

Probe Staff Responds to the Terrorist Attack on America

Words are difficult to form when seeking to respond to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in New York City and Washington D.C. Evil of the most despicable sort has truly visited our shores. But amidst the numbing horror of watching the unbelievable scenes on television and the disgusting displays of celebration from some in Palestine, an emotion lacking in my heart was anger.

I am confident that every attempt at finding those who helped mastermind this complex act of terrorism will be made. They must be brought to justice and I support every legal effort to do so. However, I understand that those who brought these tragic events about justify it on the basis of faulty assumptions, a different worldview. This scheme was brought about by not necessarily a sick mind but a deceived and confused mind. They may even believe, if they turn out to be Islamic fundamentalists, that they will have gained a greater reward in the next life for killing huge numbers of "infidels" (unbelievers). This points out all too powerfully that in order to engage our increasingly global culture for Christ, we need to understand not only what we believe and why, but also the worldview of those around us. Not only are our evangelistic efforts imperiled, but our very lives are threatened if we fail to do so.

Unbridled anger is also unproductive. It can lead to making mistakes in a rush to find someone to blame. To seek vengeance as opposed to justice is to abandon a Christian worldview. Paul admonishes us to never pay back evil for evil to anyone. He further reminds us that vengeance belongs to God and to feed our enemy, therefore overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:17-21). Paul further reminds us in the next chapter that the government carries the God-given responsibility for

justice, “for it does not bear the sword for nothing, for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4b).

Let us pray, and donate our blood and money for the families of those who have been murdered, the injured, those still missing but alive, the rescue workers and medical personnel, and especially pray for those in our government responsible for investigating and ultimately apprehending those who planned these acts of terrorism that adjectives simply can't adequately embrace.

Sue Bohlin:

Several observations have struck me and stuck with me as I've watched, listened, assimilated and prayed over the disaster.

1. Many people are experiencing fear that they find difficult to shake. The antidote to fear is to know the presence of the Lord, and I think we need to continually invite Him and the sense of His presence into our hearts, our minds, and our feelings. I think it's essential to remind ourselves that *a loving God is in control*, and to communicate this to our children.



2. As I was meditating on the inevitable question that so many people would ask: “Where was God in the midst of this disaster?” I realized that Jesus was on the

hijacked planes, He was in the World Trade Center offices, and He was at the Pentagon. I remembered the painting of the Lord Jesus knocking at the door of the U.N. building. In my mind's eye, I could easily see Him standing before the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and then I "saw" Him turned around, facing the planes on their deadly missions, and realized *they had to fly through Jesus*, and through His heart, to get to the buildings. The terrorists inflicted fresh pain on the Lord just as they devastated the American people.

3. In hearing people's anguished voices on talk radio, and reading their impassioned posts on the internet, and seeing their pained faces in real life, I sensed a strong desire for justice. Many expressed outrage at the unfairness and the *evil* of this despicable act. And I thought, as a culture we can talk about everybody having the right to their own truth and the universal validity of everyone's experience, but a tragedy like this shows what a hollow and deceptive philosophy that is. Where did the strong sense of right and wrong, of good and evil, come from if not from the fact that "God has planted eternity in the hearts of man" (Eccl. 3:11)? Within moments of hearing about the terrorist attacks, I started praying that people (including the media) would talk about this as an act of evil, making the moral judgment that calling something evil is. . . and was so glad to hear Peter Jennings use that word moments later. President Bush wisely and I am sure deliberately used the word "evil" several times in his message the night of the attacks.

4. Several friends have remarked that they don't feel safe anymore; they feel like they're in a war zone and their world could blow up at any time. What a poignant reminder that in actuality, we live in a *spiritual* war zone. We are in more danger of the enemy's flaming darts and philosophical scud missiles, every single day of our lives, than we are of hijacked planes slamming into buildings. We need to stay vigilant and trust in God all the time. Which reminds me. . .

God is good. All the time. All the time, God is good.

Michael Gleghorn:

As the prophet Jeremiah surveyed the destruction of Jerusalem he wept, pouring out his grief in the poignant poetry of the Old Testament book of Lamentations. The ruthless honesty with which he attempts to reconcile his profound sense of loss with the sovereign will of a holy God is, ironically, both heartbreaking and refreshing. He offers no trite phrases, no easy answers. Indeed, he freely confesses, "My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord" (3:18).

Yet in the midst of his despair and the desolation of his city a light begins to dawn, a ray of hope breaks through the darkness and gloom and he writes his now famous words:

"This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I have hope in Him'" (3:21-24).

Though we may not fully understand why God would allow Tuesday's tragic events we can, like Jeremiah, still look to Him in hope. Even in the midst of our pain and confusion, we can humbly remember His faithfulness, compassion and loyal love.

Pat Zukeran:

Yesterday's attack challenges each person's beliefs and convictions. It brought the reality home to all of us, that life is fragile and eternity is only one step away. At times like these we really begin to search and question our beliefs. It is at these times we see if our belief system really addresses life's greatest questions and if it provide the answers.

Yesterday we saw that only the Christian worldview stood the test. Never have we heard so many people turning to God for strength, for answers and for healing. This shows the natural reaction of man to turn to God in times like these. Each man and woman has the knowledge of God imbedded in his or her heart. As Romans 1:18 states, all men and women have knowledge of God but suppress this truth to justify living independently of Him. However, in times like this, we see this knowledge that man suppresses, rise up and come to the forefront of his thoughts. We can only question this act of terror, seek comfort, and hope only in relation to God Whose nature is revealed in the Bible. No other worldview can address an issue like this and make any sense of it, or bring a message of any hope.

The naturalist believes there is no God and that we are just accidents of time and chance. Therefore, there really is no ultimate reason or purpose behind our existence in the vast universe. Naturalists must realize that, in their belief system, thousands of their loved ones have died for no reason and we will never see them again forever and ever. Those who were burned alive or jumped to their deaths from the burning buildings, firemen who rushed in to the World Trade Center to rescue their fellow citizens, died a meaningless death and are now extinct forever. What hope, what meaning is there in the naturalist worldview? Where are the atheists and humanists proclaiming their message of eternal extinction? They are all silent.

Pantheists will state that evil and sin are really an illusion. How then do we respond to this event? The pantheist's understanding of reality and human nature cannot make sense of this act.

To the Postmodernists who believe all truth is relative and decided by each individual, can those who truly believe this say this was an evil act? Those who flew this suicide mission and their supporters say no. So do we have the right to

condemn them? Relativists, I am sure, are rethinking their position. Americans are angered and seeking justice to be executed on the perpetrators. This is the only right response, to seek justice, and that can only be done if there is a universal basis for right and wrong. Otherwise, if we hold to the relativist's position, we should tolerate this act as a one group freely expressing their ideas. Fortunately for Christians, we can respond properly for there are absolutes of right and wrong declared to us from God's word. Only on this basis can we seek a basis for executing justice.

Only the Christian worldview can bring an understanding, meaning, and hope to this tragedy. The Christian worldview correctly diagnosis human nature, that man is created in the image of God but sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he falls prey to false beliefs and is capable of doing great evil. Only Christianity gives the message of hope that God is in control and will execute justice and one day overcome all evil. Only Christianity can give hope that those in Christ will live eternally in the presence of God. Life is fragile, but there is a life beyond the grave where justice is restored, peace is forever, and love will be experienced in its greatest way. Finally, seeking justice is the right response, for God's word states, "You shall not murder." Human life is sacred, and we are angered and in sorrow for beings made in the image of God are all valuable to Him and He weeps when they are destroyed by the evil we enact on fellow image bearers. This event only makes sense in reference to God.

That is why many are turning to Him now. Now is the time for Christians to expose false ideas and proclaim truth throughout our country and the world.

Second, it challenges us to see that religious values have consequences. What would motivate men to go on suicide missions and kill thousands of people? It is the Islamic belief that if a man dies in a Jihad, he will spend eternity in heaven sitting on couches, drinking wine, and enjoying the

sensual pleasures of the heavenly maidens of whom he can take as many as he desires. This false religion, begun in violence, has devastating consequences of which we have now become aware. I can only conclude this is an evil force that has captured the hearts and minds of young men and led them to commit some of the worst acts of evil in the name of their false God. We Christians must pray and seek to win those lost Muslims to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Jimmy Williams:

A recent bestseller by Tom Brokaw is entitled *The Greatest Generation*. The people to whom he referred (and honored) were those who faced the horrors of World War II. They met their challenge with resolve and personal sacrifice, overcoming their enemies and helping to create a new "beginning" for planet Earth. Why were they "great?" What kind of environment could forge such men and women?

The fathers and mothers of this "great" generation entered the 20th century optimistically. The light bulb. The automobile. The airplane. But then came World War I. It was called The "Great War." And so it was. Never had the world seen such carnage on the battlefield. An estimated ten million died and twenty million were injured.

Quickly following came the "Great Depression." Times were hard in America, and the economy didn't really recover until the demands of war with Germany and Japan jump-started American industry. 400,000 Americans died in this war. Every home in America had been touched by death and injury to their friends and loved ones.

When it was over, this was a cleansed and grateful generation. No theory here. They had experienced and affirmed anew what they deemed REALLY important. The spirit, bravery, and sacrifice of their lives spilled over upon their children, the first post-war generation (baby boomers).

Life was good, and getting better. Unfortunately, it didn't last twenty years. The turbulent Sixties followed. Assassinations. Flower Children. Vietnam. Ingratitude. "Me First." Personal peace and affluence. Security. Unbridled freedom and non-stop entertainment of some kind.

While in church this first Sunday after September 11, I was struck by the awesome power of the words in the hymns we sang: "God of Our Fathers," "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," and "How Firm a Foundation." They just flew off the page at me! It made me realize that the people who wrote these great hymns were probably much closer to living every day in a world of "uncertainty" and danger which Americans have just now rediscovered in the reality of our current shock, grief, and even fear.

Perhaps this tragic event is an opportunity for all Americans to be cleansed and purged and purified to such an extent that we might be among those who one day could come to be honored as another "greatest" Generation.

A "legacy of faith" has been prevalent throughout the history of our country which has periodically refashioned and refreshed the nation, giving it a strong religious flavor, not unnoticed by foreign observers. English novelist and poet G.K. Chesterton remarked in 1922 that the United States is "a nation with the soul of a church." May it be so again in these days.

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Harry Potter

How should wise Christian parents look at the Harry Potter phenomenon? Chances are your kids or grandkids are clamoring to read these incredibly best-selling books. And since only the first of the four books (out of a planned total of seven) is out in paperback, buying these thick hardback books requires a considerable cash outlay as well.

There is a lot to be said in favor of these books:

- They are very well-written fantasy, and a pleasure to read. Even adults enjoy reading them to children—and to themselves. (In England, there is an edition produced especially for adults who are embarrassed to be seen reading a children's book!)
- Because they are written for young boys, they captivate the imagination of almost *all* children.
- They tap into the poignancy of the powerlessness of children, which is a painful part of being young.
- They are full of real-life situations, ranging from the embarrassing to the hurtful to the scary to the satisfying, that real-life kids experience.
- They pit good against evil, with the good guys really being the *good* guys.
- They are getting hundreds of thousands of kids excited about reading.

But there's one substantial difficulty with the Harry Potter series. They make sorcery and witchcraft enticing to the reader. And that is not consistent with a Christian worldview, where we are called to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"[{1}](#). God gives us very strong and clear commands about witchcraft: it is a sin,[{2}](#) it is an

abomination before God, {3} and the Old Testament penalty for sorcery or witchcraft was death. {4} The proscription against the practice of magic is continued in the New Testament. {5}

When Christians and other conservative people make this complaint against the Harry Potter books, one often hears a condescending dismissal about the evils of censorship. No mention is made of the substance of the concern with witchcraft itself, which is a reasonable one.

Fantasy vs. Real-World

Many people impatiently respond, "But it's *fantasy!* It's only make-believe! Nobody's going to really *believe* that this stuff is true!" But the author J.K. Rowling revealed in *Newsweek* that she gets "letters from children addressed to Professor Dumbledore [headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the books' setting], and it's not a joke, begging to be let into Hogwarts, and some of them are really sad. Because they want it to be true so badly they've convinced themselves it's true." {6} She answers those letters herself.

I think it's important to point out that there is an important difference between the fantasy magic of the world of Harry Potter, and the real-world magic that is condemned in the Bible. The fact that J.K. Rowling doesn't believe in witchcraft except as presented in the centuries-old British myths is important; she honestly isn't hoping to draw children into the world of the occult (from everything I have read about her). Unfortunately, that doesn't mean it won't happen. Some people are going to be more sensitive to the draw of the occult, just as some people's bodies are going to be more sensitive to alcohol. The only responsible choice for both kinds of people is complete abstinence.

Connie Neal has written a book, [*What's a Christian To Do with Harry Potter?*](#). I really liked the way she explains the distinction between fantasy magic and occult (real-world)

magic to kids: The magic in *Harry Potter* is make-believe, but the real-world magic in our world ALL falls in the category of “Dark Arts” magic, and those who play with it or pursue it are making themselves vulnerable to a very real evil spirit like Lord Voldemort. There is no such thing as everyday or good magic. Supernatural power that doesn’t come from God is all evil. Kids can understand those kinds of boundaries.

Some people have likened the Harry Potter books to C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While they are both fantasy literature, one is designed to create a thirst for Jesus and for heaven, and the other may create a thirst for power and manipulation. C.S. Lewis writes from a strong Christian worldview; J.K. Rowling writes from a naturalistic worldview that includes magic as a fact of life but excludes God. And by making witchcraft and wizardry so appealing, Harry Potter may be an alarmingly attractive door to the occult for some readers.

Can Harry Potter Be OK?

Is it possible to read the Harry Potter books without stumbling? If one’s discernment filter is well-exercised and in place, yes. But is it wise? That depends on the individual—and it should definitely be a decision each parent makes for his or her own children. If we can watch *The Wizard of Oz* with our kids and not conclude that the presence of a couple of witches will send our kids into the occult, then we can practice the same discernment about Harry Potter.

Hoping the Harry Potter phenomenon will just go away is about as practical as wishing away Christmas. You know your child; for some children, trying to keep them away from the books will only tempt them to read the books on the sly. In some cases, I believe it would be wiser for a parent or teacher to intentionally use them as a teaching tool to help develop children’s “discernment muscles.”

Just as we would never send children out to play in the street alone, it's a different story when we take their hands to walk them across the street, teaching them about safety in the process. In the same way, I would suggest that handing a Harry Potter book to a child to read on his own is the spiritual equivalent of sending a child out to play in the street. Or worse, sending her out into a minefield. However, it can be an invaluable experience for a parent to read the book out loud, stopping to ask questions that will help a child recognize the spiritual counterfeits that comprise witchcraft.

For example, there are several incidents of conjuring, where witches and wizards wave a magic wand and instantly produce things like food for a banquet. Conjuring is a counterfeit of the way God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Casting spells, such as speaking the word "Lumos!" to make one's magic wand become a light source, is a counterfeit of God's ability to speak things into existence.^{7} Bewitching cars to make them fly and ceilings to twinkle like the night sky is a counterfeit of Christ's ability to do miracles like walking on water and feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. Harry's invisibility cloak should be pointed out as make-believe, but God is always and true-ly with us even though He's invisible.

Despite the witchcraft in the Harry Potter books, there are clear moral lessons that can be discussed. Children can understand the painfulness of discrimination as they are encouraged to think through the emotions of being despised simply because one's parents are non-magical Muggles. They can identify the ugliness of arrogance and pride displayed by Harry's Muggle family and his school tormentor, Draco Malfoy. The author has done a magnificent job of portraying the evil of Harry's arch-nemesis, Lord Voldemort, and children can be encouraged to talk about what makes evil, evil. This would provide an excellent opportunity to teach them that God has a plan to put an end to evil forever, and He proved it by

disarming Satan at the cross.

A Final Warning

The Harry Potter books have a lot going for them, but there is potential spiritual danger in the way they make witchcraft so appealing to some people. There is not a clear-cut answer to this question because it is a modern-day “disputable matter.” (See 1 Cor. 8 and Romans 14.) Some people will have freedom to read the books and see the movie without it violating their conscience; others cannot do that. I think it’s important for those with freedom not to boast about their freedom or look down their noses at those who choose not to get into Harry Potter, and it’s equally important for those who have been led to avoid Harry Potter not to judge those who haven’t been led that way.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 10:5
2. 1 Samuel 15:23
3. Deuteronomy 18:10-11
4. Exodus 22:18
5. Galatians 5:20
6. “The Return of Harry Potter!” *Newsweek*, July 10, 2000, p. 58.
7. Genesis 1:3

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The Littleton Shootings:

Looking for the “Why”

Amidst the discussion of the gruesome details of the Columbine High School shootings, the question of “why?” inevitably comes up. People have talked about the killers’ identification with the Trench Coat Mafia, with Nazi values, with an obsession with violence in music and entertainment. They point to the boys’ experience with violent video games, the easy access to guns, and parents who were distant enough to not notice teenage boys building bombs in their garage.

But all of these things, contributing to the total picture that produced the worst school shooting in American history, are all components of the “how.”

People who have studied shame^[1] think they understand a big part of the “why.”

Shame isn’t talked about very much, because, well, it’s shameful. We don’t discuss it, but we all experience it. Shame is the feeling that I am defective, unacceptable, unworthy. Guilt, someone has said, is the awareness that I did something bad; shame is the horrible feeling that I *am* bad. We fear that at our core, something has gone terribly, terribly wrong, and that wrong is me. And we fear being exposed, that others will find out our dirty little secret—that I am a deficient, damaged human being.

Everyone carries around shame baggage, starting with Adam immediately after the Fall. And since we are all burdened by this invisible coating of “shame slime,” we are vulnerable to the further shaming messages that others send us or which we perceive. Shame slime is sticky, and shame messages stick.

When asked how others related to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students at Columbine High School report that most kids didn’t pay any attention to them, and some kids made fun of them. Both of these are perceived as shaming messages:

“You’re so worthless you’re invisible,” and “You’re so worthless and weird that you deserve to be ridiculed.”

What makes high school seniors go on a killing rampage? There is a strong link between unbearable shame and rage. Those who fly into violent rages do so because they fear they can’t take any additional shame. Something happens one otherwise normal day when the painfully tolerable becomes the unbearable, and the person carrying such awful shame crosses a line. A switch is tripped. Some people act on their rage immediately, pulling out guns or knives or fists, or screaming hurtful words. Other people, apparently Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold among them, channel their rage into a plan for later revenge.

This is where another dimension comes into play, I suggest: spiritual warfare. It took Eric and Dylan a good amount of time to prepare for April 20. As a result of their decision to do something so horrendously evil, they were especially vulnerable to the lies of the Enemy. Those lies fueled them: “They’re not going to get away with this.” “They deserve to die.” “I’m justified in meting out revenge for the way they treated me.” “This is a good thing to do.” “Suicide is the only way to finish this off.” “This will solve everything.” Two kids planned, and demons cackled.

But when rage is expressed, it changes things. People who fly into rages end up with greater rejection and more shame, the very thing they couldn’t bear in the first place. So it makes sense that these two bright young men would decide that they couldn’t—and wouldn’t—handle the consequences of their hurtful, unrecoverable decision to hurl pain and violence at the school, and they planned to take their own lives during the rampage. CNN reported that one of them left a note saying, “This is the way we planned to go out.”

There is a significant difference between the Jonesboro junior-high killers, and these high school seniors in Littleton. Children are still mainly shaped by their family.

17- and 18-year-olds, on the other hand, have spent several years traveling through the stage of adolescence where their family no longer has as much impact on them as their peers. What other students think about a person is more important, and more powerful, than what his family thinks. This is a normal part of growing up and getting ready to be an adult, but it makes young people exceptionally vulnerable to those who often don't understand the power they wield. And sometimes, unfortunately, the popular and accepted kids very much do understand their power, and they use it as a weapon against those who don't fit the mold by ridiculing and ostracizing them.

Perhaps this is what happened in Colorado.

Students who appeared on ABC's *Nightline* the night of the shooting reported that the two boys strode into the school, shouting "Now you're gonna pay for what you did to us!" They were especially interested in targeting jocks, who were evidently the source of at least some of the ridicule and put-downs. Earlier this year, the two boys are reported to have made a video for a school project, which featured the two of them in trench coats with guns, mowing down jocks in the halls.

The diary of one of the killers was found, giving insight into the reasons behind their desire for revenge.

We want to be different, we want to be strange and we don't want jocks or other people putting (us) down....We're going to punish you. [\[2\]](#)

Shame is everywhere in this awful tragedy. Why would students make fun of other students in the first place? Their own shame. Putting down others is a time-honored and unfortunately effective way of battling one's own sense of inadequacy and incompetence: "I'll step on you to make myself higher." People who accept themselves, who are content with who they are,

usually don't feel any need to bash others. Unfortunately, the teenage need to feel the approval of one's peers can inspire people who ordinarily wouldn't insult or degrade others to do so simply to look good in their friends' eyes.

There is no question that the ultimate responsibility for this tragedy lies squarely at the feet of the two students who chose to inflict pain and suffering on others. They made a conscious decision to choose an evil and hurtful path. Still, that choice was not made in a vacuum and without provocation. In order to understand the bigger picture, we need to look beyond the two boys whose own shame cost them their own lives and the lives of at least 13 others, not to mention the wounds of other students and the damage to the building. What students do and say to each other is immensely important. Our personal power to hurt and to build must never be underestimated. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" is one of the most grievous lies ever told. Bones heal; insults maim the soul for a long, long time.

It's helpful to ask ourselves, What if we could rewrite history? What could we have done to change things, so it never got to this point? What can we learn from this tragedy that can prevent it from happening somewhere else?

The antidote for shame is love and grace. Those who feel loved and accepted, validated for their differences instead of ostracized for not fitting in, don't have to be crippled or controlled by shame. It is the privilege of those who know God to be able to communicate the truth about how He has created people in His image, as beautiful, worthy, and acceptable because of what Christ did for us on the Cross. That's the grace part. We need to tell each other the truth, in love, just as the Bible commands us. We need to reach out and touch people to communicate "You're valuable. You matter. I'm glad God made you."

Regrettably, those were messages that Eric and Dylan apparently didn't get.

Notes

1. Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 1992.
2. <http://www.freep.com/news/nw/qshoot25.htm>

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Pokemon

Former Probe staffer Russ Wise provides a conservative Christian assessment of the Pokemon character and games.

Pokemon, also known as pocket monsters, has become the biggest game phenomenon among pre-adolescents in modern history. It has not only won the hearts of young boys, but young girls as well.



Pokemon has not only captured the game and collecting market among young people; it has also captured the financial market. Pokemon began in Japan as a Nintendo *Game Boy* game, and now encompasses television with a cartoon program by the same name, plush toys, posters, coloring books, T-shirts, comics, audio CD's, strategy books, hats, and a growing list of other possibilities. *Mewtwo Strikes Back*, a full-length motion picture, will be out November 10th.

And Who Is Pokemon?

In *The Land of Pokemon* there are dozens of exotic little

monsters who have magical powers. They come in all shapes and sizes and have both strengths and weaknesses. However, they can be trained. The goal of the trainer is not only to have the right Pokemon for the event but also to have properly trained the Pokemon. Thus, the trainer can ultimately capture them all and become a master.

Pokemon have more working for them than having strengths and weaknesses; they also have the ability to evolve into "higher forms" by making a conscious choice rather than evolving as a matter of, -oh well!- evolution. Pokemon can either evolve or *devolve* depending on the trainer's needs. Pokemon also has characters that are psychic or ghostly, thereby giving them advantages by displaying supernatural powers.

Problems in the Land of Pokemon

As mentioned earlier, Pokemon has captured the minds and hearts of our youth, not to mention their pocketbooks. The game has become so competitive that parents have begun to make purchases while their young players are in school. A recent *Dallas Morning News* editorial, written by a Dallas-area mom, bemoaned the fact that parents have ruined Pokemon for children because they have purchased unfairly and taken the fun out of the game for children in general. It seems that parents have become over-zealous in their desire to give their children every advantage.

Another problem that Pokemon raises is that young people cannot make good decisions about when to play and "not" play. A growing number of schoolteachers and schools have banned Pokemon from their schools and classrooms. Students have difficulty leaving playtime at the classroom door, thereby not giving the teacher their full attention during class.

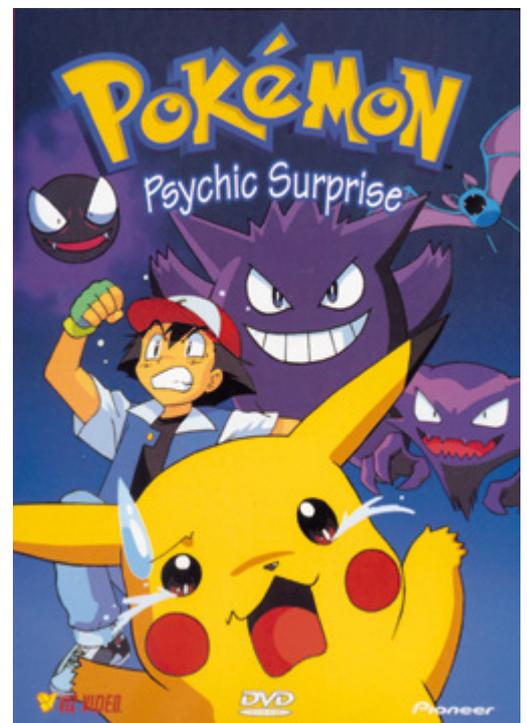
Students also have difficulty dealing with their emotions after making a "bad" trade or purchase. It is not uncommon for a student to become depressed after a bad deal literally

ruining his day.

There have been reports of young people having their valuable cards stolen on campus or in the classroom. You can imagine the trauma of having your card collection of several hundred dollars disappear.

Eric, a thirteen-year-old enthusiast, said, "It's highly addictive and I think it's fun that there's a world out there with imaginary creatures that you can control and are highly powerful."

Another problem, and one that the Christian cannot ignore, is the occultic influence that comes with the game. Pokemon who have psychic abilities and are able to evolve or devolve introduce an occultic world that young people may not have the maturity to deal with. The wise parent will oversee this child's activities and playtime, interacting with his child, and instructing his son or daughter in their faith. In a word, it offers the parent a *teachable* moment that may not otherwise occur.



Teachable moments are precious and few. It is not uncommon for Christian parents to overreact and want to protect their children from all negative influences in their lives. However, it may be an opportunity for parents to teach their children a biblical truth, rather than calling for the censors.

The fact that Pokemon opens a door into the realm of the occult and the world of fantasy should concern parents because it can easily lead to a deeper involvement with other games that are more seductive and ultimately deadly.

A concern worth noting is that Pokemon may whet the appetite for more sophisticated fantasy games such as *Magic* and ultimately *Dungeons and Dragons*. Pokemon is primarily played by elementary-aged students, whereas *Magic* is played by junior high students, and *Dungeons and Dragons* is mostly played by students in high school and older. Each game introduces the player to more and more seductive and occult fantasies and activities.

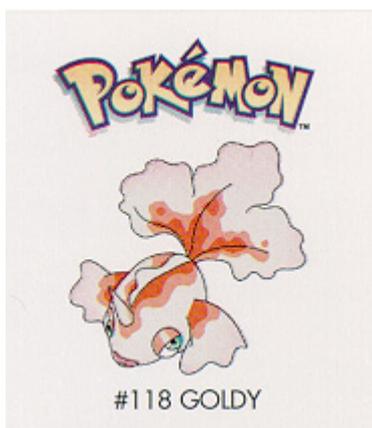
What is a Parent to Do?

If you have decided that your child will be allowed to play, it would be wise to limit the time he or she can play. Set limitations on when your child can play—after homework is done, chores are completed, etc.

It may be wise to limit the amount of money that will be used for the game. Pokemon, with its addictive potential, can easily become a money pit. It may be instructive to encourage your child to use his own money that he has earned through chores, for example. Learning the value of a dollar is always a good lesson to learn.

We need to ask the question, What is this game teaching me—or my child—about magic, power, God, and spirituality? Do the answers to these questions bring my child or me into a closer relationship with God? If not, why?

Positive Lessons to Be Learned



Pokemon has positive lessons to be learned. However, these lessons need to be channeled in a productive manner. Proponents of the game offer several reasons why Pokemon is and can be enriching.

First, the game is a social time for engaging in friendly play.

Second, the game fosters cooperation. It takes the help of one's playmates to capture and train all one hundred and fifty-plus Pokemon.

Third, the game helps the player develop skills in using strategy, thinking, and memorization. The game also encourages a child to develop reading skills so he can achieve mastery.

Fourth, the game promotes negotiation and organization skills that may be useful in life.

Wrapping it Up

Pokemon helps develop positive skills in the life of a young person. However, the game can easily become addictive and disruptive. The introduction of psychic powers and other occultic manifestations are indeed troublesome. We as parents must be proactive in teaching our children how to discern those things that are destructive to their relationship with God.

We must keep our focus on the things of God. Philippians 4:8 tells us to keep our minds on those things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely and of good report. These are the things that we are to dwell on—not on the magical world of fantasy and psychic power.

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Culture Wars

America at (Culture) War

Americans are highly polarized when it comes to issues of morality and social norms. We feel our collective blood pressure rise as we read the daily paper or watch the news on television. We all feel the tension caused by problems like teen pregnancies, abortion, crime, poverty, and political corruption. Factions from across the political spectrum respond with social programs and ideals that, if instituted, they are sure would make America a better place for all to live. However, the problem is that these programs or ideals are often in direct conflict with each other, presupposing very different assumptions about human nature. To highlight these differences, consider the following events.

In the early '90s the American Civil Liberty Union informed members of the California State Assembly's Education Committee that they were opposed to a bill the committee was considering. The bill, which called for traditional values in school curricula, was offensive to the ACLU because it would mandate that students be taught that monogamous, heterosexual relations solely within marriage is a traditional American value. The ACLU argued that this would be an "unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools."¹ They went on to contend that the bill was an obvious violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, a private school in Georgia asked a student to either change his behavior or leave the school. This, in itself, is not a rare event. However, the student wasn't a discipline problem and he wasn't failing academically. In fact, he was popular and liked by many on campus. The problem was that he was cross-dressing. He dressed and behaved as a woman and was accepted by many students as a female. When the

student chose to leave the school instead of changing his attire, the school's drama teacher remarked, "I really think that we all lost something precious that night." {2}

To many Americans, the ACLU's action in the first incident is incomprehensible. It seems reasonable, healthy, and obvious for schools to implement a "traditional values" model for sex education. Those on the side of the ACLU find it just as incomprehensible that anyone would see their position as unreasonable or unusual. Some might find the expulsion of the cross-dressing student to be grossly unfair, while most parents would wonder why the school took so long to act.

Regardless of your perspective, everyone agrees that Americans find themselves with deep differences on a number of fundamental issues that govern our daily affairs. Unfortunately, these deep differences have led some Americans to bomb a government building, shoot abortion doctors, or burn down a mountain top ski resort in order to further their cause.

This article will spotlight the culture war we find ourselves in and consider what a biblical response might be. Although few Christians fail to see the conflict in our society, particularly in our schools, they are far from united as to what our response should be. However, from a historical perspective, times of cultural disruption are often a great opportunity for the church, if it is being all that God desires it to be.

Orthodox vs. Progressive

Leaders of all political persuasions have taken note of the culture war that is engulfing our nation. To begin clarifying the issue, we will consider the contribution of two books that have helped to define the conflict for many religious and cultural conservatives: James Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* and William Bennett's *The De-*

Valuing of America. Bennett argues that the battle over our culture is being fought between what he calls the liberal elite and the rest of society. The elite are “found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media.”{3} He feels that they are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters and opinion makers. Differing from traditional elite groups in American history, Bennett argues that these people reject the traditional bourgeois emphasis on work, frugality, sexual restraint, and self-control.”{4} As evidence for the existence of this elite, he refers to studies done by Stanley Rothman with Robert and Linda Richter. Their work portrays a media aristocracy that votes as a block for liberal candidates and on issues like abortion, gay rights, and the environment.{5}

Bennett adds that this elite is marked by a wholesale rejection of American ideals, a calling into question of what has been known as the American dream.{6} Evidence is not as significant as ideology for the elite. Their approach is “one of vindication, not investigation.”{7} If the middle class and the Republicans are for something, this group will instinctively be against it.

Hunter’s approach to defining the warring camps is subtler and, I feel, more accurate. He would argue that there is an elite on both sides of the culture war. On the one hand is what he calls the “orthodox” group. They have a commitment to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. From an evangelical perspective this is the God of the Bible. He is a consistent and unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity. Hunter would also include Jews and others who hold to a definable, unchanging, absolute authority.

Opposing this group are the “progressives.” Progressives are

defined by the ideals of modernism, rationalism, and subjectivism. To these people truth is more a process than a constant authority. It is an unfolding reality rather than an unchanging revelation. What is interesting about the progressives is that they often hold on to the religious heritage of the orthodox, but reinterpret its meaning for modern consumption. For instance, to a gay progressive, Christ came not to free us from the penalty of sin, but to free gays from the constraints of society. Although many progressives discard religion altogether, those who claim the Christian tradition have usually adopted a liberation theology, liberating the individual from any obligation other than to love each other in a very vague sense. To love each other seems to mean allowing people do whatever is expedient in their lives.

The real difference between the "orthodox" and the "progressives" is at the faith level. Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian or not is not nearly as important as what kind of reality they place their faith in. Hunter believes that the culture war is a war of worldviews, and that these worldviews cause us to see the world differently. How then should a Christian, one who places his faith in the sacrificial death of Christ as an atoning payment for his sins, respond to this culture war?

The Angry Christian

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the secular world Christians are often seen as angry, intolerant people. At school board meetings, outside abortion clinics, even at the funeral of a homosexual who was murdered because of his lifestyle, Christians are there to angrily condemn sin and its perpetrators. It is almost as if Christians are surprised by sin and feel that their only response is to point people to the law of God. As a result, many outside the church see Christianity as a religion of law, similar to most other world

religions. This is a tragedy.

Although understandable, I don't believe that we are called as Christians to respond to the culture war in anger, especially anger directed at people. Although the wrath of God is evident in both the Old and New Testaments, condemnation of human anger is also present in each. Near the very beginning of human culture, God warns Cain about his anger and downcast face. Instead of seeking to do what was right, Cain was angry with God and his situation (Gen. 4:6-7). The wisdom literature of Proverbs teaches us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," and "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated" (Prov. 14:17, 15:1).

In the New Testament, Paul condemns "hatred" and "fits of rage" immediately before listing the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. James 1:19-20 is fairly straightforward in arguing that, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Jesus set an extraordinarily high standard against anger and hatred in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is speaking to the root cause of much evil in any society: an angry, unforgiving heart.

Some may respond that righteous indignation, or anger against sin is merely emulating Christ. After all, Jesus cleared the Temple with a whip and violently overturned the moneylender's tables. Are we not allowed the same righteous indignation? I think not, especially if we take seriously God's admonition to let Him be in charge of judgment and vengeance (Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul tells us to feed our enemy if he is hungry, give

him drink if he is thirsty, and to overcome evil by doing good (Rom. 12:20-21). The difference between Jesus' righteous indignation and our anger is that Jesus, being God, has the right to judge, and being perfectly righteous His judgment is perfect. He knows the hearts of men and has no bias other than holiness itself. On the other hand, we are often most angry when our personal comfort is disturbed. To the watching world, Christians become the most interested in politics when their personal wealth or comfort is at stake.

I don't believe that God is calling His people to anger in America. We bring a message of grace to the lost, not a message of law.

Apathy

Many Christians have been active in the culture war since the early '80s. With the rise of conservative politics and the family values movement, Christians joined the Republican party in droves and joined numerous organizations in order to help fight against the moral decline of the nation. Given the popularity of the current Democratic President and what appears, in many ways, to be a rejection of the conservative moral agenda, it is tempting for many to simply retreat from activism all together.

Some Christians never did get engaged in a counter-cultural sense. In fact, an early evangelical leader in culture war activity, Francis Schaeffer, warned that most Christians were more concerned with personal peace and affluence than about having an impact in their society.^{8} He was concerned that as the Christian- dominated consensus weakened, these two values would grow in their place. The picture of society we are left with is one in which people's lives are consumed by things, buying two SUV's and a nice big house in the suburbs, with a nice tall fence, color TV (a big color TV), and remote. These people do not want to know about the suffering in our urban ghettos or about the plight of Christians in other countries.

They want their lives to be unimpeded by the turmoil experienced by less affluent people.

Is it wrong to have a nice house and cars? No, it isn't. But neither is it the ultimate purpose to which our Lord has called us. Gathering nice things should not be motivating our daily activities. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He responded that we are to first, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), and second, love our neighbor as ourselves. For Christians, success in this life should be measured against these two goals. The rest of revelation, both the written Word and the life of Christ, gives us a picture of what this means in both the general culture and within the church. Christ gave us the Great Commission, to go into all nations making disciples and teaching what He taught (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul talks about us being living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds so that we will know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

To be indifferent about sin is to not love God; this form of apathy is incompatible with true Christian faith. However, to be indifferent about suffering in the world is equally incompatible with our faith. To ignore oppression and hatred reveals a lack of love for our neighbors. Too often Christians only seem to get excited when their rights, whether property or religious, are threatened. This makes a mockery of our Lord's words when He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Romans 12 Paul talks about blessing those who persecute you, and if it is possible, to be at peace with everyone around you.

Hebrews 12 tells us to throw off everything that entangles us, everything that keeps us from running the race marked out for us by Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Him, who endured the cross because its joyous result would be a redeemed people of God.

Ambassadors For Christ

When thinking about how to respond to the culture war in America, or in any culture, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we are trying to accomplish? In the language of real war, What are our tactical and strategic goals? Some might respond that we are here to fight sin, to rid our society of the evils of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, drug abuse, political corruption, etc. There are Christians who claim that our primary cultural objective is to reinstate the law of Moses by taking control of the government and using its legal authority to impose a moral society on the population. However, this does not appear to be the plan revealed to us in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul details the role we are to play in America or in any country we might live in. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, and our message is one of reconciliation with God. There are many religions pushing a message of law; Islam, Judaism, and most Eastern religions all focus on the works people must do in order to please God or the gods. They focus on how humanity must reform itself to gain God's favor. Christianity's message is grace, and as Christ's ambassadors we proclaim that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ by making "Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God is making the righteousness of Christ available to sinners; salvation is the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our personal account, thus satisfying the judgment of a holy God against our personal sins.

What about social activism, what about politics? Do we just share the gospel and ignore the problems facing our nation? No, we are to be salt and light in a decaying world. However, our trust is not in politics, which can only change a nation's laws and to a lesser degree its people's behavior. Even if abortion ended tomorrow, if every homosexual became

heterosexual, and if drugs and pornography were things of the past, people without Christ would still be lost in their sins.

The role of an ambassador is a complex one. He or she must be intimately familiar with the nature of their sovereign's kingdom. Christians must seek to know God and His message in a way that can be communicated to the culture they live in. Unfortunately, Christians often know the message, but have a difficult time communicating it in a way that the surrounding culture understands, and in a way that answers the questions being asked by that society. Stating the gospel accurately and in a meaningful manner is central to being an effective ambassador for Christ.

If we are to respond to the culture war by being ambassadors for Christ, then the vitality of the church becomes far more important than controlling the White House or Congress. Understanding how to communicate the gospel of Christ becomes infinitely more valuable than having the most potent political strategy. Being faithful to Christ in this way builds God's kingdom on earth and results in common grace as more and more believers participate in every aspect of our culture.

Notes

1. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 310.

2. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 October 1998, 7A.

3. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Bennett, 12.

7. Ibid.

8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How then Shall We Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 205.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A Christian Voice and Martyr

Todd Kappelman presents a stirring overview of Dietrich Bonhoeffer looking at both his life experience standing against the Nazis and some of his key perspectives on the true Christian life. He was a thought provoking voice for Christianity as well as a famous martyr.

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

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Man and His Mission

Since his death in 1945, and especially in the last ten years, Bonhoeffer's writings have been stirring remarkable interest among Christians, old and young alike. Thus, we are going to examine the merits of reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We will do this by examining the man and his particular place in the canon of Christian writers, his background and historical setting, and finally three of his most important and influential works.

Bonhoeffer's importance begins with his opposition to the Nazi party and its influence in the German church during the rise of Hitler. This interest led him into areas of Christian

ecumenical concerns that would later be important to the foundation of our contemporary ecumenical movements. Many denominational factions and various groups claim him as their spokesman, but it's his remarkable personal life, and his authorship of difficult devotional and academic works, which have gained him a place in the history of twentieth century theology.

Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now part of Poland) and had a twin sister named Sabine. In 1933, before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer, a minister in the Lutheran church, was already attacking the Nazis in radio broadcasts. Two years later he was the leader of an underground seminary with over twenty young seminarians. That seminary is often seen as a kind of Protestant monastery, and is responsible for many of his considerations about the Christian life as it pertains to community. Later the seminary was closed by the Secret Police. In 1939, through arrangements made by Reinhold Niebuhr, he fled to the United States, but returned to Germany after a short stay. He believed it was necessary to suffer with his people if he was to be an effective minister after the war. The last two years of his life were spent in a Berlin prison. In 1945 he was executed for complicity in a plot on Hitler's life.

During the time that Bonhoeffer was in prison he wrote a book titled *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The manuscript was smuggled from jail and published. These letters contain Bonhoeffer's consideration of the secularization of the world and the departure from religion in the twentieth century. In Bonhoeffer's estimation, the dependence on organized religion had undermined genuine faith. Bonhoeffer would call for a new religionless Christianity free from individualism and metaphysical supernaturalism. God, argued Bonhoeffer, must be known in this world as he operates and interacts with man in daily life. The abstract God of philosophical and theological speculation is useless to the average man on the street, and

they are the majority who needs to hear the gospel.

We will examine three of Bonhoeffer's most influential and important works in the following four sections. The first work to be considered will be *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1939. This work is an interpretation of The Sermon on the Mount. It calls for radical living, if the Christian is to be an authentic disciple of Christ. The *Ethics*, written from 1940-1943, is Bonhoeffer's most technical theological exposition. It details the problems in attempting to build an ethical foundation on philosophical or theoretical grounds. Then we will examine more thoroughly *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one of Bonhoeffer's most personal and moving achievements.

The Cost of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's most famous work is *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1939. This book is a rigorous exposition and interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 9:35-10:42. Bonhoeffer's major concern is *cheap grace*. This is grace that has become so watered down that it no longer resembles the grace of the New Testament, the *costly grace* of the Gospels.

By the phrase *cheap grace*, Bonhoeffer means the grace which has brought chaos and destruction; it is the intellectual assent to a doctrine without a real transformation in the sinner's life. It is the justification of the sinner without the works that should accompany the new birth. Bonhoeffer says of cheap grace:

[It] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the

cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.{1}

Real grace, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, is a grace that will cost a man his life. It is the grace made dear by the life of Christ that was sacrificed to purchase man's redemption. Cheap grace arose out of man's desire to be saved, but to do so without becoming a disciple. The doctrinal system of the church with its lists of behavioral codes becomes a substitute for the Living Christ, and this cheapens the meaning of discipleship. The true believer must resist cheap grace and enter the life of active discipleship. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting; the Christian must rise and follow Christ.{2}

It is here that Bonhoeffer makes one of his most enduring claims on the life of the true Christian. He writes that "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes." {3} Men have become soft and complacent in cheap grace and are thus cut off from the discovery of the more costly grace of self-sacrifice and personal debasement. Bonhoeffer believed that the teaching of cheap grace was the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works.{4}

Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, means strict adherence to Christ and His commandments. It is also a strict adherence to Christ as the object of our faith. Bonhoeffer discusses this single-minded obedience in chapter three of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this chapter, the call of Levi and Peter are used to illustrate the believer's proper response to the call of Christ and the Gospel.{5} The only requirement these men understood was that in each case the call was to rely on Christ's word, and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world.{6}

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel we have the story of the rich young man who is inquiring about salvation and is told by Christ that he must sell all of his

possessions, take up his cross, and follow. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the bewilderment of the disciples who ask the question, "Who then can be saved?"^{7} The answer they are given is that it is extremely hard to be saved, but with God all things are possible.

Bonhoeffer and the Sermon on the Mount

The exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is another important element of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer places special emphasis on the beatitudes for understanding the incarnate and crucified Christ. It is here that the disciples are called "blessed" for an extraordinary list of qualities.

The *poor in spirit* have accepted the loss of all things, most importantly the loss of self, so that they may follow Christ. Those who *mourn* are the people who do without the peace and prosperity of this world.^{8} Mourning is the conscious rejection of rejoicing in what the world rejoices in, and finding one's happiness and fulfillment only in the person of Christ.

The *meek*, says Bonhoeffer, are those who do not speak up for their own rights. They continually subordinate their rights and themselves to the will of Christ first, and in consequence to the service of others. Likewise, those who *hunger and thirst after righteousness* also renounce the expectation that man can eventually make the world into paradise. Their hope is in the righteousness that only the reign of Christ can bring.

The *merciful* have given up their own dignity and become devoted to others, helping the needy, the infirm, and the outcasts. The *pure in heart* are no longer troubled by the call of this world, they have resigned themselves to the call of Christ and His desires for their lives. The *peacemakers* abhor the violence that is so often used to solve problems. This point would be of special significance for Bonhoeffer, who was writing on the eve of World War II. The *peacemakers* maintain

fellowship where others would find a reason to break off a relationship. These individuals always see another option.[{9}](#)

Those who are *persecuted for righteousness' sake* are willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. Any and every just cause becomes their cause because it is part of the overall work of Christ. Suffering becomes the way to communion with God.[{10}](#) To this list is added the final blessing pronounced on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. These will receive a great reward in heaven and be likened to the prophets who also suffered.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on suffering is directly connected to the suffering of Christ. The church is called to bear the whole burden of Christ, especially as it pertains to suffering, or it must collapse under the weight of the burden.[{11}](#) Christ has suffered, says Bonhoeffer, but His suffering is efficacious for the remission of sins. We may also suffer, but our suffering is not for redemptive purposes. We suffer, says Bonhoeffer, not only because it is the church's lot, but so that the world may see us suffering and understand that there is a way that men can bear the burdens of life, and that way is through Christ alone.

Discipleship for Bonhoeffer was not limited to what we can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension. The believer must plunge into the deep waters beyond the comprehension and everyday teaching of the church, and this must be done individually and collectively.

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Ethics* was written from 1940-1943. Intended as lectures, this is his most mature work and is considered to be his major contribution to theology.[{12}](#) Christian ethics, he says, must be considered with reference to the regenerated man whose chief desire should be to please God, not with the man who is concerned with an airtight

philosophical system. Man is not, and cannot, be the final arbitrator of good and evil. This is reserved for God alone. When man tries to decide what is right and wrong his efforts are doomed to failure. Bonhoeffer wrote that "instead of knowing only the God who is good to him and instead of knowing all things in Him, [man] knows only himself as the origin of good and evil."[{13}](#) With this statement, Bonhoeffer entered one of the most difficult philosophical and theological problems in the history of the church: the problem of evil.

Bonhoeffer believed that the problem of evil could only be understood in light of the Fall of mankind. The Fall caused the disunion of man and God with the result that man is incapable of discerning right and wrong.[{14}](#) Modern men have a vague uneasiness about their ability to know right and wrong. Bonhoeffer asserted this is in part due to the desire for philosophical certainty. However, Bonhoeffer urged the Christian to be concerned with living the will of God rather than finding a set of rules one may follow.[{15}](#) And while Bonhoeffer was not advocating a direct and individual revelation in every ethical dilemma, he did believe that man can have knowledge of the will of God. He said that "if a man asks God humbly God will give him certain knowledge of His will; and then, after all this earnest proving there will be the freedom to make real decisions, and [this] with the confidence that it is not man but God Himself who through this proving gives effect to His will."[{16}](#)

Perhaps our first response to Bonhoeffer is that he appears to be some sort of mystic. However, it is imperative to understand the time in which he was writing, and some of the specific problems he was addressing. World War II was raging and the greatest ethical questions of the century were confronting the church. Good men, and even committed Christians, found themselves on opposing sides of the war. It would be ludicrous to suppose that right and wrong on individual or national levels was obvious, and that there was

universal agreement among Christians. In the midst of all of this confusion a young pastor-theologian and member of the Resistance could only advise that believers turn to Christ with the expectation that true answers were obtainable. Such confidence is sorely needed among Christians who face a world devoid of answers.

The strength of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* lies not in its systematic resolution of problems facing the church, but rather the acknowledgment that life is complex and that all systems outside of humble submission to the Word of God are doomed to failure. As unsettling as Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* may be, it is a refreshing call to the contemporary church to repent and return to a life characterized by prayer, the traditional mark of the early church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Correspondence

Our final consideration of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 for his part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, will center on his *Letters and Papers from Prison* begun in 1942. These letters represent some of Bonhoeffer's most mature work, as well as troubling observations concerning the church in the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century.

The opening essay is titled *After Ten Years*. Here Bonhoeffer identifies with the evil of the times, and especially the war. He speaks of the unreasonable situations which reasonable people must face. He warns against those who are deceived by evil that is disguised as good, and he cries out against misguided moral fanatics and the slaves of tradition and rules.

In viewing the horrors of war, Bonhoeffer reminds us that what we despise in others is never entirely absent from ourselves.[\[17\]](#) This warning against contempt for humanity is

very important in light of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, whose contempt for the war turned into disillusion with humanity. This is a striking contrast between several witnesses to the war who came to very different conclusions. Bonhoeffer's conclusions were the direct result of a personal relationship with Christ. The conclusions of Hemingway, Sartre, and Camus were the pessimistic observations of those without a final hope.

Bonhoeffer faced death daily for many years and came to some bold conclusions concerning how believers might posture themselves toward this ultimate event. He argued that one could experience the miracle of life by facing death daily; life could actually be seen as the gift of God that it is. It is we ourselves, and not our outward circumstances, who make death potentially positive. Death can be something voluntarily accepted. [\[18\]](#)

The final question posed in this opening essay is whether it is possible for plain and simple men to prosper again after the war. [\[19\]](#) Bonhoeffer does not offer a clear solution, which may be seen as an insight into the true horrors of the war, as well as an open-ended question designed to illicit individual involvement in the problem.

Long before movies like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *The Thin Red Line*, Bonhoeffer reported on the atrocities of the war. Some of the letters discuss the brutality and horrors of life in the prison camps, and one can certainly ascertain the expectation of execution in many of his letters. The thing that makes these letters so much more important than the popular films is that the letters are undoubtedly the confessions of one who is looking at the war as a Christian. Bonhoeffer was able to empathize with the problems faced by Christians living in such turbulent times.

Bonhoeffer's significance is difficult to assess completely and accurately, but two observations may help as we come to an

end of our examination of his work.^{20} We must always bear in mind the time of his writings. This explains much that we might at first not understand. Finally, any Christian would do well to read the works of one who gave his life in direct connection with his Christian convictions. There have been many martyrs in this century, but few who so vividly recorded the circumstances that lead to their martyrdom with both theological astuteness and a vision for future posterity.

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 30.
2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 54.
4. Ibid., 59.
5. Ibid., 87.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. Ibid., 98.
9. Ibid., 102.
10. Ibid., 102.
11. Ibid., 102.
12. William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1969), 130.
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 19.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethage, trans. Reinhold Fuller and others, [rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967)].
18. Ibid., 17.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. An excellent and more thorough consideration of Bonhoeffer's importance can be found in Eberhard Bethage's [*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Another excellent book for those

interested in his life is the biography by Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. These books are full of details about the personal life of Bonhoeffer and offer great insights into his Christian life.

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Millennial Cautions

Over twenty years ago, as a new Christian, I found myself mesmerized by Christian speakers and books that predicted future social and political events with newspaper-like details. I relished sharing those details with less biblically informed friends. They were amazed and sometimes frightened by what I thought the Bible was predicting about tomorrow's events. But as the years have progressed, I now wonder if that was an appropriate way to introduce my friends to Christianity. Many of the predictions that I shared have not come true. Did I make the claims of Christ more believable by focusing on prophecy or did I place roadblocks in the path of some, actually making their understanding of the gospel more difficult?

People seem to have an innate desire to know the future. Perhaps it is part of our need to be in control, see what's coming, and have time to prepare for it. As Charles Kettering once wrote, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there." Some people's lives are changed forever by those who claim to know the future. Hitler claimed that he and his followers were establishing a reign that would last a thousand years. A few short years after first making those claims, his nation, and much of the world, lay in ruins as a result of his violent vision. Recent examples of the dangers of unbalanced fascination with

prophecy include the odd Heaven's Gate cult, with their predictions of UFOs, death, and resurrection, and the Waco, Texas, sect led by David Koresh. Both groups, led by self-appointed "visionaries," influenced people in dramatically harmful ways.

On the other hand, a single person with vision can be a powerful force for positive change. William Wilberforce, after converting to evangelical Christianity in 1784, had a life-long desire to see an end to the international slave trade and of slavery itself in England and its colonies. His tenacity and vision had the remarkable impact of rallying both the British people and the powerful British navy toward achieving his goals. Another example of the positive impact that one person with vision can have is seen in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. His prophetic "I have a Dream" speech on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on many people in America and the world regarding racial prejudice. It seems clear that an individual with an exceptionally strong vision for the future can have a great impact on it.

Sharing the truth of Christ's return can no doubt have a positive impact on people. Our Lord's return is a reality that all Christians claim as part of the hope mentioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Unfortunately, I have encountered Christians who spend too much time trying to determine when Christ will return. In fact, some prophecy experts have fallen into the trap of the early heretic Montanus who claimed prophetic powers and claimed to know the time of our Lord's return even though Jesus himself said that no one knows when He will return but the Father (Matt. 24:36).[\(1\)](#)

As we approach the year 2000, prophets and prophecies are expected to multiply in both the secular world and the Church. In this discussion, I will look at examples of prophecy experts who claimed to know more than they could deliver. My purpose is not to endorse one end-times system over another.

However, my hope is that Christians will be discouraged from claiming knowledge they do not possess and encouraged to keep their focus on the gospel message rather than on highly questionable prophetic schemes.

Christ's Return and the Church

A quick scan of the Internet reveals the popularity of prophetic claims. Along with sites on biblical prophecy, there are pages detailing the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the famous "sleeping prophet," and the fairly well-known Nostradamus. But there are many lesser-known prophetic sources as well, like one site called *Millennium Matters*. It has 583 pages of information on something called the "Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension," which predicts the awakening of a planetary entity on the earth in the near future. We might make fun of these prophecies, but imagine how Christians appear to others when we make false predictions about the return of Christ.

Attempting to predict the future is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 18; Acts 16) with warnings against divination and interpreting omens. Yet history has recorded the tendency of Christians to predict Christ's coming in every generation. Tertullian, a follower of Montanus in the second century, supported the idea of a near return when he wrote, "What terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! What pestilences, famines . . . and quakings of the earth has history recorded!" [\(2\)](#) He felt that these evidences alone were enough to indicate Christ's return. Novation in the third century and Donatus in the fourth, were both branded as heretics, but gathered a large number of followers by proclaiming the imminent return of Christ. Later, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory was sure that the end of the world was near. He wrote,

Of all the signs described by our Lord as presaging the end of the world, some we see already accomplished... For we now see that nation arises against nation and that they press and

weigh upon the land in our own times as never before in the annals of the past. Earthquakes overwhelm countless cities, as we often hear from other parts of the world. Pestilence we endure without interruption. It is true that we do not behold signs in the sun and moon and stars but that these are not far off we may infer from the changes of the atmosphere. [\(4\)](#)

Pope Gregory's words sound quite contemporary, and remarkably similar to some current thinking on prophecy.

What I am warning against is not the preaching of Christ's return. Virtually all Christians believe that He will return physically and that a final judgment will follow. How then, do we respond to this truth? Christ uses the parables of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) to teach His followers to be constantly ready for His return. We are to be ambassadors for Christ and the Kingdom of God, sharing the message of reconciliation that is found only in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

One potentially damaging aspect of some prophecy teaching is the tendency to look for and find conspiracies that foretell Christ's return. Whether it be a renewed Roman Empire or a one-world government, Christians seem to relish a world of secret connections and commitments. We already know that the world system is hostile to the gospel, Jesus told us as much and warned of persecution. When we tend to see people through the lens of grand conspiracies, the natural response is to fight the conspiracy rather than share the gospel with the individual. The New Testament calls us to build God's Kingdom one heart at a time. We accomplish this not with legal or political power, but by sharing the good news revealed by God in a culturally relevant way.

The First Millennium

Predictions for the end of the world were prolific at the

close of the first millennium after Christ. Now we will look at some of these predictions and consider their impact on the Church.

In A.D. 950 Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote a "Treatise on the Antichrist" which was a response to a number of mid-century crises that had provoked widespread alarm and fear of an end-time apocalypse.[\(5\)](#) Five years later, Abbo of Fleury heard a preacher in Paris who announced that the Antichrist would be unleashed in the year 1000 and that the Last Judgment would soon follow.[\(6\)](#) At about the same time a panic occurred in the German army of Emperor Otto I because of a solar eclipse that the soldiers mistook as a sign of the end of the world.[\(7\)](#) And when the last Carolingian dynasty fell with the death of King Louis V in 987, many saw this event as a precursor to the arrival of the Antichrist. King Otto II of Germany had Charlemagne's body exhumed on Pentecost in the year 1000 supposedly in order to forestall the apocalypse. Both Halley's comet in A.D. 989 and a super nova in A.D. 1006 were interpreted as signs of the end. About the same time, the Moslem caliph, Al Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem prompting apocalyptic fear in the west as well as violent anti-Jewish outbursts.[\(8\)](#)

The Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore (ca. A.D. 1135 1202) stands out as a key figure in medieval apocalypticism. On Easter Sunday in 1183 he was inspired to write his massive Exposition on Revelation. Later near the end of his life, he summarized his prophetic knowledge in the Book of Figures. His writings influenced a wide range of medieval events. The Franciscan order was founded on the basis that they would be the spiritual elite described in Joachim's "Age of the Spirit," a future time when God would send revelation directly to believers. Using Joachim's hints, writers concluded that the "Age of Grace" would end and the "Age of the Spirit" would begin in A.D. 1260. This prophecy, mixed with German social unrest, created a myth surrounding Frederick II. Having ruled

from 1220 to 1250, many believed that Frederick was the “Emperor of the Last Days” who would usher in the new Millennium.[\(9\)](#) The myth gained force when Frederick seized Jerusalem in 1229. When he died in 1250, a new myth started that Frederick would return from the dead. Two pseudo-Fredericks were burned at the stake by his successor to the throne. The Book of a Hundred Chapters stated that the returned Frederick would lead a fight against corruption in the state and the church, and that he will instruct his followers to “Go on hitting them” (referring to the Pope and his students) and to “Kill every one of them!”[\(10\)](#)

The Taborites, founded in A.D. 1415, also looked back to Joachim for their prophetic beliefs. They believed that once their persecutors were defeated, Christ would return and rule the world from Mount Tabor, a mountain they had renamed south of Prague. Their communal activities eventually turned bloody, prompted by tracts with lines like, “Accursed be the man who withholds his sword from shedding the blood of the enemies of Christ.”[\(11\)](#) After a crushing defeat at the hands of the German army, the group quickly disbanded.

Although all of these prophecies were misguided, it would be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of the individuals. However, the events surrounding the end of the first millennium should temper our desire to make predictions about the coming new millennium. Next, we will look at more recent predictions that have been just as wrong.

Recent Predictions

People want to know the future and are eager to follow those who claim to predict it. When a Jehovah’s Witness knocks on your door, prophecy is used as a hook to gain entrance. A recent best-selling book *The Bible Code* claims to have uncovered a hidden code in the Old Testament that predicts many modern-day events as well as a nuclear holocaust in the year 2000 or 2006. Many New Age books are sold on the claim

that channelers have access to future events when connected to those on another spiritual plane. Because of the emotional power of prophecy, the temptation for Christians to make dramatic claims about future events is great. Discernment and care must be used so that the integrity of the gospel message is not compromised. There is no doubt that Scripture teaches a Second Coming of Christ and that a final judgment will follow. However, there is considerable disagreement among Bible-believing Christians regarding the signs that foretell these events and our ability to predict when Christ will return.

One of the favorite past-times of date setters is to attempt to identify the Antichrist, a powerful figure who will appear immediately prior to Christ's return. This guessing game has a long tradition, going back to the time right after Jesus' death. The early church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine all believed that this person would be present immediately prior to Christ's return. During the Middle Ages, some churchmen identified the Antichrist as a Moslem, such as Saladin, but others pointed to a Jew, and some even pointed to the Pope. During the American Revolution it was popular to cast King George III in the role of Antichrist, but the Earl of Bute and British general John Burgoyne also got nominations.

Other familiar names to be included in this long list of suspected Antichrists are Napoleon, the British Parliament, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Since World War II, the Pope still makes the list as does Jewish leader Moshe Dayan, the assassinated Egyptian leader Anwar el-Sadat, Spain's King Juan Carlos, and Korean cult leader Sun Myung Moon. For some, Mikhail Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein are naturals for the job.

The mark of the Beast, the number 666, has been used in very creative ways to support many different Antichrist theories. Although many conservative theologians have seen the number 666 from Revelation 13 as symbolic of all that is evil and a

blasphemous parody of the perfection that the Bible attributes to the number 7, others attempt to use the number to identify an individual.[\(12\)](#) The advent of the computer has caused some to see it as the Beast. One writer noted that if the letter "A"=6 and "B"=12 and "C"=18, and so on, the word computer adds up to 666. The same writer also observed that the words "New York" added up to 666.[\(13\)](#) Some pointed to John Kennedy because he had received 666 votes for the vice-presidency in 1956.[\(14\)](#) Others pointed to Henry Kissinger because his name in Hebrew added up to 111 or 666 divided by 6.[\(15\)](#) Even Ronald Reagan was considered because his first, middle, and last names all had six letters.[\(16\)](#)

The striking number of attempts to identify the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666 should at least give us a sense of humility before adding another name to the list. Perhaps we should follow the example of Irenaus in the second century. Seeing the many efforts to identify the Antichrist in his day, he cautioned against the practice and believed that the name was deliberately concealed until it would be obvious in the day of the Antichrist's arrival.

The U.S. in Prophecy

As the year 2000 gets closer, prophets and their prophecies will explode in number. A popular topic for prophecy experts is the future of the United States. Although prophecy expert John Walvoord has written, "No specific mention of the United States or any other country in North America or South America can be found in the Bible,"[\(17\)](#) this has not, and probably will not, stop others from seeing detailed references to the U.S. and its future in Scripture.

The depiction of the United States in end-times scenarios has varied over the years. There is a long tradition of seeing the U.S. as the New Israel. Near the end of his life, Christopher Columbus wrote, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which He spoke in the Apocalypse of St.

John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it.”(18) In 1653 the New England historian Edward Johnson wrote that the U.S. “is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth,” a theme that Jonathan Edwards picked up nearly a hundred years later.(19)

This notion that the colonies held a special place in God’s redemption plan continued to spread as the colonies grew. By the time of the War for Independence, this conception changed from a primarily religious or spiritual role to a civic one as well. In 1808 Elias Smith, a New England evangelist, argued that the Great Awakening in America, as well as the American and French revolutions, had set the foundation for the end-time age described in the Bible.(20) In his book *White Jacket* in 1850, Herman Melville writes, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls.”(20)

This ardent belief in America’s millennial role reached its peak during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address” all contained allusions to Scripture and apocalyptic themes. Although this trend did not disappear, the twentieth century found Christian thinkers beginning to see the U.S. in another light. In 1937 Arno Gaebelein wrote that the U.S. had been overrun by the powers of darkness(21) and in 1949 Wilbur Smith saw American society described in the list of end time evils of 2 Timothy.(22) More and more, America was being identified with Babylon rather than with the New Israel.

Since the 1960s, prophecy writers have pointed out America’s long list of moral failures as evidence that God will soon focus His wrath on us. Many of them hold that the increase in abortion, homosexuality, godless education, divorce, crime, and pornography in our nation will soon seal our fate and lead

to our downfall as a nation.

This may be the case, but the many different interpretations of America's future role in God's end-times plan should cause a great deal of humility and prudence concerning our own ability to know what God has in mind for this nation. Once one goes beyond the general principal that God blesses those who conform to His moral guidelines, we are on shaky ground. Perhaps we would be far better off seeking a pure heart rather than trying to discern what role America will play in the millennium or who the Antichrist might be. Jesus is coming again. Worrying about the details or the exact time of His return is pointless if it does not turn us toward a holy life. As Jesus said, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt. 6:27).

Notes

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2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
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17. Ibid., p. 247.
18. Ibid., p. 225.
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Titanic: A Critical Appraisal

***Titanic* as Romance and History**

James Cameron's epic film *Titanic*, the most expensive film in history, swept the 1998 Oscars and has been both praised and scorned by critics. The Christian community has been especially tough on Cameron and what they properly sense to be an overly romanticized and unnecessarily cheesy retelling of the historic maiden voyage and untimely ending of the largest moving man-made object of its day. Many people who wanted to see a historic drama with special effects, realistic sets, and period costumes were surprised to learn that they would also have to endure a romantic love story, complete with frontal nudity, which celebrated an adulterous affair between a young third class steerage passenger and a wealthy first class socialite who is engaged to be married.

Although many of my initial suspicions were justified when I saw *Titanic*, I was also pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed the story. I would like to offer some guidelines that might assist those who are struggling with an interpretation,

or who may be wondering if they too would enjoy this film.

First, I believe that one must realize that there are actually two stories within the film. The main story is not that of the *Titanic* itself but rather the romantic liaison between Jack Dawson, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, and Rose De Witt Bukatar, played by Kate Winslet. The second story, the one bearing the film's title, is the tale of one of the greatest disasters of the modern industrial age, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Unfortunately, it is the romantic story which most viewers will remember, and the one that is most celebrated. I say unfortunately because there are valuable historic and moral lessons to be learned from the retelling of this tragedy if one will take the time to sift through all of the romantic drivel which threatens to suffocate it.

There is the danger of going to see *Titanic* and forgetting that it is a story that has been retold for most of this century without much of the romanticism that Cameron and Hollywood include in their latest retelling. The real story of the *Titanic* is not about the celebration of heroic individualism and personal autonomy. It is about a single machine which has become a symbol in the twentieth century for man's technological brilliance, resourceful imagination, and inability to completely master his universe. The monuments and personal testimonies include acts of cowardice and bravery, accounts of class conflict, and excessive celebrations of wealth that would make most people blush.

Rushing to hasty judgment about James Cameron's account of the *Titanic* is neither wise nor expedient. I believe that too often our tendency is to reject films, literature, and the arts in general because there are a few things we find objectionable. Francis Schaeffer always cautioned us against hasty judgment when evaluating the arts.(1) Schaeffer believed that the work of understanding a particular piece of art and the artist should always precede an evaluation. For many viewers, the romantic overshadowing of the historic event may

prove to be overwhelming and, ultimately, the film will have to be rejected. Likewise, the careful viewer may find that the historic story and its moral lessons are preserved, managing to shine through the Hollywood commercialism and romantic sentimentality.

***Titanic*: Romance Hollywood Style**

Having introduced the dual nature of *Titanic*, a fictionalized romance and a factually inspired historic costume drama, I will now examine each aspect separately. By inserting the romantic plot into *Titanic*, Cameron presumes that a modern audience will not be interested in a historic costume drama, even one about the *Titanic*, without some form of entertainment to elevate the boredom of mere history. As his vehicle, Cameron chooses the love story between Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio), a young bachelor in third class and Rose De Witt Bukatar (Kate Winslet), a young socialite who is engaged to be married.

Jack wins his ticket on the *Titanic* in a last minute poker game and jumps from the gang plank just as the fated ship is pulling out of the harbor. He is the embodiment of the classic male adventurer. Jack has no ties to friends, family, or country. His days are occupied with whatever adventure he chooses and he answers to no man. By contrast, Rose is a beautiful young woman who is accustomed to the finer things in life, a member of the upper class and a lady in every sense of the word. Her family has come to financial ruin, and the only means of rescuing their fortune is for her to marry back into wealth. Rose, distraught with her arranged marriage, is contemplating suicide by jumping overboard when Jack comes to her rescue.

Jack is an amateur artist specializing in portraiture and the human figure. Rose is impressed with Jack's talent and proposes that he paint her in the nude. Jack naturally complies with Rose's request and we see Kate Winslet in the

film's only nude scenes. Jack and Rose fall in love, consummate their love out of wedlock, and Rose begins to scheme for a way out of her marital commitment. When the ship begins to sink, it is Jack who leads Rose through the maze of hazards, assists her after the ship sinks, and is finally responsible for her survival. Their love is portrayed as triumphing over natural disasters and societal constraints. They will not be denied by man or God.

We should not vicariously live sinful adventures through the lives of others, whether in film or literature.(2) When we applaud the sinful behavior of others, we participate in their sin and are thus guilty. Likewise, to remain silent is a sin.(3) Too often a film like *Titanic* inspires young people, Christian and non-Christian alike, to applaud sinful behavior. Young people frequently see romantic adventure and thrilling lifestyles in characters like Jack and Rose. What they often fail to realize is the sinful nature of the romance in the film and the direct contradiction of biblical principles. If young people are going to continue to watch films with mixed messages like those of *Titanic*, it is imperative that we discuss the philosophical and doctrinal content in an intelligent and reflective manner.

Men and women are born with a fallen nature and we should expect to see this nature in fictional literature and film. What we should not do is celebrate this fallen nature and revel in wickedness. And too many people, especially young people, applaud *Titanic* on the basis of the romantic triumphs of Jack and Rose.

Humanistic Confidence and Technological Arrogance in *Titanic*

Having discussed the romantic aspect of *Titanic*, discussion of the historic nature of the film is at hand. In order to accomplish this more fully, one must begin with an

understanding of the thinking prevalent when the *Titanic* was built and the place that its demise has held throughout the twentieth century.

Understanding the historical milieu of the beginning of this century is a prerequisite for grasping what the *Titanic* meant to those who lived at that time. Following the rebirth of classical studies in the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by a vigorous application of the scientific method to almost all aspects of life. The Enlightenment period was a time marked by some of the greatest discoveries of mankind, discoveries which have so impacted our lives that we cannot imagine our modern society without them.

The first and second Industrial Revolutions followed the Enlightenment period, and the modern world as we know it came into being. The confidence from the Enlightenment period, coupled with the obvious engineering and technical successes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fostered a confidence in man's ability to master his universe that was unrivaled in any preceding period.

The *Titanic*, built during the early and formative years of this century, was truly a modern project in that it was built out of the confidence acquired by the western world during the previous two centuries of progress. Designed by Thomas Andrews, and built by The White Star Line in England, the *Titanic* was completed in 1912 and weighed over 45,000 tons. It was the largest moving man-made object of its day, and eyewitness accounts of it were often marked by a daunting reverence for her sheer size and presence.

The *Titanic* was the pride of the White Star Line and became, for many, a symbol for man's ability to accomplish anything he endeavored. The designers, captain, and engineers claimed that she was the fastest and safest luxury liner on the ocean. We even hear the infamous boast that "God couldn't sink her."

Rather than objecting to this type of statement, or assuming a posture of righteous indignation, Christians should understand that lines such as these accurately reflect the true spirit of the time. The *Titanic* may be understood as an overwhelming example of sinful pride on the part of many individuals in that era. She was able to inspire in many, from designers and builders to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated in her glory, a false estimation of man's control of the universe.

In 1985, 73 years after the *Titanic* sank, Eva Hart, the last living survivor who was old enough at the time to remember the actual events surrounding the fateful night, had many interesting things to say about the disaster. She said that the entire catastrophe could simply be attributed to man's arrogance and desire to demonstrate mastery over his universe. We now know that the *Titanic* was traveling too fast to react quickly to the report of icebergs ahead. Coupled with an arrogant over-confidence, this caused a disaster that need never have happened. James Cameron's *Titanic* provides a new opportunity to reconsider some of the lessons that many hold to be fundamental aspects of this tragic event.

Class Conflict, Religion and Heroism in *Titanic*

I have discussed the technological arrogance which is usually cited in reference to the *Titanic* disaster and has been part of the story for most of this century. I now want to examine some additional aspects of the film which are valuable as moral lessons and interesting from historical perspectives.

First, and something that has caught many by surprise, is the glaring presence of class conflict in the movie. Men and women from every class of society and many ethnic origins were on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. The early part of this century was characterized by an extreme class consciousness.

People were extremely conscious about their social and financial status, and upward mobility was very rare. In the film, as in real life at the time, the poor and the rich have little association with one another. On the occasions when their lives intersect, it is the rich who have all of the benefits and the poor who endure most of the pain and suffering. In *Titanic* we have an opportunity to see this class division from a unique perspective. We can find rich and poor characters with whom we genuinely sympathize, as well as those whom we despise. For the most part though, James Cameron portrays the rich as oppressive, rude, and arrogant. This may or may not be a true perspective of that time, but it does capture the distinction. In the film we are given the opportunity to attend one party for first class passengers and a separate celebration for third class passengers. The third class folks look like they are having every bit as much fun as the first class passengers, and possibly more.

The heroic aspect of the *Titanic* legend remains intact in Cameron's film. All of the historical facts are not perfect and there have been outcries from some about the portrayal of specific individuals in the film in a manner that is unflattering and factually false. However, the film is true to the account that many people went down honorably and courageously with the ship. Many of the crew remained at their stations throughout the sinking. We witness Captain Edward John Smith's (Bernard Hill) disbelief at the sinking of the great ship, as well as his willingness to go down with her. The musicians who played while the ship was sinking in order to provide a calming background are portrayed as noble and of unflinching courage. There are scenes in which men of all classes step aside so that women and children from all classes can get to the life boats. There was not perfect equality, calm, or heroism. However, there were enough heroic and noble acts performed that night to merit respect for those individuals.

I also found the treatment of Christians to be fair and realistic in the brief scene dealing with the religious life of the passengers. Groups are seen in prayer as the ship sinks. Eva Hart also testified that the last song the band played as the *Titanic* went down was *Nearer My God To Thee*.(4)

The Problem of Pain and the Sovereignty of God

To conclude this appraisal of *Titanic*, I will discuss the theological questions that are raised and offer some insights for discussion. Regardless of one's position on the film, the factual account of 1500 persons losing their lives in a disaster that did not have to happen raises some serious issues. Many Christians believe that God is in control and that, had He wished to do so, He could have intervened in the *Titanic* disaster. In this instance God did not intervene, and many innocent people perished, including women, children, and infants.

C. S. Lewis summarizes the problem of pain and suffering in this way. "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."(5)

The first part of this problem, which pertains to God's goodness, presupposes that the sinking of the *Titanic* was not good, and that God allowed an evil thing to take place. One response might be that He allowed this to take place to avoid a larger disaster, such as a collision involving two ocean liners. Or perhaps there was a plague or virus on the ship which would have stricken a large portion of the American population, and God prevented the *Titanic* from reaching its destination in order to save millions. While this is pure speculation, it does illustrate that we, being finite, do not have the same perspective as God in determining what is good

or evil.

The second part of this problem questions God's ability to intervene in human affairs. Here the argument would be that God saw the *Titanic* in danger, but was powerless to stop the disaster. Any Christian who believes the Scriptures knows that God has miraculously intervened in human affairs in the past, and could do so again at any time. The fact that He apparently did not act may be accounted for by supposing that God saw a greater good in allowing the *Titanic* to sink. Furthermore, He may have been instrumental in her sinking just as He was instrumental in stopping the Tower of Babel from being built.(6) Again, the point here is not to argue this position specifically, but to show that we do not completely understand how God works in every situation. In Isaiah 55:8-9 the prophet declares that God's thoughts and ways are not man's. His understanding is higher than ours. We should expect His actions to be higher also.

The presence of natural, moral, and gratuitous evil in the world is one of the greatest challenges to the consistency of Christian truth claims. *Titanic* is a wonderful opportunity for believers and non-believers to engage one another. When we remember that over 1500 people perished in the 1912 *Titanic* disaster and thousands of friends and family members were also dramatically affected, the problem of pain and suffering should not be neglected. Very few, if any, of the passengers on board the *Titanic* that night thought it would be their last night on earth. Yet for many, it was just that. Though we can use film as an easy escape and a vehicle for vicarious living, we should both realize and maximize the potential for dialogue and the opportunity for contact with our culture afforded through a film like *Titanic*.

For Further Reading

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Notes

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2 For a more detailed account of how Christians should approach the arts see: Ryken, Leland. *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts*. Harold Shaw: Wheaton, 1989. and Ryken, Leland. *Culture in Christian perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts*. Multnomah Press: Portland, 1986.

3 I Jn. 5:17

4 *The Titanic*. Public Broadcasting System. Aired on channel 13, Dallas, TX, May 4, 1998, 9:00 PM.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (The Macmillian Company: New York, 1944), 14.

6 Gen. 11

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a politically correct attempt to over-correct cultural bias by elevating all subcultures to equal status.



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

What is Multiculturalism?

A few years ago the campus newspaper of a major university published an essay written by two professors titled *The Statement of the Black Faculty Caucus*.^{1} The purpose of the essay was to define how the University might become a truly multicultural institution. It spoke of empowerment, authority, Western culture, and transformation. The objective of the Black Faculty Caucus was to create a critical mass of empowered “minority people” at all levels of the university system. The essay argued that “Euro-Americans teaching the materials of people of color cannot make the University multicultural because multiculturalism demands empowered people of color as well as empowered areas of knowledge.”^{2} At the end of their essay the authors wrote, “What we are talking about here is no less than transforming the University into a center of multicultural learning: anything less continues a system of education that ultimately reproduces racism and racists.”^{3}

Racial reconciliation should be a top priority for every Christian, of any race or cultural background. But will this

demand for a “multicultural center of learning” produce a less prejudiced society? Multiculturalists insist on greater sensitivity towards, and increased inclusion of, racial minorities and women in society. Christians should endorse both of these goals. But many advocating multiculturalism go beyond these demands for sensitivity and inclusion; here is where Christians must be careful.

One of the difficulties of accommodating multiculturalists is that defining a multicultural society, curriculum, or institution seems to be determined by one’s perspective. A commonly held view suggests that being multicultural involves tolerance towards racial and ethnic minorities, mainly in the areas of dress, language, food, religious beliefs, and other cultural manifestations. However, an influential group calling itself NAME, or the National Association for Multicultural Education, includes in its philosophy statement the following: “Xenophobia, discrimination, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are societal phenomena that are inconsistent with the principles of a democracy and lead to the counterproductive reasoning that differences are deficiencies.”^{4} NAME is a powerful organization composed of educators from around the country, and it has considerable influence on how schools approach the issue of diversity on campus. The fundamental question that the folks at NAME need to answer is, “Is it always counterproductive to reason that some differences might be deficiencies?” In other words, isn’t it possible that some of the characteristics of specific culture groups are dangerous or morally flawed (for example, the culture of pedophilia)?

It is not uncommon for advocates of multiculturalism like NAME to begin with the assumption that truth is culturally based. It is argued that a group’s language dictates what ideas about God, human nature, and morality are permissible. While Americans may define reality using ideas from its Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian heritage, Asian or African cultures

see the world differently based on their traditions. Multiculturalists conclude that since multiple descriptions of reality exist, no one view can be true in any ultimate sense. Furthermore, since truth is a function of language, and all language is created by humans, all truth is created by humans. This view of truth and language has a spokesperson in Dr. Richard Rorty, humanities professor at the University of Virginia, who argues that truth that transcends culture is not available because “where there are no sentences there is no truth, and sentences and their respective languages are human creations.”[\[5\]](#)

Finally, if all truth is created by humans, it is all equally true. Cultural ideas or institutions, like human sacrifice or welfare systems, are equally valid if they are useful for a given group of people. In other words, we live in a universe that is blind to moral choices. We are the final judges of how we shall live.

As Christians, we believe that ideas do have consequences. While being careful not to promote one set of cultural rules over others simply because we are comfortable with them, we acknowledge that Scripture reveals to us the character and nature of God, humankind, and our need for a savior. These truths can be communicated cross-culturally in a sensitive way, regardless of the people-group involved. If we didn't believe this to be true in a universal sense, then Christianity can't be true in any real way. In other words, in order to be what it claims to be, Christianity must transcend culture in a way that many multiculturalists argue cannot occur.

Language and Sensitivity

In recent years, America has been attracting over one million immigrants annually. This has resulted in a country that is religiously, racially, and linguistically more diverse. Conflict arises, however, over the question of how our

nation's institutions should respond to this diversity. Until recently, it was argued that America was a melting pot society, that regardless of an immigrant's origin, given a generation or two, his family would be assimilated into American culture. Multiculturalists have challenged both the reality and advisability of this view.

Multiculturalists brand our culture as white, Western, male, Christian, middle-class and heterosexual. They declare that our schools have forced on students a curriculum that promotes only that perspective. The books they read, the ideas they consider, the moral and ethical standards they are taught, explicitly or implicitly, tend to be those of dead white European males. The problem, they argue, is that this leaves out the contributions of many people. People of color, women, homosexuals, and various religious traditions are ignored and thus silenced. As a result, they contend, what passes for knowledge on campus is biased. Their goal is to correct this bias.

This charge of bias is not a groundless one. Even though many feel that Western culture has been very open to outside ideas, all majorities—in any society—will tend to seek cultural dominance.

The resulting multiculturalist agenda includes three demands on American society. The first is that the white Americans become more sensitive to minorities. This demand has resulted in what is referred to as “politically correct language.” Speech codes enforcing sensitivity on college campuses have attempted to protect oppressed groups from having to endure words and ideas that might ostracize them. At the center of this issue is the individual's feelings or self-esteem. The multiculturalists argue that if a person's self-esteem is damaged, he or she cannot learn in school.

Christians ought to be the most sensitive people in society. If calling people handicapped, Black, or Indian makes them

feel diminished in importance or somehow less human, we as Christians need to be empathetic and make changes in our use of language. This sensitivity should grow out of a sense of biblical humility, not for political or economic reasons.

But another question still must be answered. Will the enforced use of certain words really benefit the self-esteem and thus the learning of minority students in schools, as some have suggested? Dr. Paul Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argues that this is a far too simplistic view of human nature.^{6} Self-esteem itself cannot be tied directly to any behavior, positive or negative.

Some contend that enforcing “politically correct speech” is an attempt to redescribe our society in a manner that changes the way we think about issues. If the concepts of personal and family responsibility become labeled as hate speech towards those on welfare, an entire way of looking at the issue is forced out of the dialogue.

Unfortunately, language can also be used to legitimize behavior that Christians believe to be morally wrong. Homosexuality has progressively been referred to as a sin, then a disease, a lifestyle, and now a preference or sexual orientation. Just by re-describing this activity in new terms, an entirely different connotation is given to what homosexuality is. This has not occurred by accident.

Hebrews 12:14 tells us to make every effort to be at peace with all men. As we articulate truth, our language should lean towards gentleness and respect, for the sake of the Gospel. When we believe that every person deserves to be shown respect because we are all created in the image of God, our attitude will result in language and tone that is sensitive and gentle—not because political correctness demands it, but because out of a heart of love flow words of love.

Inclusion and Truth

A second demand being made on our schools and society is in the area of inclusiveness. Multiculturalists contend that marginalized people need to be brought into the curriculum and the marketplace of ideas on campus. No group should ever have to feel left out. One example is the recent set of standards offered by UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools. As originally offered, the standards greatly increased the voice of both minorities and women in the telling of our nation's history. However, many charge that they denigrated or ignored the contributions of white Americans in order to be inclusive. In fact, some complained that the overall picture of America produced by the standards was of an oppressive, WASPish empire. Even the U.S. Senate denounced the proposed standards by a vote of 99 to 1. One Senator voted against the resolution because it wasn't strong enough.

The standards declared that the U.S. is not a Western-based nation, but the result of three cultures. These cultures—Native American, African-American and European—are not seen as moral equals. In fact, the European contribution was one of oppression, injustice, gender bias and rape of the natural world. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, responded to the standards by saying that “No other nation in the world teaches a national history that leaves its children feeling negative about their own country—this would be the first.”[\[7\]](#)

In fact, U.S. history textbooks have been moving toward inclusion for some time. In order to make up for the neglect of women and people of color in past texts, some historians and publishers have gone a bit overboard in their attempts at finding the right balance. In one text, *The American Nation*, of the 13 religious leaders mentioned in short biographies, only two are non-Hispanic white males—Brigham Young and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[\[8\]](#) Often women and minorities are injected into

the text in odd ways. In this book, Senator Margaret Chase Smith is cited for challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy. While she was an early critic of McCarthy, she had little to do with his eventual political demise. Another example is Native American chief George Crum, noted for making the first potato chips in 1853.

The writing of history is a delicate task, and is probably impossible to accomplish without bias. But as Christians, we would prefer that truth—what really happened—at least be the goal, rather than political or racial propaganda, even if this goal will never be perfectly accomplished. This notion of truth demands that students be taught as much U.S. history as feasible. To leave out the experience of Native Americans, African-Americans or women would be a tremendous failure. But writing our entire history from their perspective is unfair as well. One answer to this problem is to have students read more primary historical documents and depend less on history textbooks. Unfortunately, multiculturalists see all texts as primarily political. They argue that only one view prevails: either the empowered majority's or the oppressed minority's. This belief that all knowledge is political results in turning schools into battlegrounds where representatives from every group, from Hispanics to gay rights activists, go over the curriculum with a magnifying glass, looking for the proper amount of inclusion or any derogatory remarks made about their group.

Tolerance as a Worldview

Many multiculturalists insist that we embrace multiculturalism in our schools not just in the way we teach, but in the way we think. Multiculturalists have specific ideas about the notion of truth; paramount is the belief that no truth transcends culture, that no idea or moral concept might be true for every cultural group or every human being. As a result, multiculturalists demand that we give up our beliefs in moral

absolutes and become moral relativists.

This worldview model has been the litmus test for college professors on many campuses for quite some time, particularly in the humanities. Evidently, in some programs it is now being applied to college students as well. In 1992, St. Cloud (Minn.) State University made it known that if students were to be accepted, those who desired to enter the social work program must relinquish specific notions of moral truth. While acknowledging that many students come from religious backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, these very students were required to go beyond "hating the sin and loving the sinner." Students who had predetermined negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians were told to look elsewhere for a major. In other words, one must, at the level of faith commitment, find no moral aversion to homosexuality in order to be admitted to this program. This removes a majority of our population from consideration right off the bat.

Part of the problem with multiculturalism is that it allows for a broad definition of cultural groups. There is both a gay culture and a feminist culture in America. In fact, any group can identify itself as a marginalized culture group. The homeless become a cultural group, as do single mothers on welfare. Should their perspectives get equal treatment in our schools? Are their moral values as valid as all others? The problem is that to be considered multiculturally sensitive, one must be able to place oneself into the perspective of the oppressed group completely, at the metaphysical level, not just to sympathize or even empathize with them. This means that one must be willing to compromise faith-based beliefs about God, human nature, and reality itself. For instance, if the gay community, being an oppressed minority group, believes that being homosexual is natural and every bit as normal as heterosexual relationships, Christians should ignore what they believe to be revealed truth about homosexuality's sinfulness.

Christians are called to have mercy and compassion on the poor and less fortunate, but not at the expense of recognizing that some lifestyles result in the impoverishment of people regardless of their race or cultural heritage. What is being asked of Christians is that we give up our view of a universe governed by a moral God who has established a moral universe, and replace it with a morally relativistic one. Tolerance becomes the only absolute. To be exclusive about truth, or to argue that some action might be morally wrong for all people all the time, violates this new absolute of tolerance.

Ultimately, this current enforcement of tolerance is really a thinly veiled pursuit of power. The only way certain groups, such as homosexual activists or the more radical feminists, can get recognition and the ability to spread their views, is by establishing tolerance as an absolute. Eventually, they win affirmative action concessions from universities and public schools, which enforces their viewpoint. Recently, the state of Massachusetts passed legislation recognizing the difficulties of gay elementary and secondary students, forcing all public school teachers to be educated and sensitized to their plight. This recognition and re-education of teachers further legitimizes and enhances the power of the gay rights movement.

Without losing sight of our calling to reach out and minister to people caught in lifestyles and cultures that vaunt themselves against the knowledge and standards of God, we cannot become moral relativists in the process.

Justice and Truth

While multiculturalists occasionally refer to justice, it cannot be the foundation of their movement. This is for the simple reason that justice is not possible without truth. In order to claim that someone's actions or words are unjust, one must assume that a moral order really does exist, a moral order that would be true for all cultures and at all times.

Injustice implies that justice exists, justice implies that moral laws exist, and moral laws imply that a lawgiver exists.

One college professor, explaining his plan for a liberal ironist utopia, says that a liberal is someone who thinks that being cruel is the worst thing that one can do. He argues that this moral standard can be used to create a utopia on earth. But he admits, being a good moral relativist, that he cannot give any non-circular arguments for why being cruel is the worst thing one can do. He is inventing a moral law, but admitting that its foundation lies only in his preference for that law.

Even if we accept his moral standard as useful, it leaves us with many questions. The first is, what does it mean to be cruel? Is it cruel to encourage people in their gay lifestyle given the short life span of male homosexuals, even without AIDS?[\[9\]](#) If pain is part of our definition of cruelty, should all operations be banned because even if successful, pain might result? How can he know that being cruel is the worst thing one can do in a morally neutral universe? Without truth, without knowledge of right and wrong, justice is impossible, as is any notion of a good life. The word "cruel" becomes an empty word.

By declaring tolerance an absolute, multiculturalists are consistent with their view of reality. They see all human cultures as morally equal because of their faith in a naturalistic world view. This view argues for a godless universe, and recognizes chance as the only possible cause for what exists. If this is true, absolute tolerance is the best we can hope for. Christians seek sensitivity and inclusion for a much better reason.

We believe that every human being was created in God's image and reflects God's glory and majesty. We were created to have dominion over God's creation as His stewards. Thus, we are to care for others because they are ultimately worthy of our care

and concern. We are not to be cruel to others because the Creator of the universe made individuals to have fellowship with Him and He cares for them. This does not discount that people are fallen and in rebellion against God. In fact, if we really care about people we will take 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 seriously. First, that God has made reconciliation with Himself possible through His Son Jesus Christ, and as verse 20 says, "...he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

True sensitivity and inclusion will not be achieved by making tolerance an absolute. They occur when we take what people believe, and the consequences of those beliefs, seriously. When you think about it, what could be crueler than failing to inform people of the Gospel of redemption through Christ, leaving them to spend eternity separated from the Creator God who loves them?

Notes

1. Berman, Paul. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (NY: Dell Publishing, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 253.
3. Ibid., 257.
4. Francis, Samuel, "The Other Face of Multiculturalism," *Chronicles*, April, 1998, p. 33.
5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 5.
6. Guinness, Os & Seel, John, ed. *No God But God*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 96.

7. Leo, John "History standards are bunk" *U.S. News & World Report* February 6, 1995, 23.

8. Ibid.

9. Dr. Paul Cameron, *Family Research* (Newsletter of the Family Research Institute, Inc.), April-June 1991.

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Christians and Culture

What Should We Do with This Thing Called Culture?

What do you think of when you hear the word culture? Perhaps you refer to the arts. You may picture the way people dress, the way they eat, their language, their religion, their architecture, or a host of other perceptions. One of the most succinct definitions of culture is wide-ranging because it refers to "that which man does beyond biological necessity."^{1} Obviously such a definition indicates the importance of the term. Our lives are lived within culture. There is no escaping this thing called culture. But how is a Christian to respond?

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Christians who lived in Corinth, a very challenging culture. Where should we stand? Inside? Outside? Ignore it? Become isolated from it? Should we concern ourselves with attempting to transform it?

In 1949 a theologian named Richard Niebuhr delivered a series of lectures entitled *Christ and Culture*.^{2} Subsequently his thoughts were published and the book has become a classic. Niebuhr's text focuses on five paradigms that describe how Christians have dealt with culture. A brief survey of these paradigms can help us see ourselves, and perhaps challenge us to consider changing the way we look at the world around us.

The first paradigm, *Christ against Culture*, describes those who choose to isolate themselves from the surrounding culture. A descriptive contemporary phrase might be "the holy huddle" of Christians who dialog among themselves, but no one else. Second, the *Christ of Culture* perspective is exactly the opposite of *Christ against Culture* because it attempts to bring culture and Christianity together, regardless of their differences. Third, the *Christ above Culture* position attempts to synthesize the issues of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation. Fourth, *Christ and Culture in Paradox* refers to those who understand the tension between the Christian's responsibility to both the cultural and the spiritual realms. Fifth, *Christ the Transformer of Culture* describes those who strive "to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God."^{3}

Which of these paradigms describes your relationship with the culture in which you live? Or perhaps you have another paradigm to offer. No doubt we could engage in debate about the merits and demerits of all of them. But since we cannot do that at the moment, let us agree that we should at least give attention to our place in culture.

Christians are to observe and analyze culture and make decisions regarding our proper actions and reactions within it. A struggle is in progress and the stakes are high. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be thoughtful and informed.

Our work through Probe Ministries is dedicated to the

proposition that the Lord can use Christians as salt and light. God has called us to offer a voice in both the Christian and the non-Christian communities. Among other things, this means that we have attempted to give attention to how this can be done for the glory of God. In particular, our involvement in the non-Christian community presents a special challenge. Much prayer and study have been focused on principles that should be considered before we engage with the culture. In this article, I will focus on five of these principles that apply to ministry within the culture.

Establishing Biblical Precepts

Unless you live in a cave, you have had to deal with the culture around you. You have sensed the need to give thought to how you might glorify God as you react to your culture. Or you may have experienced times of mental and spiritual trauma as you realized the sinful nature of what you experience around you. If you choose to interact with your culture, there are certain principles to be considered.

The first of these is the need for biblical precepts. That is, our minds should be filled with God's ideas before interacting with the culture. This is an understandable and universally stated declaration among evangelical Christians. Experience tells us we need to give life to the declaration. Are we responding to our culture based on biblical precepts, or are we responding to our culture based on other sources? Are we utilizing a Christian world view as we respond to culture, or are we unwittingly utilizing a naturalistic worldview? When we discuss things as Christians, do we focus on Scripture no matter what we might be discussing? "Contemporary Christianity is all too frequently shaped by the fact that when we meet we do so in an atmosphere resembling that of a committee or caucus, where the style is political and tactical, hardly scholarly, and almost never devotional or genuinely spiritual." [\[4\]](#) Do we give serious attention "to the sacred

text as the firm and only basis on which life and decisions should be based?"[{5}](#) Indeed, without the "sacred text" evangelicals are left to grapple with their culture in much the same manner as those who do not claim allegiance to that text.

In order to affirm the primacy of Scripture in a cultural critique the Christian should first *read* his culture in the light of the Bible. Proper recognition of the culture is necessary before it can be addressed properly. In other words, we need a biblical "lens" through which we can see the culture. The light of God's Word needs to be focused on the questions at hand. For example, the culture tends to *secularize* life. Most of us live, work, and play in the secular sphere. But *secularism* refers to a way of life that "excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state."[{6}](#)

Harry Blamires, a protégé of C.S. Lewis and an astute cultural critic, offers an insightful critique of secularism. The secularist's position can be defined only in negatives. There is no life except this life in time. There is no order of being except that which we explore with our senses and our instruments. There is no condition of well-being except that of a healthy and comfortable life in time. There is no God to be worshipped, for no God created us. There is no God to propitiate, for there is no God to offend. There is no reward to be sought and no punishment to be avoided except those which derive from earthly authority. There is no law to be obeyed except those which earthly authority imposes or earthly prudence recommends.[{7}](#)

Obviously, Blamires' observations are the result of seeing secularism with a scriptural lens. Biblical precepts allow him to offer such a critique. His example can be an encouragement for us. May God guide us as we apply biblical precepts to evaluate our culture.

Rejecting Cultural Biases, Developing Interaction

What do you think of the culture in which you live? In particular, what do you think of the broader American culture in which your sub-culture is found? For example, are you comfortable with the adage: "America: love it or leave it?" Or do you tend to think of certain other cultures as pristine, even if you have never visited them?

I have discussed the need to assess culture through the use of biblical precepts, the first principle of cultural evaluation. The second principle is focused on what I call cultural bias. If we are to interact with cultures other than our own, and if we seek honestly to evaluate our own, we must be cautious of biases.

Carl F.H. Henry, a great theologian, apologist, and cultural critic has enumerated what he calls twenty fantasies of a secular society. One of these includes the thought that God "will protect the United States and its people from catastrophic disaster because of our commitment to freedom, generosity, and goodness." Dr. Henry writes, "For many, God is an ever-living George Washington who serves invisibly as the father of our country. This vague political theology assumes that America can never drift irrecoverably beyond divine approval, and that the nation is intrinsically exempt from severe and final divine judgment." Another fantasy is "that the American people are essentially good at heart in a world whose inhabitants are more prone to evil." [\[8\]](#) The anthropologist Charles Kraft responds to such thinking by writing that "much of the Christian populace has simply continued to assume that such features of our society as monogamy, democracy, our type of educational system, individualism, capitalism, the 'freedoms,' literacy, technological development, military supremacy, etc. are all products of our association with God and therefore can be

pointed to as indications of the superiority of our culture over all other cultures.”[\[9\]](#)

Missionaries who serve in cultures other than their own can speak to the danger of such fantasies. But we do not have to be foreign missionaries to experience the effects of cultural bias. The United States has become such a multicultural environment that Christians can and must understand the importance of rejecting cultural biases.

Interaction but not Accommodation

The third principle of cultural evaluation focuses on the need for interaction with culture, but not accommodation. There should be no fear in this if we are using biblical precepts, the first of our principles. But we need to be alert to the ways in which we can become enmeshed in the culture. In addition, we should be accountable to one another by offering warnings when we observe such entanglement.

Without cultural interaction evangelicals leave numerous important facets of contemporary cultural life without the light of truth they can offer. A cursory reading of post-Enlightenment history will demonstrate the progressive decrease of evangelical interaction and the subsequent lack of influence in strategic areas of culture. For example, American higher education has been guided by principles that leave Christian theism out of the picture.

It is crucial, though, that such interaction take place with a sense of accountability. The person who enters the culture without respect for the ideological dangers that reside there will prove to be foolish. The ideas, the sense of progress, and the pride of cultural accomplishment can lead us to give credit to man instead of God. May the Lord receive praise as He uses us to touch our culture!

A Positive Revolutionary Vision

The word *revolution* tends to have a negative connotation for most of us. A revolutionary most often is seen as someone who engenders rebellion and chaos. But a Christian's response to culture should include a positive revolutionary mindset. Christian thought and life should state things to culture that exhibit Christ's revolutionary vision for all people. A type of pluralism that tempts us to negate Christianity's claims and absolutes should not persuade Christians. Donald Bloesch speaks to this tension by juxtaposing what he calls prophetic religion and culture religion. He writes: "Our choice today is between a prophetic religion and a culture religion. The first is anchored in a holy God who infinitely transcends every cultural and religious form that testifies to Him. The second absolutizes the cultural or mythical garb in which God supposedly meets us."[10](#) Our interaction with culture must have a prophetic voice. We must speak boldly to the culture knowing that the source of our proclamation is the sovereign God.

This means that Christians should not relegate their lives to what may be called a "Christian ghetto" or "holy huddle." Too many Christians live "a split life: they are forced to use many words and images that have a private meaning for them with which they are unable or unwilling to enrich the fund of public experience."[11](#) One may have a revolutionary vision and prophetic zeal, but too often it is directed toward his "ghetto" instead of the surrounding culture. To quote an old cliché: "He is preaching to the choir."

Notice how often conversations among Christians concentrate on problems presented by the surrounding culture. For example, discussion may focus on the latest outrage in the entertainment industry, or the newest bit of intrigue in Washington, or concerns about the sex education emphasized in public schools, or controversies surrounding issues of

abortion, euthanasia, cloning, homosexuality, child abuse, or a host of other topics. Then notice if constructive suggestions are offered. Is attention given to the ways in which the Christian community might respond to such issues based on biblical precepts? Too often such a scenario does not include positive revolutionary cultural interaction.

Lesslie Newbigin, a perceptive cultural critic, offers two propositions regarding a Christian's revolutionary vision. First, Newbigin states he would not see Christians just "in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels 'religion', but rather in the public sector where God's will as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools." Second, "I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world."^[12] Christianity is not to be privatized; it applies to all people in all places at all times.

If we choose to take Newbigin's propositions seriously, we must not be naïve about the response we will receive. At this moment in American history the public sector often is antagonistic toward a Christian voice. Thus we should not be surprised when we are rejected. Instead, if we are stating God's ideas we should rejoice, as did the early Christians when they suffered for His name (Acts 5:41). When truth rubs shoulders with untruth, friction is the result.

Glorifying God in All of Life

The words *whatever* and *all* are enormous. Can you think of something more than *whatever* or *all*? When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth he used these terms to describe how they should glorify God in their lives: "Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all

to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). Pagan Corinth certainly provided many opportunities for early Christians to learn how to respond to their culture. The same is true for Christians in our time. We live in and associate with a culture that constantly presents challenges. We are to glorify God in all we do, regardless of those challenges. "Where God is acknowledged as the Creator, man knows that the ultimate meaning of His creatures is the same as the meaning of all life: the glory of God and the service of men." [\[13\]](#) Our work within culture and our influence on it are part of what God will judge. Therefore, these works are important.

We are to remind ourselves and tell the culture that "the prophetic church witnesses to the breaking into history of a higher righteousness; it points people to a higher law." [\[14\]](#) Carl F.H. Henry emphasizes this in a passage concerning education, but the implications cover much more:

The drift of twentieth century learning can be succinctly summarized in one statement: Instead of recognizing [God] as the source and stipulator of truth and the good, contemporary thought reduces all reality to impersonal processes and events, and insists that man himself creatively imposes upon the cosmos and upon history the only values that they will ever bear. [\[15\]](#)

God is sovereign; He is the Lord of *whatever* and *all* in all of life.

Thus we must be cautious about our emphases within culture. God changes things; we are His messengers. Our involvement is important, but it must be remembered that it is transitory. As beautiful and meaningful as the works of man may be, they will not last. The theologian Karl Barth emphasized this by relating his comments to the tower of Babel: "In the building of the tower of Babel whose top is to touch heaven, the Church can have no part. The hope of the Church rests *on* God *for* men;

it does not rest *on* men, not even on religious men—and not even on the belief that men *with the help of God* will finally build that tower.”^{16} Our hope is not found in man’s efforts. Our hope is found in God’s provision for eternity. But this does not denigrate our involvement with culture. “There is a radical difference between human culture generally, which is thoroughly secular, and that which is developed as a loving service to God.”^{17} Utopia will never refer to this life. Since no culture “this side of the Parousia [Second Coming] can be recognized as divine we are limited to the more modest hope that life on earth may gradually be made better; or, more modestly still, gradually be made less bad.”^{18} Christian’s response to culture should be described with such modest hopes in view.

This article has focused on five principles that can strengthen a Christian impact on culture. Fill your mind with biblical precepts; be careful that you do not respond to the surrounding culture with cultural biases; be interactive, but not accommodating; develop a positive revolutionary mindset; and glorify God in all of life.

Notes

1. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 142.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
3. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 227.
4. Charles E. Kinzie, “The Absorbed Church: Our Inheritance of Conformed Christianity,” *Sojourners* 7 (July, 1978), 22.
5. Ibid.
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