of the poster in the committee room was the word: CENSORED.

A number of commentators (Laura Loomer, Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones) have been banned from Facebook and Instagram. Steven Crowder’s YouTube channel has been demonetized. Nearly two-dozen PragerU videos have been slapped with a restricted label on YouTube. The list goes on and on.

Big tech does control much of the media world. Google controls 90% of worldwide search, 75% of smartphone operating systems, 67% of desktop browser, and 37% of digital advertising. Add to this other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube that also have a profound influence. At the Senate hearing, Ted Cruz noted that these big tech companies “are larger and more powerful than Standard Oil was when it was broken up” and “larger and more powerful than AT&T when it was broken up.” But does that mean government should get involved?

Those who are advocating government intervention make the case that “platform access is a civil right.” The argument is that private companies are actually violating the civil rights of Americans in the same way that preventing someone to speak in a public park would be a violation. They argue that the big tech companies are a monopoly. And they call for federal and state regulation of these social media platforms arguing that the Supreme Court has argued in the past that government cannot restrict your access to the public square.

The problem with that argument is two-fold. First, these big tech companies are private companies not the government. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube platforms are private property and not the public square. We may not always like what they do, but they are privately owned technology companies and not the federal government, which is governed by the First Amendment.
Second, these companies are protected by a section of the 1996 Communications Decency Act that keeps them from being exposed to potentially crippling liability for something posted on their platform. Some politicians have called for changing that legal protection, but Congress seems unlikely to do anything like that in the near future.

Many conservatives are wary of having the government get involved in patrolling social media platforms. They remind us of the 1949 FCC Fairness Doctrine. This regulation was supposed to provide an opportunity for media outlets to provide content that was fair, honest, and balanced. Talk radio and other forms of media exploded once the Fairness Doctrine was removed. In most cases, government regulation of the media hurt conservative voices more than helped them.

Even if government were to regulate content on social media platforms, it is worth mentioning that the major tech companies would probably have lots of influence. Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg would have a place at the table as government drafted various media regulations. It is likely that company and many others might even help craft regulations that would protect them from future competitors. We have seen this picture before in other instances when government intervened.

Some have even suggested that we close our social media accounts. If you don’t like the way the New York Times or the Washington Post reports stories or provides commentary from people on your side, you don’t have to subscribe to those newspapers. If you don’t like how MSNBC or Fox News covers stories, you don’t have to tune to that TV network. Media outlets are already choosing what to print or broadcast. Social media platforms are no different.

Sam Sweeney has this advice: “Delete your Facebook, yesterday. Don’t get your news from Twitter. The issues of free speech on social media will no longer matter to you. They don’t matter to me. I’ve made a decision not to subjugate myself to the whims of our new overloads.”

I think most of us want to keep our social media accounts because of the benefit we receive. But I also realize that in light of what we have discussed in this article, many will decide to follow his advice and drop one or more of these social media accounts. We leave that decision to you.

Additional Resources


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What is Art, Anyway?

When my dear friend Laura Helms told me about integrating her biblical worldview with how she teaches high school art, I was fascinated and asked her to write about her approach.

For the last nine years I have had the privilege of teaching visual arts in the public school system here in Texas. Each year I start off with one question on the board: “What is art?” Students give a wide range of answers but they usually land somewhere near the phrase “art can be whatever you want it to be.”

This year I laid out an assortment of objects ranging from pottery to paintings to piles of trash that I pulled from the garbage can that morning. Through many giggles and lots of questions, many of the students still firmly asserted that all of these items could be considered “art.” While you may agree or disagree with the used candy wrapper being called “art,” art is a form of visual communication that encompasses the values and beliefs of the maker. Effective art communicates those beliefs clearly to the viewer. And I believe good art communicates truth to the viewer.

I don’t get upset when my students hold the candy wrapper up as “art.” I don’t get upset because I know why they think that way. Matthew 6:22-23 says, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” My primary goal as an art teacher is to help students learn how to see clearly. The goal is to teach them to look for truth—objective truth rather than subjective truth.

Art history is a reflection of what cultures believe about truth. The shift in western art movements closely correlates to changes in public value systems. Nietsche famously wrote “God is dead” in the late 1800s. After two world wars, the rise of Nihilism in the West, and the elevation of reactionary self-determination supported by the growing popularity of psychology, artistic thought turned inward for answers to the human experience. Artists looked at a world going up in flames and thought to themselves, Maybe it is true. Maybe I am on my own and this is all there is to life. Artists created art in their own image, validating their own truths and personal beliefs. When our eyes do not work, we do not see clearly. It is not shocking, but it is heartbreaking. When we exchange the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:25), we hope to find life in things that cannot give us life.

I want to briefly share with you the journey my students take each year. Together we first identify
our beliefs. What do you think the definition of art really is? What is the purpose of art? How do you know if art is good art? We start by identifying what we believe about “art.”

Next, we look at how we came to hold those beliefs. Together we look at history, philosophy and the evolution of Western thought. We talk about wars and Darwin, about appropriation and human rights. We look at the change in technology and how it influenced human interaction. We talk about religion and worldviews. We pinpoint large ideological shifts that show up in history. Did you know that the phrase “art is about personal expression” would have been laughed at before 1900? And the phrase “art can be what I want it to be” didn’t show up in public thought until the 1960s. As a class, we look at these origins and take note of how they have shaped our own thoughts and beliefs about art.

Once students can articulate what they believe about art and the origins of those beliefs, we take a second look. How do you know your beliefs are true? How has your understanding of art changed after your studies? Students think they are profound when they make grandiose statements like “art is whatever I want it to be.” The goal isn’t to change their beliefs. The goal is to teach them to see clearly.

I think we all need to go to art class. At our core, none of us want to be fools, trusting in false hopes. We all desire to see truth. It is my goal to help them learn how to seek it and find it. When was the last time you asked yourself, “How do I know this to be true?”

Now go make some good, weird art.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_is_art_anyway on April 30, 2019.
Are Surveys Fake News?

On March 7, 2019, Probe’s Senior VP Steve Cable gave a one-hour presentation drawing on his decades of statistical research and insight to probe deeply into the trustworthiness of news containing references to surveys. In this message he shows why we should remain skeptical of what surveys purportedly indicate. Sometimes the actual results are directly opposite of what is claimed.

You can download the mp3 audio recording here.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Note


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**Politicized Culture**

*Kerby Anderson examines the politicized nature of American culture, offering the Bible’s antidote of a call to civility.*

**Social Media’s Role in Politicizing Issues**

I think most of us lament how just about everything in our culture has become politicized. We can attribute that to the fact that we live in a nation that is divided. The clash of worldviews is more apparent than ever before.
In this article I want to talk about the politicized nature of our culture. First I would like to look at how technology has accentuated this problem. In a recent column, Daniel Foster points the finger to social media. The title of his column is “Everything All the Time.”

His perspective is simple. “It is no longer the case that technologies of communication merely accelerate the public discourse, they now ensure that every possible public discourse happens simultaneously.” In other words, we don’t hear these comments one after another. We hear every comment all at the same time.

We have always had conflicts and differences of opinion in this republic. But these seem to have intensified because of the means of our communication. We could work through our differences “at a pace consistent with social cohesion.” Now we “get a no-holds-barred battle royale in which all things are always at stake.”

Football and the national anthem provide a good example. We were told that Colin Kaepernick did not have a job in the NFL because he was either: (a) a terrible quarterback, or (b) was being blackballed by the NFL owners.

Foster argues that the truth was obviously in between: he is a middling NFL talent who might have the job if he didn’t come with so much baggage.

Of course, the discussion quickly moved beyond him to many of the other NFL players that decided to kneel during the national anthem. Either they were presented as saints or traitors. Soon the protests became something else: a referendum on America. Lost in all of that was the reason for the actions of the football players.

The tackle for the Pittsburg Steelers (Alejandro Villanueva) decided to stand for the national anthem with his hand on his heart. As an ex-Army Ranger, he could do nothing less. Yet, he was made a hero by many and criticized by others.

He wasn’t trying to make a statement, and I don’t think he was trying to defy his coach and teammates. He was merely trying to do what he thought was right. He was distressed with how he was being portrayed in the media by both people who approved of his actions and by those who disapproved. He was merely trying to do what he thought was right before playing the game of football.

In this world of new media, everyone’s opinion is available simultaneously. And the most strident opinions are often given more attention because they are the more extreme. There is little time to digest them and evaluate them because they are coming fast and furious.

**Politicizing Sport and Education**

An NFL player kneeling during the national anthem isn’t the only place where we see a politicized culture.

For example, the controversy over the NFL players seemed to be dying down until President Donald Trump intensified the debate with his speeches and tweets. But politics in sports began long before he became president.
ESPN has been losing viewers, in part, because it has become much more political. Sports journalist Clay Travis put it this way: “Middle America wants to pop a beer and listen to sports talk, they don’t want to be lectured about why Caitlyn Jenner is a hero, Michael Sam in the new Jackie Robinson of sports, and Colin Kaepernick is the Rosa Parks of football.”

In fact, a recent survey validates his conclusions. “The study aggregated 43 different media markets to see the political leanings of ESPN consumers in those markets.”[2] The study found that Republicans were fleeing ESPN in droves. In the last year, the ESPN audience became 5 percent less Republican and ESPN 2 actually became 10 percent less Republican. The biggest partisan shift happened on ESPN News, whose audience became 36 percent less Republican.

Last week the editors at the *Wall Street Journal* explained why we need some areas of our life that are not dominated by political thought. “Healthy democracies have ample room for politics but leave a larger space for civil society and culture that unites more than divides. With the politicization of the National Football League and the national anthem, the Divided States of America are exhibiting a very unhealthy level of polarization and mistrust.”[3]

Politics has also been a part of education, especially higher education, for some time. Political correctness led to attempts to prevent certain professors from gaining tenure and kept certain speakers from even being allowed to speak on campus. Universities may say they believe in free speech, but I think we all know that certain religious views and political views are essentially banned from the academy.

Politics has now become part of the business world. Just like on college campuses, we see that certain social and political views are not allowed in the corporate world. Just ask employees at Google and Mozilla who lost their jobs because one wrote a memo about gender and diversity and the other gave a donation to support traditional marriage. No wonder America is so polarized. Nearly everything in our world has become political.

This politicized political environment has moved into nearly every area of life, including the military.

**Politicizing the Military**

The military might be one arena that you could assume would not be politicized. Unfortunately, we have seen how even the military has been affected by the political environment we find ourselves in today.

We have some examples during the 2016 presidential campaign. Candidate Trump seemed to question the heroism of Senator John McCain when he said, “I like people that weren’t captured.” Trump also belittled the Khan family who criticized him at the Democratic Convention. His approval ratings dropped significantly due to his critical comments about that Gold Star family.

More recently, we have seen the controversy that erupted when a Gold Star wife and a member of Congress complained about the way President Trump talked on the phone to her about the loss of her son. Before it was over, you had the media, members of Congress, and key figures in the Trump administration making comments and charges about what was supposed to be a desire to console a mother who lost her son.

In a recent column, Ben Shapiro reminds us that when we politicize a sacred space in our culture it is a serious problem.[4] He believes it is serious “because no culture can exist without certain cultural capital—trust—and that trust exists only when there are certain spaces in which we can
assume agreement without having to ask."

When there is shared agreement, there is communication and less friction. If every issue becomes contentious, then the chances for miscommunication increase. Also the cost of transactions increases dramatically.

One of the cultural taboos (until recently) have been the politicization of Gold Star families. Their loved ones have paid the ultimate sacrifice, and they certainly deserve to be left alone to grieve and rebuild their lives. They should not be at the center of politicized statements.

President George W. Bush provides a good example of how to respond. You might remember that he was the target of a Gold Star mother by the name of Cindy Sheehan. Instead of opposing her or reacting to her, he allowed her to make harsh political statements and did not respond.

It is worth remembering she alleged that Bush went to war for oil. She even said that Bush sent her son to die to make his oil friends rich. She even camped out near his home in Crawford, Texas to protest him. He showed character and restraint.

Perhaps there is a lesson for us to learn. In this politicized environment, we need to be peacemakers as people of integrity and civility. We should practice restraint because it is often better to turn the other cheek. Sometimes it is better not to respond or retaliate. After all, that is what is what the Bible tells us to do.

**Philosophical and Spiritual Roots of Politicizing**

Why has nearly everything in society become politicized? We have talked about the role of social media and other cultural factors. Today I would like to look at the philosophical and spiritual reasons.

What we are seeing in our society can also be seen in Western civilization. It is the loss of civility. The two words share the same etymology. The root word means to be “a member of the household.” Just as there are certain rules that allow family members to live peacefully within a household, so there are rules of civility that allow us to live peacefully within a society. Those rules have collapsed in the 21st century.

How can we summarize the principles of civility? I believe Jesus simply expressed the goal of civility when he taught that “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). If we truly love our neighbors, then we should be governed by moral standards that express concern for others and limit our own freedom.

Perhaps that is why civility is on the decline. More and more people live for themselves and do not feel they are morally accountable to anyone (even God) for their actions or behavior. We live in a world of selfishness and narcissism and we aren’t about to let anyone limit our freedom to be ourselves.

Civility also acknowledges the value of another person. Politeness and manners are not merely to make social life easier. We are to treat each other with respect and afford them the dignity they deserve as people created in the image of God. It is improper not to treat them with the dignity they deserve.

Again, this may help answer why civility is on the decline and political divisions seem to be growing. An increasing majority in our society no longer believes in moral absolutes. A significant number do not believe in God and therefore do not believe we are created in God’s image. The moral restraints
that existed in the past are loosed. As this crisis of morality and theology unfolds, so does barbarism and decadence. Civility is what is lost from society.

If this is so, then the rise of rudeness and incivility cannot be easily altered. Miss Manners and others have written books about how our nation can regain its civility. But if the crisis is greater than a lack of manners (and I believe that it is), its solution must be found in a greater social change than merely teaching manners or character.

Ultimately, a return to civility must flow out of a moral and religious change. And I believe Christians should lead the way by exemplary behavior. In essence, Christians must be the best citizens and the best examples of civility in society.

The Bible’s Antidote

Let’s turn from the loss of civility and the subsequent rise in a politicized culture to what the Bible has to say about this idea of a civil discourse.

At the heart of civility is the biblical command to love your neighbor as yourself. While it is relatively easy to love people who are your friends or people who are nice to you, the real test of Christian love comes when we are with strangers or with people who are not civil to you. When we find ourselves being criticized in social media or face to face, we should still treat these critics with dignity and respect even if they are not civil to us. Even if they are not gracious toward us, we should not repay them with incivility.

Our duty to be civil to others should not depend on whether we like them or agree with their moral or political perspectives. They may be disagreeable, and we are free to disagree with them, but we should do so by giving grace. Often such a gentle response can change a discussion or dialogue. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”

Civility also demands that we not retaliate. The Apostle Paul teaches in Romans (12:9, 14, 21) we are to “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” Paul goes on to say that we should “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Finally, he concludes, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Civility also requires humility. A civil person acknowledges that he or she does not possess all wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, one should listen to others and consider the possibility that they might be right and that he is wrong. Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.”

Civility also requires that we watch what we say. The Bible clearly warns us of the danger of the tongue in James 3:5-8. We should watch what we say and what we write.

We should work to cleanse our language of harsh, critical, and condemning words. We should rid ourselves of nasty and vulgar language. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

In summary, we should be a positive example as we engage the world. We should do so with courage, compassion, character, and civility.

Notes
A Pilgrim’s Progress: Suffering in the Life of John Bunyan - A Christian View of Suffering

Dr. Michael Gleghorn considers the lessons presented by the life and writings of the famous author of The Pilgrim’s Progress to give each of us a better understanding of the role of suffering in the lives of followers of Christ.

A Suffering Pilgrim

John Bunyan is known to most people today as the author of The Pilgrim’s Progress, a book he began writing in prison. It tells the story of “Christian,” who makes his way from the “City of Destruction” (which represents this world) to the “Celestial City” (which represents Heaven). It’s been described as “perhaps the world’s best-selling book” (after the Bible), and has been “translated into over 200 languages.” {1} Written in the form of an allegory, it essentially relates the story of Bunyan’s own Christian journey.{2} And just as his life was full of trials and suffering, so also “Christian” must face many hardships and difficulties as well.

Bunyan was born in England in 1628 at a time of great political and religious unrest. In 1644, at just fifteen years old, both his mother and sister died within a month of each other. Later that year, “when Bunyan had turned sixteen, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army and for about two years was taken from his home for military service.” {3} He married in 1648, at about the age of twenty, but his wife died just ten years later, leaving him with four children, the oldest of whom was blind. He married again the following year, in 1659, but incredibly, just one year after this, “Bunyan was arrested and put in prison.” {4} His wife, who was pregnant at the time, suffered a miscarriage, probably because of the added stress which this ordeal created. She was then left to care for Bunyan’s four children while he spent the next twelve years in jail. {5}

As you can see, Bunyan was no stranger to suffering. Indeed, he had an intimate, firsthand acquaintance with heartache, trials, and difficulties. But what crimes had he committed to be cast
into prison? Essentially, the charges against him were two: first, “he refused to attend the services of the Established church” of England; and second, he “preached to unlawful assemblies.”(6) You see, Bunyan had converted to Christianity during his first marriage and had become a powerful and respected preacher. But in the volatile political and religious climate of that day, the freedom of Nonconformist preachers like Bunyan eventually came to an end. And when it did, he was arrested and put in prison.

In the remainder of this article we’ll look at some of the trials this man endured, how he responded to them, and what they might teach us as we each make our own spiritual journey.

The Pilgrim’s Conversion

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of the best-selling Christian books of all time. But as Bunyan tells us in another of his books, the autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, before becoming a Christian he had few equals in “cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God.” Indeed, prior to his marriage, he says he was “the very ring-leader of all the youth . . . into all manner of vice and ungodliness.”(7)

Bunyan’s young wife had a very godly father. When he died, he left her two books which she brought into her marriage: *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. According to Bunyan, although these books did not awaken him to his “sad and sinful state,” they nevertheless did arouse within him “some desires to religion.”(8) One of the practical effects of these new desires was Bunyan’s regular attendance at a local church.

Soon Bunyan also began to read the Bible. He then came under such powerful conviction of sin that he scarcely knew what to do. “Sin and corruption,” he wrote, “would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind.”(9) Bunyan was plunged into a state of despair over the greatness of his sin which, he tells us, “continued a long while, even for some years together.”(10)

Eventually, after years of spiritual and emotional agony, Bunyan described “what seemed to be the decisive moment.”(11) He was heading into the field one day when suddenly this sentence broke in upon his mind: “Thy righteousness is in heaven.” At this, he says, “I . . . saw . . . that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse: for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, *the same yesterday, and today, and for ever* (Heb. 13:8).” “Now,” he said, “did my chains fall off my legs indeed . . . my temptations also fled away . . . now went I . . . home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God.”(12)

After years of spiritual anguish, Bunyan had been set free by the grace of God from some of his worst fears and torments. But as we’ll see, this was not to be the end of his experience with suffering. As one set of trials was ending, another was soon to begin.

The Pilgrim’s Imprisonment

According to Bunyan, five or six years after his conversion, in about the year 1655, some of the believers in his local congregation began entreating him “to speak a word of exhortation unto them.”(13) Although initially hesitant, Bunyan agreed to their request “and suddenly a great preacher was discovered.”(14) Apparently, word spread quickly through the English countryside. According to one author, “In the days of toleration, a day’s notice would get a crowd of 1,200 to hear
him preach at 7 o’clock in the morning on a weekday.” [15]

Unfortunately, it was not to last. In 1660, the same year in which Charles II was brought home as king in the Restoration of the Monarchy, John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned “for preaching without state approval.” [16] Officially, he was charged with being in violation of the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593. According to this Act, anyone found guilty of “abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and . . . being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings . . . could be held without bail until he or she submitted to the authority of the Anglican church.” [17] As a Nonconformist preacher, this Act applied to men like Bunyan.

What’s interesting, however, is that Bunyan could have gone free at any time, so long as he agreed to give up preaching. But as he was firmly persuaded that he had been called by God to this ministry, he was completely unwilling to abandon his calling. He thus spent the next twelve years in prison, largely cut off from his wife, children, friends, and church.

I say “largely cut off” for, strange as it may seem, it appears that Bunyan was occasionally let out “to see his family or make brief trips.” [18] Of course, this was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, by “the standards of the seventeenth century the conditions in which he was held were not particularly brutal.” [19] On the other hand, Bunyan was largely fortunate in this respect: “hundreds of Dissenters died in prison, and many more came out with their health broken by foul, over-crowded conditions.” [20]

Although these qualifications must be admitted, we must never lose sight of the fact that Bunyan was willing to endure twelve long years of this suffering, rather than agree to give up preaching. And thankfully, as we’ll see, God brought a great deal of good out of His faithful servant’s suffering.

**The Pilgrim’s Writings**

Most people today know John Bunyan as the author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, but this is just one of many works written by the metal-worker turned minister. His first book was written in 1656, when he was twenty-eight years old. But by the time of his death, some thirty-two years later, he had authored fifty-seven more! [21] John Piper notes:

> The variety in these books was remarkable: books dealing with controversies (like those concerning the Quakers . . . justification and baptism), collections of poems, children’s literature, and allegory (like *The Holy War* and *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*). But the vast majority were practical . . . expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of . . . helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven. [22]

What’s especially astonishing about the size and variety of Bunyan’s literary legacy is that it came from a man with almost no formal education. As a child Bunyan had been taught to read and write, but nothing more. He had no university or seminary degrees in which to boast. And yet his diligent study of the Bible, born mainly out of a burning desire to find peace with God, made Bunyan mighty in the Scriptures. Indeed the Bible, more than any other book, would be the primary influence upon his many writings. So evident was this to Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, that he once wrote of Bunyan:

> He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings are . . . full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his
Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.\(^2\)

Not even his suffering in prison could dampen Bunyan’s enthusiasm for the Word of God or for writing. Indeed, if anything, it increased it. Some of his best-known works were written from the confines of a prison cell. These include *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, written during his first imprisonment, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, apparently completed during a second, briefer period of imprisonment in 1677.\(^2\) Bunyan’s writings are surely one of his greatest gifts to the church.

**Lessons from a Suffering Pilgrim**

A thoughtful examination of John Bunyan’s reflections on the purpose and value of suffering can give us much wisdom in how best to deal with it in our own lives. Near the end of his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he appended a brief account of his imprisonment in the Bedford jail. In it, he tells of how he tried to prepare himself for imprisonment, and possibly even death, when he realized that he might soon be called upon to suffer for the cause of Christ. Naturally, as one might well expect, one of the things he did was pray. He was particularly concerned to ask God for the strength to patiently endure his imprisonment, even with an attitude of joy (Col. 1:11).\(^2\)

However, it’s the second thing he says that I find especially interesting and helpful. He reflects on the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:9: “[W]e had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (NASB). Commenting on this verse, he then makes the following two observations:

> By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them... The second was, to live upon God that is invisible; as Paul said in another place, the way not to faint, is to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen, they are eternal.\(^2\)

Bunyan realized that, like it or not, suffering, pain, loss and death would all come to him in one way or another. Indeed, sooner or later every single one of us must ultimately face these terrifying realities. How, then, can we best prepare to meet them? As Bunyan reminds us, if we only prepare for prison, say, then we will be unprepared for beatings. But if we stop our preparation with beatings, then we will be unprepared for death. But we cannot evade or cheat death forever. And thus, concludes Bunyan, “the best way to go through sufferings, is to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come; and as touching this world.”\(^2\) This was how Bunyan lived, and with God’s help it was also how he died. May the eternal and unseen God grant each of us the grace to follow his example.

**Notes**

Probe Responses to “The Shack”

Probe staff members are not unanimous in their responses to The Shack. Sue Bohlin enjoyed it as “a good book with problems,” and former staffer Pat Zukeran sees value in the book but is concerned enough about the theological problems to give it a “thumbs down.” Those of us who have read the book have a difference of opinion with each other, but we remain friendly and mutually respectful even as we disagree.

The movie is faithful enough to the book that our takeaways still stand.
What is Probe?

Probe Ministries is a non-profit ministry whose mission is to assist the church in renewing the minds of believers with a Christian worldview and to equip the church to engage the world for Christ. Probe fulfills this mission through our Mind Games conferences for youth and adults, our 3-minute daily radio program, and our extensive Web site at www.probe.org.

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Japan’s Unknown Christian History: A Review of ‘Silence’

Former Probe staffer Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews Silence, the book by Shusaku Endo and the movie directed by Martin Scorsese, which look at the little-known Christian history of Japan.

Introduction: Historical Background
The novel *Silence*, written by Shusaku Endo, has been made into a movie directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liam Neeson and Andrew Garfield. This historical fiction provides a glimpse into the little known Christian history of Japan. Few are aware that Japan has a rich Christian history that dates back over four centuries.

The first Christian missionary from Europe was Francis Xavier, who arrived in Japan in 1549. The Japanese embraced the message of Christ and for half a century Christianity flourished in Japan. By 1587, it is estimated that there were nearly 200,000 Christians in Japan. In 1597, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 Japanese had become Christian, 1.6% of the population.{1}

The situation changed dramatically in 1587 under the rule of the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. He grew concerned about the growing influence of Christianity and viewed it as a threat to his power. He gave an edict outlawing Christianity in Japan. In 1597 the first 26 Christians were arrested in Kyoto and marched 600 miles to Nagasaki, the center of Christianity in Japan. There they were tortured and later crucified. This began the Christian persecution in Japan.

Following Hideyoshi came the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), which lasted over 250 years. Under the Tokugawa rule one of the fiercest Christian persecutions occurred in Church history. Church historians estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians died during this time.

The Tokugawa Shoguns realized that killing the Christians did not diminish the growth of Christianity in Japan. The Shogun eventually devised a more sinister and effective way of thwarting the spread of Christianity. Instead of quickly executing Christians, it was more effective to torture the Christians and coerce them to renounce their faith. After committing apostasy, the apostate would be paraded throughout Japan and have them persuade fellow Christians to abandon their faith. This proved more effective in discouraging people from becoming Christians. Christians who apostatized were known as “korobi” or fallen Christians. Priests who apostatized were the most valuable in this endeavor.

To induce Christians to renounce their faith, the Shogun devised some of the most heinous forms of torture that he unleashed on the Christians. Christian men, women, and children were slowly burned at the stake, boiled in hot springs, thrown into frozen lakes and brutalized in various ways. One of the most feared methods was the pit. In this technique, people were hung upside down and their head was placed in a covered pit filled with sewage. The torturers would cut a slit behind the ears or across the forehead so the blood rush would not kill the person but prolong the agony for days.

The persecution proved to be very effective. In 1612 there were an estimated 300,000 Christians. In 1625 it is estimated that there were less than half that number. For the next 250 years the Japanese Christians were forced to worship secretly and were known as the “kakure” or hidden Christians.

This is the historical setting for the movie *Silence* which takes place in 1639 during the height of the Christian persecution in Japan. Two Jesuit priests from Portugal, Father Sebastião Rodrigues and Father Francisco Garpe, secretly enter Japan in search of their mentor Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Neeson) who is purported to have apostatized. Their goal is to find Ferreira and minister to the Japanese Christians who are without priests and thus without true spiritual guidance.

The priests arrive in Japan to find that the Christians live a very arduous life. The movie does an excellent job in revealing the poverty of the Christian communities who are forced to retreat to
remote areas. The audience also feels the anxiety and fear that constantly looms over the Christian villages. The priests spend their days in hiding and in the evenings they minister to the community. However, the priests are discovered and eventually captured.

*Silence* vividly portrays graphically the brutal torture the Japanese Christians suffered at the hands of the daimyos. There are heart-wrenching scenes that depict the way fathers, mothers, and children were inhumanely tortured before they were executed. In many church history books we read of the glorious death of the Christian martyrs. However, this is not the case in the novel or the movie. In the book *Silence*, Susaku Endo wrote,

> I had long read about the martyrdom in the lives of the saints – how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was.\(^2\)

Indeed, the horror of martyrdom is captured in the movie. The agonizing deaths of the Christians are not inspiring or glorious but dreadful to watch.

The priests are coerced to apostatize while in prison. The priests do not fear their own death but they cannot bear to watch the suffering of others. Father Garrpe dies attempting to rescue Christians tossed into the ocean. Rodrigues is now the last missionary in Japan. Finally, the dreaded but sought-for meeting occurs. He meets his mentor Father Ferreira who has apostatized and now goes by his Japanese name Sawano Chuan. He is married and spends his days translating European writings for the Japanese and persuading Christians to abandon their faith in Christ. He encourages Rodrigues to save his life and his fellow believers by apostatizing. Rodrigues refuses and expresses his heartfelt disappointment at Ferreira. Rodrigues courageously resists but eventually he is unable to endure the suffering of his fellow Christians hanging in the pit. Worn down by the cruelty, he eventually steps on the portrait of Jesus, renouncing his faith in Christ. Knowing the Catholic Church cannot forgive him, Rodrigues wonders if Jesus will forgive him for what he has done. This becomes his agonizing struggle for the rest of his life.

**The Silence of God**

The main question that is asked throughout the movie is, Where is God? How can He let His people suffer and die like this? Why does He remain silent and not answer the cries of His people? The priests Garrpe and Rodrigues wrestle with that question throughout the movie and we are drawn into their struggle. This is the question people in every age ask in the midst of their suffering.

Each year I lead the Japan Christian Martyrs Tour where I take the group along the path of the Martyrs. We see the sites and hear the stories where thousands of Japanese Christians were brutally tortured and executed. At those times, even four centuries later, we still ask, “Where was God? Why was He silent? How could He allow the violent massacre of His people in Japan?”

In the final moments of the movie, Rodrigues, now known as the Apostate Paul wrestles with God on this lifelong struggle. He reflects on his act of apostasy, stepping on the image of Christ but instead...
of anger in the eyes of Christ, he saw eyes of understanding, grace and love. He states,

   Even now that face is looking at me with eyes of pity from the plaque rubbed by many feet. “Trample!” said those compassionate eyes. “Trample! Your foot suffers in pain; it must suffer like all the feet that have stepped on this plaque. But that pain alone is enough. I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason I am here.”

“Lord, I resented your silence,” states Rodrigues. Jesus replies, “I was not silent. I suffered beside you.”

Despite his act of apostasy, Rodrigues in the end finds forgiveness from a Christ who understands his situation and extends grace to him. He realizes Christ was not silent but with him though his suffering and remained with him even in his final days. He seems to realize the love of Christ is more powerful and faithful than he has ever known.

This is one of the unique aspects of Silence. Endo and Scorsese want us to see through the eyes of the “korobe” Christian. We applaud those who died never renouncing their faith in Christ and quickly condemn those who publicly renounced their faith in Christ. However, I believe Shusaku Endo through his novel tells us, “Not so fast!” Those who apostatized struggled and suffered greatly too. I believe Endo wants us to see through the eyes of Rodrigues and ask ourselves the question, “Could we endure watching our wives, children and loved ones receiving such vicious treatment for days without end?” “Would we remain steadfast or would we renounce Christ to save our loved ones from such an unbearable fate?” “Would Christ condemn us for renouncing Him to save our loved ones or would he understand and extend grace in such a situation as the Japanese and other persecuted Christian face?”

I believe Endo wants us to understand the struggle of persecuted Christians and wants us to understand they wrestle with their guilt for the rest of their lives. If God’s grace is indeed “greater than all my sin,” should we consider extending grace to our “fallen brethren” as well?

I believe another lesson Endo wants us to learn is that God is not silent but remains with His people in their suffering, never abandoning His people. Throughout church history, Christians have faced brutal persecutions. Even Christ the Son of God suffered the most dreadful death on the cross. Therefore, God understands the pain we experience, He grieves at the wickedness of men, and He promises to be with us always.

I agree with Endo that God is with us in our suffering. However, I feel his answer is incomplete. In a Christian’s suffering, often a disciple feels the presence of Christ in an even greater way. In the writings of the persecuted saints and in the many interviews I have had with Christians who are suffering, many state they feel the presence of God in greater ways than they have ever known. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:10-11, “. . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” So many times in suffering Christians identify with the sufferings of Christ and sense His presence in greater ways.

What I found troubling about the novel and movie is the gloomy mood of the story. The movie emphasizes the brutal deaths of Christians, the struggles of a fallen priest, and what appears to be the demise and bleak future of Christianity in Japan. Indeed, the Christian history of Japan is sorrowful and the movie ends in the midst of Japan’s persecution so I can understand Endo’s ending. On this earth, life will not always have a happy ending. What I find
missing in Endo’s story is the message of hope that is found in Christ even in suffering. What compels Christians to surrender their life for Christ is the assured hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2 states, “... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

There is little joy when focusing primarily on the affairs and outcomes in this fallen world. If this is where the story ends, it is indeed dark and disheartening. However, through the darkness shines the hope that allowed Christ to have joy even when facing the agony of the cross. Believers can also have joy and hope if they look forward to the glory that awaits every believer in Christ. Despite the suffering believers face, it pales in comparison to the eternal glory that is to come. Persecution teaches Christians we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Christians can endure and remain joyful even in their suffering when focused on Christ and the glory of our true home. The end is not the cross of death, but the resurrection of Jesus and every disciple of Christ. This is important in any story of persecuted Christians. It is emphasized in the New Testament and is the story of Christ’s and the believer’s ultimate triumph. The New Testament prophesies the future persecution of all believers but ends with the triumphant resurrection and return of Christ. Through Christ’s victory, the Christian story ends ultimately in triumph. The end is not the death of the Christians in Japan but the glory they received from Christ in heaven. Their courageous commitment should be an inspiration to believers around the world and an example of what it means to live not for this world, but the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 11:35-40 states,

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The Japanese Christians were living for another kingdom and looking forward to the eternal glory of heaven. This message was not present in the novel or the film, which I believe made it a dark and gloomy story. Although Japan Christian history is discouraging, the end has not been written for the Christ’s Church in Japan.

Can A Tree Grow in a Swamp?

One of the most significant dialogues in the movie occurs between Rodrigues and the Samurai Lord Inoue, also known as the Inquisitor. Inoue states,

A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil, may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?

Inoue tells Rodrigues that a tree cannot grow in a swamp. Therefore, Christianity will not take root
There is a famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” In other words, persecution strengthens the faith of Christians and the church grows when persecuted. This was not the case in Japan. The genocide that took place from 1600-1800 was devastating and Christianity has never regained a strong foothold in Japan. Another question Christians struggle with is, “Why has Christianity not taken root in Japan?” Today the largest growth of Christianity is occurring throughout Asia. Despite this, Christianity continues to struggle in Japan.

When Christianity first arrived in Japan in 1549, the Japanese embraced the gospel of Christ. Xavier was so impressed with Japan that he called for only the missionaries of highest quality to be sent. Xavier wrote, “Japan is the only country yet discovered in these regions where there is hope of Christianity permanently taking root. . . . These are the best people so far discovered, and it seems to me that among the unbelievers, no people can be found to excel them.” Father Organto, who followed Xavier, wrote that Japan would be Christianized in 30 years, expressing the optimism of missionaries that Christianity would thrive in Japan. The situation quickly changed and the two centuries of persecution that followed nearly eradicated Christianity in Japan.

Today there is a famous saying among missionaries: “Japan is where Christian missionaries go to die.” Indeed, many return after years of labor discouraged and disillusioned by the little fruit they see in their years of labor in Japan. There are many reasons given why the gospel has not thrived in this country. Can the seed of the gospel penetrate the hard soil of Japanese culture?

As unbelievable as this may seem, I believe a spiritual revival for Japan. As the gospel flourished 400 years ago, spiritual awakening will come to this nation again. How it will come about only God knows. I believe the Japanese are realizing the emptiness of their secular outlook and lifestyle of materialism and consumerism. Their high suicide rate reflects the emptiness of these ideologies. Japanese Buddhism and Shinto fail to answer the great questions of life or fill the void in the heart of all people. These religions are also largely built on myths and so they are not based on reality.

Xavier realized the Japanese religions did not answer the big questions of life such as the origin of life and the universe, the nature of God, the origin of evil, the answer to the problem of evil, and what happens after death. The ideologies that dominate Japan still fail to adequately answer these questions today. As Xavier demonstrated that Christianity provides the best answer to these questions, so the Church in Japan must do the same. Christianity has the evidence to uphold its claims to truth and life everlasting in Jesus. I believe that Christian apologetics would do well in this country that is very rational and well educated. The message of the gospel provides the true message of hope for this nation. I hope that the message and lives of the Japan Christian martyrs will one day be recognized and remembered by the people of Japan.

**Conclusion**

Scorsese’s film is one of the few films about the little known Christian history of Japan. Even the Japanese are not aware of the tremendous Christian history of their nation. We should be thankful to Scorsese for showing the brutal persecution and the suffering endured by the Christians of Japan. Endo and Scorsese reveal to us the heinous tortures but they also take us into the mental torture that those suffering persecution go through. The struggles of the priests and the questions they ask are the same questions we all struggle with in our journey of faith. Endo and Scorsese present a unique perspective looking through the eyes of one who apostatizes and yet finds God’s grace through it all.

It is my hope that Christians throughout the world gain a greater awareness of one of the greatest
massacre of Christians that took place in Church history. I also hope that people will appreciate and admire the courage and commitment of the Japanese Christians who gave their lives for Christ. The Japanese unfortunately hide this part of their history. However, the Japanese and the world should recognize this facet of their history. The story of the men, women and children who gave their lives for Christ is moving and inspirational. They truly lived out the call of discipleship as Jesus commanded. In Matthew 10:37-39 Jesus said,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Few have lived out the commands of Christ so faithfully and courageously as the Christians of Japan. I hope that more will recognize and remember the Christians of Japan who gave their lives for the Gospel.

Notes

5. Dougill, 51.