The Appeal of Twilight

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series currently hold three of the top ten slots on Amazon's best sellers list. Her Young Adult novels about a love story between a human girl (Bella) and her vampire boyfriend (Edward) are popular with far more than just young adults. And "popular" is quite the understatement.

A friend who does ladies' nails told me that one of her 60-something clients confessed, "Don't tell my husband, but I'm in love with Edward." She also told me that when she invited one of her friends to go out to a movie, she was rebuffed with, "Oh, sorry, but I'm going to stay in with Edward tonight."

"Popular" doesn't quite describe the series. "Obsession" works well, though.

What's all the fuss about? And is it safe for young readers?

What struck me as I read *Twilight* is how much the vampire Edward displays the beauty and strength of the Lord Jesus Christ. No wonder people are attracted to him! Whether this is intentional or not—the author is a Mormon, though I don't see Mormon theology anywhere in the book—I believe it's easy to get wrapped up in the transcendent relationship of a god-like figure and his beloved human sweetheart because it echoes the love story of God and His people.

Consider the way Edward is written:

- *He is able to read minds (hearing the thoughts of those near him, with the exception of Bella)*
- *He has superhuman strength*
- *He has superhuman speed*
- *He consistently exhibits strong self-control, keeping his emotions and his great power in check*
- *He is loving, kind, and thoughtful*

• He is self-sacrificing
• He is tender and sensitive, at the same time the essence of masculine strength and leadership
• He is lavishly generous
• He anticipates Bella's needs and desires and is prepared to meet them in ways that are in her best interests, even if it costs him
• He sparkles in the sunlight with a stunning radiance

Edward and Bella's relationship echoes the dynamics of Christ and His beloved bride, the Church. The relationship is a mixture of agony and sacrificial love. Human and vampire are very different and very other, yet they both desire oneness and intimacy. This reflects the way humanity and divinity come together in Christ and the Church.

Bella tells Edward, "You *are* my life" (p. 474). This sense of connecting to and being lost in the transcendent is the foundation of a healthy relationship with our Creator and Savior; but it is the essence of unhealthy emotional dependency in another creature. It sounds very romantic, to put all one's eggs in another's basket, but it also gives all our power away to that person since they have the power to make and keep us happy and fulfilled. This is safe in Jesus' hands, but no one else's.

I think there is a good reason for the strong reaction to the characters and the dynamics of the story. They resonate with the far larger Story of God wooing His people.

I found one passage that hints at a worldview perspective on the *Twilight* series. On page 308, Bella asks Edward where vampirism started originally. He answers,

> "Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn't we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to

> accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?"

However, thinking biblically, we know that the vampire "kind" doesn't truly exist. It's a fantasy. There are no "undead" people like vampires. Hebrews 9:27 tells us that "it is appointed unto man to die once; and after this comes judgment." Transitioning from human to vampire by being bitten with a vampire's venom doesn't happen.

The book's cover features a pair of hands proffering an apple. Just after the table of contents, this quotation from Genesis 2:17 appears by itself on a page: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

The author says on her website,

> The apple on the cover of Twilight represents "forbidden fruit." I used the scripture from Genesis (located just after the table of contents) because I loved the phrase "the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil." Isn't this exactly what Bella ends up with? A working knowledge of what good is, and what evil is. The nice thing about the apple is it has so many symbolic roots. You've got the apple in Snow White, one bite and you're frozen forever in a state of not-quite-death… Then you have Paris and the golden apple in Greek mythology—look how much trouble that started. Apples are quite the versatile fruit. In the end, I love the beautiful simplicity of the picture. To me it says: choice. (www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight_faq.html#apple)

Should tweens and teens read this series? I think it provides an opportunity for parents and other authority figures (like youth group leaders) to read and discuss the themes of the book with youth, particularly what makes Edward so attractive.

People are drawn to him for the same reason that a seeking heart is drawn to Jesus. The best use of this book and series is if the reader can be pointed to the One who can actually fulfill the fantasy that Stephenie Meyer writes so well, of being cherished by a strong and beautiful Lover who thinks and acts sacrificially.

Because the heart that is drawn to Edward is actually looking for Jesus.

Note: Since writing this blog post, I have read all the books and done a lot of research, coming to a different conclusion. Please be sure and read Part 2: A New Look at Twilight: Different Conclusion. Thanks!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/the_appeal_of_twilight
on March 16, 2009.

A New Look at Twilight, Different Conclusion

Last year (June 8, 2010) I blogged about *Twilight*, connecting the dots between the supernatural vampire character of Edward Cullen and Jesus. I suggested that perhaps the reason millions of people so resonate with that character is that what they're really looking for is the glory and perfection of the Lord

Jesus Christ, which Edward appears to manifest in various ways.

Since then, I have read all the books and done months of research. It's like pulling the camera focus back, back, back. . . . and finding some extremely disturbing details now in our field of vision.

I have now come to a very different conclusion.

I was stunned to learn about how the idea for *Twilight* came to the author, Stephenie Meyer. She tells this story:

> "I woke up . . . from a very vivid dream. In my dream, two people were having an intense conversation in a meadow in the woods. One of these people was just your average girl. The other person was fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire. They were discussing the difficulties inherent in the facts that A) they were falling in love with each other while B) the vampire was particularly attracted to the scent of her blood, and was having a difficult time restraining himself from killing her immediately."

"Fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire"? Consider what vampires are, in the vampire genre that arose in the 1800s: demon-possessed, undead, former human beings who suck blood from their victims to sustain themselves. A vampire is evil. And the vampire who came to Stephenie Meyer in a dream is not only supernaturally beautiful and sparkly, but when she awoke she was deeply in love with this being who virtually moved into her head, creating conversations for months that she typed out (obsessively, she says) until *Twilight* was written.

When I heard this part of the story, it gave me chills. 2 Corinthians 11:14 tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, which is a perfect description of the Edward Cullen character.

Then I learned that “Edward” came to Meyer in a second dream that frightened her. She said, “I had this dream that Edward actually showed up and told me that I got it all wrong and like he exists and everything but he couldn’t live off animals. . . and I kind of got the sense he was going to kill me. It was really terrifying and bizarrely different from every other time I’ve thought about his character.”

I believe that Stephenie Meyer’s dream was not your ordinary dream. The fact that “Edward” came to her in a second dream that terrified her (but she dismissed it and kept on writing), indicates this may have been a demonic visitation. I do believe *Twilight* was demonically inspired.

But there’s more.

All four books are permeated with the occult. The *Twilight* vampires all have various kinds of powers that don’t come from God. They are supernaturally fast, supernaturally strong, able to read others’ minds and control others’ feelings. Some can tell the future, others can see things at great distances. These aspects of the occult are an important part of what makes *Twilight* so successful.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God strongly warns us not to have anything to do with the occult, which is part of the “domain of darkness” (Colossians 1:13). *Twilight* glorifies the occult, the very thing God calls detestable (Deuteronomy 18:9). This is reason enough for Christ-followers to stay away from it!

Last year I wondered if Edward was something of a Christ-figure. Now I think this character is a devious spiritual counterfeit to Jesus that has captured the hearts of millions of obsessed fans who are in love with a demonic “angel of light.”

And they don’t know it.

Note: My article on the Probe website is now online, with much more information than what's in this blog post: probe.org/twilight

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/a_new_look_at_twilight_different_conclusion

Hayek and 'The Road to Serfdom'

Kerby Anderson gives an overview of the bestseller The Road to Serfdom *and explains how it is consistent with a Christian worldview.*

Why the Interest in Hayek and *The Road to Serfdom*?

A few years ago, if you said the name Friedrich Hayek to the average person in society, they wouldn't know his name. They might wrongly guess that he was the father of actress Selma Hayek. His name was unknown to non-economists.



Today he has much more visibility. People are reading his classic book, *The Road to Serfdom*, perhaps in order to make sense of our troubled economic climate and the current administration's policies. When TV host Glenn Beck talked about Hayek and *The Road to Serfdom*, the book went to number one on Amazon and stayed in the top ten for some time. A rap video featuring cartoon versions of Hayek and John Maynard Keynes have been viewed over a million times on YouTube.

Why all the interest in a Vienna-born, Nobel Prize-winning economist who passed off the scene some time ago? People are taking a second look at Hayek because of our current economic troubles. Russ Roberts, in his op-ed, "Why Friedrich Hayek is Making a Comeback,"{1} says people are reconsidering four ideas Hayek championed.

First, Hayek and his fellow Austrian School economists such as Ludwig Von Mises argued that the economy is much more complicated than the simple economic principles set forth by Keynes. Boosting aggregate demand by funding certain sectors with a stimulus package of the economy won't necessarily help any other sector of the economy.

Second, Hayek highlighted the role of the Federal Reserve in the business cycle. The artificially low interest rates set by the Fed played a crucial role in inflating the housing bubble. Our current monetary policy seems to merely be postponing the economic adjustments that must take place to heal the housing market.

Third, Hayek argued in his book that political freedom and economic freedom are connected and intertwined. The government in a centrally controlled economy controls more than just

wages and prices. It inevitably infringes on what we do and where we live.

Even when the government tries to steer the economy in the name of the "public good," the increased power of the state corrupts those who wield that power. "Hayek pointed out that powerful bureaucracies don't attract angels—they attract people who enjoy running the lives of others. They tend to take care of their friends before taking care of others."{2}

A final point by Hayek is that order can emerge not just from the top down but also from the bottom up. At the moment, citizens in many of the modern democracies are suffering from a top-down fatigue. A free market not only generates order but the freedom to work and trade with others. The opposite of top-down collectivism is not selfishness but cooperation.

Although *The Road to Serfdom* was written at the end of World War II to warn England that it could fall into the same fate as Germany, its warning to every generation is timeless.

Misconceptions About *The Road to Serfdom* (part one)

Hayek wrote his classic book *The Road to Serfdom*{3} more than sixty years ago, yet people are still reading it today. As they read it and apply its principles, many others misunderstand. Let's look at some of the prevalent misconceptions.

Because Hayek was a Nobel-winning economist, people wrongly believe that *The Road to Serfdom* is merely a book about economics. It is much more. It is about the impact a centrally planned socialist society can have on individuals. Hayek says one of the main points in his book is "that the most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of the people. This is necessarily a slow affair, a process which

extends not over a few years but perhaps over one or two generations."{4}

The character of citizens is changed because they have yielded their will and decision-making to a totalitarian government. They may have done so willingly in order to have a welfare state. Or they may have done so unwillingly because a dictator has taken control of the reins of power. Either way, Hayek argues, their character has been altered because the control over every detail of economic life is ultimately control of life itself.

In the forward to his book, Hayek makes his case about the insidious nature of a soft despotism. He quotes from Alexis de Tocqueville's prediction in *Democracy in America* of the "new kind of servitude" when

> *after having thus successively taken each member of the community in it powerful grasp, and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered but softened, bent and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.{5}*

Tocqueville warned that the search for greater equality typically is accompanied by greater centralization of government with a corresponding loss of liberty. The chapter was insightfully titled, "What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear."

Tocqueville also described the contrast between democracy and socialism:

> *Democracy extends the sphere of individual freedom; socialism restricts it. Democracy attaches all possible value to each man; socialism makes each man a mere agent, a mere number. Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word: equality. But notice the difference: while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and servitude.{6}*

Hayek believed that individual citizens should develop their own abilities and pursue their own dreams. He argued that government should be a *means*, a mere *instrument*, "to help individuals in their fullest development of their individual personality."{7}

Misconceptions About *The Road to Serfdom* (part two)

Another misconception about Hayek is that he was making a case for radical libertarianism. Some of the previous quotes illustrate that he understood that the government could and should intervene in circumstances. He explains that his book was not about whether the government should or should not act in every circumstance.

What he was calling for was a government limited in scope and power. On the one hand, he rejected libertarian anarchy. On the other hand, he devoted the book to the reasons why we should reject a pervasive, centrally controlled society advocated by the socialists of his day. He recognized the place for government's role.

The government, however, should focus its attention on setting the ground rules for competition rather than devote time and energy to picking winners and losers in the marketplace. And

Hayek reasoned that government cannot possibly know the individual and collective needs of society. Therefore, Hayek argues that the "state should confine itself to establishing rules applying to general types of situations and should allow the individuals freedom in everything which depends on the circumstances of time and place, because only the individuals concerned in each instance can fully know these circumstances and adapt their actions to them."{10}

Wise and prudent government must recognize that there are fundamental limitations in human knowledge. A government that recognizes its limitations is less likely to intervene at every level and implement a top-down control of the economy.

One last misconception has to do with helping those who suffer misfortune. It is true that he rejected the idea of a top-down, centrally controlled economy and socialist welfare state. But that did not exclude the concept of some sort of social safety net.

In his chapter on "Security and Freedom" he says, "there can be no doubt that some minimum of food, shelter, and clothing, sufficient to preserve health and the capacity to work can be assured to everybody."{11} He notes that this has been achieved in England (and we might add in most other modern democracies).

He went on to argue that the government should provide assistance to victims of such "acts of God" (such as earthquakes and floods). Although he might disagree with the extent governments today provide ongoing assistance for years, Hayek certainly did believe there was a place for providing aid to those struck by misfortune.

Paved With Good Intentions

Friedrich Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom* to warn us that sometimes the road can be paved with good intentions. Most

government officials and bureaucrats write laws, rules, and regulations with every good intention. They desire to make the world a better place by preventing catastrophe and by encouraging positive actions from their citizens. But in their desire to control and direct every aspect of life, they take us down the road to serfdom.

Hayek says the problem comes from a "passion for conscious control of everything."{12} People who enter into government and run powerful bureaucracies are often people who enjoy running not only the bureaucracy but also the lives of its citizens. In making uniform rules from a distance, they deprive the local communities of the freedom to apply their own knowledge and wisdom to their unique situations.

Socialist government seeks to be a benevolent god, but usually morphs into a malevolent tyrant. Micromanaging the details of life leads to what Hayek calls "imprudence." Most of us would call such rules intrusive, inefficient, and often downright idiotic. But the governmental bureaucrat may believe he is right in making such rules, believing that the local people are too stupid to know what is best for them. Hayek argues that citizens are best served when they are given the freedom to make choices that are best for them and their communities.

Hayek actually makes his case for economic freedom using a moral argument. If government assumes our moral responsibility, then we are no longer free moral agents. The intrusion of the state limits my ability to make moral choices. "What our generation is in danger of forgetting is not only that morals are of necessity a phenomenon of individual conduct but also that they can exist only in the sphere in which the individual is free to decide for himself and is called upon voluntarily to sacrifice personal advantage to the observance of a moral rule."{13} This is true whether it is an individual or a government that takes responsibility. In either case, we are no longer making free moral decisions. Someone or something else is making moral decisions for us.

“Responsibility, not to a superior, but to one’s conscience, the awareness of duty is not exacted by compulsion, the necessity to decide which of the things one values are to be sacrificed to others, and to bear the consequences of one’s own decision, are the very essence of any morals which deserve the name.”{14}

A socialist government may promise freedom to its citizens but it adversely affects them when it frees them from making moral choices. “A movement whose main promise is the relief from responsibility cannot but be antimoral in its effect, however lofty the ideals to which it owes its birth.”{15}

Hayek also warned about the danger of centralizing power in the hands of a few bureaucrats. He argued that, “by uniting in the hands of a single body power formerly exercised independently by many, an amount of power is created infinitely greater than any that existed before, so much more far reaching as almost to be different in kind.”{16}

He even argues that once we centralize power in a bureaucracy, we are headed down the road to serfdom. “What is called economic power, while it can be an instrument of coercion, is, in the hands of private individuals, never exclusive or complete power, never power over the whole of life of a person. But centralized as an instrument of political power it creates a degree of dependence scarcely distinguishable from slavery.”{17}

Biblical Perspective

How does *The Road to Serfdom* compare to biblical principles? We must begin by stating that Friedrich Hayek was not a Christian. He did not confess Christian faith nor did he attend religious services. Hayek could best be described as an agnostic.

He was born in 1899 into an affluent, aristocratic family in

Austria. He grew up in a nominally Roman Catholic home. Apparently there was a time when he seriously considered Christianity. Shortly before Hayek became a teenager, he began to ask some of the big questions of life. In his teen years, he was influenced by a godly teacher and even came under the conviction of sin. However, his quest ended when he felt that no one could satisfactorily answer his questions. From that point on he seems to have set aside any interest in Christianity and even expressed hostility toward religion.

Perhaps the most significant connection between Hayek and Christianity can be found in their common understanding of human nature. Hayek started with a simple premise: human beings are limited in their understanding. The Bible would say that we are fallen creatures living in a fallen world.

Starting with this assumption that human beings are not God, he constructed a case for liberty and limited government. This was in contrast to the prevailing socialist view that human beings possessed superior knowledge and could wisely order the affairs of its citizens through central planning. Hayek rejected the idea that central planners would have enough knowledge to organize the economy and instead showed that the spontaneous ordering of economic systems would be the mechanism that would push forward progress in society.

Hayek essentially held to a high view and a low view of human nature. Or we could call it a balanced view of human nature. He recognized that human beings did have a noble side influenced by rationality, compassion, and even altruism. But he also understood that human beings also are limited in their perception of the world and subject to character flaws.

Such a view comports with a biblical perspective of human nature. First, there is a noble aspect to human beings. We are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27-28) and are made a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5). Second, there is a flaw in human beings. The Bible teaches that all are sinful

(Rom. 3:23) and that the heart of man is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9).

Hayek believed that "man learns by the disappointment of expectations." In other words, we learn that we are limited in our capacities. We do not have God's understanding of the world and thus cannot effectively control the world like socialists confidently believe that we can. We are not the center of the universe. We are not gods. As Christians we can agree with the concept of the "disappointment of expectations" because we are fallen and live in a world that groans in travail (Romans 8:22).

Although Hayek was not a Christian, many of the ideas in *The Road to Serfdom* connect with biblical principles. Christians would be wise to read it and learn from him the lessons of history.

Notes

1. Russ Roberts, "Why Friedrich Hayek is Making a Comeback," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents, the Definitive Edition*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
4. Ibid., 48.
5. Ibid., 49.
6. Ibid., 77.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 57.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid., 114.
11. Ibid., 148.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 216.
14. Ibid., 217.
15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 165.
17. Ibid., 166.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

What the Heck, Mr. Beck?

America has recently been abuzz about Glenn Beck and his rather large contingent of followers. Ever since somewhere between 90,000 and a billion people showed up at his Restoring Honor rally to hear the Fox News host and radio–talker prophesy from on high, fans and foes have heaped adulation, disgust, cheer, hatred, exuberance, and all sorts of emotions on the man himself. The response depends on whom you ask and what sort of political worldview they hold. Those on the political right tend to like him and see where he is coming from; however, those on the opposite side of the political divide generally show antipathy toward Beck and his event.

Adding to the Left's (and some others') angst was the fact that he conducted his rally at the stoop of the civil rights movement–the Lincoln Memorial–on the very spot where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the same day 47 years ago, delivered one of America's defining speeches. Would Mr. Beck live up to that august standard? Would he dare use this sacred place and auspicious moment as an occasion to butcher the Obama administration and, in his view, their evil conspiracy to bring America to the hard left?

In fact, no. He did something out of character. Departing from his usual message, diverging from the political path–he instead spoke of God. He opined about honor. He sounded more like a religious, pulpit–pounder than the partisan, chalkboard artist that he usually is. He declared that "something beyond

imagination is happening. America today begins to turn back to God."{1} Wow! How awesome is that? Someone in our nation standing up for God. Or is he?

Who is God?

When we dig deeper, having already donned our distinctively Christian worldview lenses, Beck's message may not be what it seems. Is he really trying to turn America back to God? The God that we as evangelical Christians believe in—the one in the Old Testament as well as in the New? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The Triune God—you know, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? In fact, as you listen to Mr. Beck's rhetoric, you might notice that he never defines which God he is actually referring to. How can you say that America is turning back to God and never define the God that you are talking about—unless you are taking one for granted? Is this the god of civic religion we hear invoked so often within the halls of power? Maybe America is seeking a god who is not really there—because it doesn't exist. Or maybe America wants to fashion, shape, and mold a god of its own—a god who is not true yet makes people feel a little better.

This god that is being fashioned here by Mr. Beck's verbiage seems to be a god called the Enlightenment, a deity of Reason. Now, please do not get me wrong, I believe that Mr. Beck has the best of intentions. I believe that he sincerely thinks that God is the answer for America. I also believe that Mr. Beck is not alone—there are many Americans, and yes, plenty of Christians, who believe that God is the answer for America and then proceed to form that god into whatever pleases them most. This is the reason why Mr. Beck's rally was a hit for some many people, and many among them, sadly, are church leaders. Yet, Scripture will not allow us to remake God into our own image—this is what He is supposed to be doing to us.

But, I digress. Back to Mr. Beck and the god called the Enlightenment. I believe he is basically trying to foster a

moral, ethical movement that stands for things like honesty, integrity, truth, and nobility—you know, good, ol' fashioned morals—hoping that this will save America from its de-evolution. Essentially, he seems to promote morality without the bothersome requirement of bowing down to the One True God of the Bible.

This kind of a cart-before-the-horse thinking was rampant during the era of the Enlightenment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of God was altered. Instead of looking to the classical Biblical definition of God, these Enlightened thinkers deemed the task of defining who God is, practically unnecessary.

One of the products of the Enlightenment, which seems to be carried over and promoted by Mr. Beck, is stripping morality from the worship of God. Immanuel Kant, one the chief proponents of such Enlightened thinking in the 18th century, reverses the traditional order that morality only flows from a true concept of God. He, instead, believed that you could acquire morality without God, because morality is rooted in reason. "It is reason, by means of its moral principles, that can first produce the concept of God."{2} Did you get it? Kant is claiming that morality establishes the concept of God. Additionally, Kant here is not referring to the One True God of the Bible; rather, it is a god that he has fashioned in his own mind. Basically, God is morality; and you can get morality by being sensible, rationale, reasonable, by looking within yourself.

Mr. Beck's gathering was a pep-rally encouraging people to look within themselves. Don't look to someone else, he proclaimed, we must "look inside ourselves."{3} He eloquently spoke of the "power of the individual" and the difference that you can make when "you look inside yourself."{4} Morality is attainable—not by worship of and communion with a holy, righteous God—but by examining your reasonable self. I believe that Mr. Beck's libertarian political philosophy is not merely

the way he sees politics—it is the way he sees all of life.

But we see Scripture providing an altogether different viewpoint—or might I say, worldview. It tells us that men's hearts are deceitful, in fact, so much so that not even the individual himself or herself can know it. It tells us that the belief and worship of God is directly tied to how we live. Wrong beliefs lead to wrong living, overall. The Bible tells us not to look within ourselves for the solution, but to look to the cross: to look to the true God and his guilt—sacrifice on our behalf. And then it tells us to look toward the community—the church of God—in order to live a holy, moral, ethical life; not so that we can become good patriots, but so that we can become good children of God, and thus more fully human. The end result will be virtuous people living together in harmony.

The bottom line is that faith counts. Looking to God for morality is both Biblical and essential. But many within the Christian community seem to ignore this important fact when they are presented with a celebrity that seems to give voice to their political and moral values. Two leading evangelicals, when commenting about Mr. Beck's gathering to Christianity Today, ignore the ultimacy of faith. "Glenn Beck's Mormon faith is irrelevant,"{5} cried one; while the other proclaimed that Mr. Beck will be seen by evangelicals "as a moral voice, not necessarily a spiritual voice."{6} But I ask once again: can morality and spirituality be divorced from one another? Is faith really irrelevant? No, and no.

What is Honor?

But another question regarding Mr. Beck's gospel is, What does it mean to be honorable? His rally was called "Restoring Honor" and he obviously lauds the idea of honor, but he never defines it. He joked at the rally that America's shape was much like his weight and then added, "That ain't good."{7} So, if America is in such bad condition morally, and if America

needs to be restored, what does it need to be restored to? These are all questions he leaves unanswered, yet I believe they are crucial questions from a Christian perspective.

But we may have more answers than we think. The one thing we do know is that Mr. Beck is a political animal. He has made a very nice living in talk radio as well as on television opining his political views. He is an unabashedly libertarian thinker, believing that small government is the best government, and that citizens deserve the highest amounts of freedom which they lose if government is too large. Thus, weak government equals strong individual freedom.

This, of course, is a legitimate political philosophy—one which many Americans believe in. Yet, Mr. Beck promotes his ideology with the fiercest possible rhetoric. He once queried about murdering Michael Moore: "I'm wondering if I could kill him myself, or if I would need to hire somebody to do it….I've lost all sense of right and wrong now. I used to be able to say, 'Yeah, I'd kill Michael Moore,' and then I'd see the little [arm]band: What Would Jesus Do? And then I'd realize, 'Oh, you wouldn't kill Michael Moore. Or at least you wouldn't choke him to death.' And you know, well, I'm not sure."{8} His résumé also contains insults of the 9/11 victims' families wanting them to just "shut up,"{9} calling Katrina victims "scumbags,"{10} and probably most infamously, claiming that President Obama had "a deep-seated hatred for white people."{11}

So, what is honor? Is honor standing up for what you believe using the most hateful kinds of attacks to do it? Would Mr. Beck be able to call President Obama honorable? Or liberal filmmaker Michael Moore? Or oppositional political pundit Keith Olbermann? Does honor only reside on the political right? It seems that honor for Mr. Beck is not something that transcends politics, but something that is very political, quite partisan. I may be wrong; Mr. Beck's message about honor may be apolitical. But if that is the case, the messenger was

flawed. The self-styled prophet who showed up that day at the Lincoln Memorial is a man whose public persona is so filled with partisan, vitriolic attacks upon people who disagree with him politically that it seems clear: "restoring honor" means ascribing to certain political views—his personal views. Yet honor is not about a political view; it transcends politics and should never be abused by being politicized. Unfortunately, Mr. Beck's message did just that.

Contrast that with the other folks who have been discussing, and yes, preaching about honor for thousands of years. Their message is pure; it is not hogtied to a political context, not confined to the simple, temporal issues of politics—rather, this message is concerned with the eternal. They are the countless preachers, teachers, pastors, church leaders who for centuries have been passing down a true message about honor. It is the Christian concept of honor. Yes, there is honor outside the Christian domain, but never does honor shine more than when it is a part of a Christian worldview. Our faith defines honor and it defines to whom honor is due.

Paul does just that in his letter to Galatia when he writes: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."{12} The very next verse ties what honor is to whom honor is due: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires" [emphasis mine].{13} This is honor in its brightest colors. Living a life of worship to the true God—a life that is characterized by love and its eight subsequent characteristics: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I believe that all of this can be summed up nicely by Paul's words in the same letter when he writes, "if we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit."{14} Whether it is morality or honor, we must realize that this kind of walking can only be done when we are living by the Spirit. The moral, ethical

system that Mr. Beck is looking for is located in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is not found by looking inside oneself; it is about looking at God's rich Word. If you choose the first option, you will remain confused in sin; if you practice the second, you will accurately know what morality and honor is. You will indeed have the moral and spiritual power to live it out. That is the only hope for our country, as it is the only hope for any person or country. Maybe I am wrong about Mr. Beck—but until the Beckian revolution can tell us what honor is and what God we are supposed to turn toward—we should, from afar, keep shouting: "What the heck, Mr. Beck?"

Notes

1. Glenn Beck at the "Restoring Honor" Rally in Washington D.C., August 28, 2010. Video accessed at GlennBeck.com.
2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*.
3. Glenn Beck at the "Restoring Honor" Rally in Washington D.C., August 28, 2010. Video accessed at GlennBeck.com.
4. Ibid.
5. Jerry Falwell, Jr., President of Liberty University. *Christianity Today*, September 2010.
6. Lou Engle, Founder of "The Call." *Christianity Today*, September 2010.
7. Ibid.
8. The Glenn Beck Program, May 17, 2005.
9. The Glenn Beck Program, September 9, 2005.
10. Ibid.
11. Fox and Friends, Fox News Television, July 28, 2009.
12. Galatians 5:22–23.
13. Galatians 5:24.
14. Galatians 5:25.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

The Darkness of Twilight: A Christian Perspective

Sue Bohlin examines the message of Twilight from a biblically informed, Christian perspective, helping Christians understand how they should approach such popular fare.

Demonic Origin of *Twilight*?

The *Twilight* saga is a publishing and movie phenomenon that sweeps tween and teen girls (and a whole lot of other people) off their feet with an obsessive kind of following. Millions of Christian girls are huge fans of this series about love between a teenage girl and her vampire boyfriend-then-husband. But it's not just a love story made exciting by the danger of vampires' blood-lust. I believe the *Twilight* saga, all four books and their corresponding movies, is spiritually dangerous. I believe there is a demonic origin to the series, and the occult themes that permeate the books are a dangerous open door to Satan and his hordes of unholy angels.

I was stunned to learn about how the idea for *Twilight* came to the author, Stephenie Meyer. She tells this story:

> I woke up . . . from a very vivid dream. In my dream, two people were having an intense conversation in a meadow in the woods. One of these people was just your average girl. The other person was fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire. They were discussing the difficulties inherent in the facts that A) they were falling in love with each other while B) the vampire was particularly attracted to the scent of her blood, and was having a difficult time restraining himself from killing her immediately.{1}



"Fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire"? Consider what vampires are, in the vampire genre that arose in the 1800s: demon-possessed, undead, former human beings who suck blood from their victims to sustain themselves. A vampire is evil. And the vampire who came to Stephenie Meyer in a dream is not only supernaturally beautiful and sparkly, but when she awoke she was deeply in love with this being who virtually moved into her head, creating conversations for months that she typed out until *Twilight* was written.

When I heard this part of the story, it gave me chills. Scripture tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, which is a perfect description of the Edward Cullen character.

Then I learned that "Edward" came to Meyer in a second dream that frightened her. She said, "I had this dream that Edward actually showed up and told me that I got it all wrong and like he exists and everything but he couldn't live off animals . . . and I kind of got the sense he was going to kill me. It was really terrifying and bizarrely different from every other time I've thought about his character."{2}

I suggest that if the *Twilight* saga is demonic in origin, it is dangerous, to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Vampires, Blood, and Salvation

I explained above how the *Twilight* saga was birthed in an unusually vivid dream that I believe was demonic in origin. So it's really no surprise that the books are permeated with the occult.

The *Twilight* vampires all have various kinds of powers that don't come from God. They are supernaturally fast, supernaturally strong, able to read others' minds and control others' feelings. Some can tell the future, others can see things at great distances. These aspects of the occult are an important part of what makes *Twilight* so successful.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God strongly warns us not to have anything to do with the occult, which is part of the "domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13) where demons reign. He calls occult practices "detestable," which tells us that He is passionate about protecting us. One of the reasons *Twilight* is so dangerous is that readers can long for these kinds of supernatural but ungodly powers; if not in real life, then in their imagination. And this is a doorway to the demonic, which is all about gaining power from a source other than God. *Twilight* glorifies the occult, the very thing God calls detestable (Deut. 18:9). This is reason enough for Christ-followers to stay away from it!

For a growing number of people, vampirism is not make-believe. In a special report on the Fox News Channel, Sean Hannity reported, "there's actually a vampire subculture that exists in the United States right now and spreads into almost every community in this country."{3} Joseph Laylock, the author of a book on modern vampires, explains that there are three general categories of people who "believe they have an 'energy deficit,' and need to feed on blood or energy to maintain their wellbeing."{4} Some drink real blood, others feed only on "energy" they draw from other humans, and "hybrids" who are a bit of both.{5}

My Probe colleague Todd Kappelman, a philosopher and literature critic, observed that Stephenie Meyer took unwarranted liberties with the genre. Vampires are evil, and you can't just turn them "good" by writing them that way.

> You can't have vampires strolling around in the daytime. You can't make evil good and good evil, putting light for darkness and darkness for light [Is. 5:20]. It's a law of physics: light always dispels the darkness. You can't have the bad guys win. There is no system in the world where evil is rewarded with "happily ever after"; it violates our sensibilities too much. Either the extremely ignorant or the extremely childish would fall for it. And apart from the moral aspect, it's doing violence to the genre—like putting Darth Vader in a Jane Austen novel.{6}

Writer Michael O'Brien comments,

> In the *Twilight* series we have a cultural work that converts a traditional archetype of evil into a morally neutral one. Vampires are no longer the "un-dead," no longer possessed by demons. There are "good" vampires and "bad" vampires, and because the good vampire is incredibly handsome and possesses all the other qualities of an adolescent girl's idealized dreamboat, everything is forgivable.{7}

Closely connected to the occult is drinking blood, which is a focus of the vampire literary genre; vampires feed on the blood of humans. In *Twilight*, we are supposed to embrace the "good" vampires who have learned to feed on the blood of animals, calling themselves vegetarians (which is an insult to all vegetarians!). Interestingly, in Lev. 19:26 God connected the occult with ingesting blood 3200 years before the vampire genre was invented.

God understands the importance of blood; in both the Old and New Testaments, He forbids eating or drinking it. Not only did this separate His followers from the surrounding pagan

cultures, but it also separated out the importance of blood because it atones for sin. In the Old Testament, animals were sacrificed as a picture of how the spotless Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, would pour out His sacred blood to pay for our sins. God doesn't want people to focus on the wrong blood![8]

Twilight is also spiritually dangerous in the way it presents salvation. When Daddy Vampire Carlisle turns Edward into a vampire, it is described as saving him.[9] He ended a 17-year-old boy's physical life and turned him into an undead, stone cold superbeing, which Edward describes as a "new birth."[10] Vampire Alice describes the process as the venom spreading through the body, healing it, changing it, until the heart stops and the conversion is finished.[11] Poison heals, and changes, and converts to lifelessness? Healing poison? This is spiritually dangerous thinking. Isaiah warns us (5:20), "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

This upside-down, inside-out way of thinking is rooted in Stephenie Meyer's strong Mormon beliefs. *Twilight*'s cover photo of a woman's hands offering an apple is an intentional reference to the way Mormonism reinvents the Genesis story of the Fall. LDS (Latter Day Saints) doctrine makes the Fall a necessary step, called a "fall up."[12] At the beginning of the book you will find, alone on a page, Genesis 2: 17–"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Stephenie Meyer explains:

> The apple on the cover of *Twilight* represents "forbidden fruit." I used the scripture from Genesis (located just after the table of contents) because I loved the phrase "the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil." Isn't this exactly

> what Bella ends up with? A working knowledge of what good is, and what evil is. . . . In the end, I love the beautiful simplicity of the picture. To me it says: choice.{13}

Echoing Satan's deception of Eve with the temptation to become like God on her own terms, the heroine Bella eventually becomes a god-like vampire, glorying in her perfection, her beauty, her infallibility. She transcends her detested humanity and becomes a goddess. This is basic Mormon doctrine, not surprising since the author is a Mormon.{14}

One of the messages of *Twilight* is that there is a way to have immortal life, eternal life, apart from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ; that there is a way to live forever without dealing with the obstacle of our sin problem by confessing that we are sinners and we need the forgiveness and grace of a loving Savior.

This is a spiritually dangerous series.

A Love Story on Steroids: Emotional Dependency

Why are girls of all ages, but especially tweens and teens, so passionately and obsessively in love with Edward, the vampire in *Twilight*?

Edward is very different from the vast majority of young men today. He is chivalrous, sensitive, self-sacrificing and honorable. He wants the best for Bella, his teenage girlfriend and eventual wife. He is able to keep his impulses in check, which is a good thing since he lusts after her scent and wants to kill her so he can drain her blood. No wonder girls and women declare they're in love with Edward Cullen!

But one of the troubling aspects of the *Twilight* saga is Edward and Bella's unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship. Yet millions of female readers can't stop thinking about this

“love story on steroids,” which means it is shaping their hopes and expectations for their own relationships. That’s scary.

The best way to describe their relationship is emotional dependency. This is when you have to have a constant connection to another person in order for you to be okay. Emotional dependency is characterized by a desperate neediness. You put all your relational eggs in one basket, engaging in an intense one-on-one relationship that renders other relationships unnecessary. In fact, there is often a resentment of not only the people that used to be your friends, but you resent anyone in the other person’s world who could pull their attention and devotion away from you.

When things are going well, it’s like emotional crack cocaine. The intensity is addictive and exhilarating. When things aren’t going well, it’s an absolute nightmare. Emotionally dependent relationships strap people into an emotional roller coaster full of drama, manipulation, and a constant need for reassurance from the other.

When Edward leaves Bella for a time, she becomes an emotional zombie. The book *New Moon* is full of descriptions of the pain of the hole in her chest because when he left, he took her heart with him. She had withdrawn from all her friends to make Edward into her whole world, so she had no support network in place when he left. All of her emotional eggs were in his basket. Many readers see this as highly romantic rather than breathtakingly dysfunctional.

One or both people are looking to another to meet their basic needs for love and security, instead of to God. So emotional dependency is a form of relational idolatry. People put their loved one or the relationship on a pedestal and worship them or it as a false god. When you look to another person to give you worth and make you feel loved and valued, they become inordinately essential. When we worship the creature rather

than the Creator as in Romans 1, what results is a desperate neediness that puts us and keeps us at the mercy of the one we worship. They have a lot of power over us, which is one reason why God wants to protect us from idolatry.

Twilight is like an emotional dependency how-to manual. At one point, Bella's mother tells her, "The way you move—you orient yourself around him without even thinking about it. When he moves, even a little bit, you adjust your position at the same time—like magnets . . . or gravity. You're like a . . . satellite, or something."{15} The power of story, especially this story, is that it can set up readers to mistake emotional dependency and relational idolatry for what a love story should look and feel like.

On the Credenda blog, Douglas Wilson makes a powerful case for *Twilight* also serving as a manual for how to become an abused girlfriend and then an abused wife. Edward's moods are mercurial and unpredictable, and Bella just goes along with it, making excuses and justifying his actions.{16}

Twilight is spiritually dangerous because of its demonic origin and its occult themes, both of which God commands us to stay away from. But it's emotionally dangerous too.

Emotional Pornography

The *Twilight* series is touted as pro-abstinence and pro-chastity because the main characters don't "go all the way" before they get married. A lot of parents hear that and give a green light for their daughters to read the books and see the movies. But the *Twilight* books are a lust-filled series, so embedded with writing intended to arouse the emotions, that it is legitimately considered emotional pornography.

Marcia Montenegro writes,

> Much has been made of the alleged message of *Twilight*, that

> it is one of abstinence and shows control over desire. In truth, Edward is controlling himself because he does not want to kill Bella; her life is truly in danger from a ferocious vampire attack from the one who loves her. Aside from that, a vibrant sensuality of attraction lies just beneath the surface. A TIME reporter who interviewed Meyer wrote, "It's never quite clear whether Edward wants to sleep with Bella or rip her throat out or both, but he wants something, and he wants it bad, and you feel it all the more because he never gets it. That's the power of the *Twilight* books: they're squeaky, geeky clean on the surface, but right below it, they are absolutely, deliciously filthy."{17}

The struggle with self-control is saturated with eroticism and lust. It's so sensual that teenage boys and young men will read it simply for that reason. The protest, "They don't have sex" is lame; the relationship is extremely sensual. One very insightful blogger writes,

> To claim that the *Twilight* saga is based on the virtue of chastity is like calling the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition pro-chastity because the girls are clothed.
>
> Bella gives detailed first person accounts of her "make out" encounters with Edward—everything from trying to unbutton clothing, to how loud her breathing is and how this or that feels . . . these detailed first person descriptions are designed to arouse young girls—like a gateway drug to full blown romance novels or vampire lore. How can books in which the author has written detailed first person descriptions of actions leading to arousal help readers to be chaste? The words on the page defy chastity. Anyone who claims that the books promote chastity has to explain how a young girl can read detailed first-person descriptions of "making out" as a tool to preserving her innocence.{18}

The sensuality of *Twilight* is not lost on even the youngest

readers and movie-goers. Robert Pattinson, the actor who plays Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* movies, was asked in a *Rolling Stone* interview, "Is it weird to have girls that are so young have this incredibly sexualized thing around you?" He answered, "It's weird that you get 8-year-old girls coming up to you saying, 'Can you just bite me? I want you to bite me.' It is really strange how young the girls are, considering the book is based on the virtues of chastity, but I think it has the opposite effect on its readers though. [Laughs]"{19}

God's word says, "Flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). Without a strong discernment filter in place, and without a strong determination to guard one's heart (Prov. 4:23), it will be very hard to obey that protective command when reading the *Twilight* books or watching the movies.

Recently at a youth discipleship camp, I asked the young men how they felt about *Twilight*. They booed. Real men don't stand a chance to be *enough* compared to the too-good-to-be-true Edward Cullen. When girls use the emotional porn of romance novels or movies, they are setting up impossible expectations that have no hope of being fulfilled by limited, fallible, all-too-human beings. It's a cruel twist on the way men can sabotage their relationships with real women by their use of internet porn. Is there much of a difference between using sexual porn or emotional porn? In both cases, fantasy creates unrealistic expectations that reality cannot satisfy.

Apart from the problem of unrealistic expectations, it is unhealthy to make such an intense heart connection with a fictional character. Some people choose getting lost in reading and re-reading the books over having connections with real human beings in community. One lady told me that she called a friend about going out to a movie, but her friend begged off: "Oh, I'm going to stay in with Edward tonight." A nail technician had one 60-year-old client who confided, "Don't tell my husband, but I'm in love with Edward."

In the first *Twilight* book, Edward sweeps Bella off her feet with the intoxicating description of his intense desire for her and why she desires him: "I'm the world's most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in. My voice, my face, even my smell. . . I'm designed to kill. . . I've wanted to kill you. I've never wanted a human's blood so much in my life. . . Your scent, it's like a drug to me. You're like my own personal brand of heroin."{20}

I believe there is a spirit of seduction in the *Twilight* saga. Something supernatural draws millions of readers to fantasize about being desired, pursued and falling in love with a character that I believe has a deeply demonic component. It's dangerous on several levels.

The (Rotten) Fruit of *Twilight*

Twilight is one of the most successful series ever published. Readers don't just read the books; many of them re-read them, multiple times. In order to be discerning, we need to examine the fruit of this series to see its effect on readers. I believe that there is a spiritual reality of evil behind *Twilight* that explains three kinds of fruit I see.

First is the fruit of obsession. Literally millions of fans can't stop thinking and talking about the books, the characters, the minutia of the *Twilight* world. There is an addictive element of the series for many people. Addiction is bondage; why willingly submit yourself to bondage?

Some girls talk about their daily reading and study of "The Book," and they're talking about the whole saga—not the Bible.{21} With social networking and digital media, fans have access to an ever-growing community of other *Twilight*-obsessed people, which allows them to connect with their God-given desire to be part of something bigger than themselves. But the transcendence of connecting to the *Twilight* world is so much

less than God intends for us to experience!

The second fruit is the spiritual warfare reported by Christians, especially those who disobeyed God's leading to get rid of the books—night sweats, hearing voices and other unusual noises, being gripped by a spirit of fear, loss of intimacy with God. Some thoughtful people have reported what one woman called "a stronghold I didn't want and couldn't seem to overcome. I became uncontrollably obsessed over this make-believe world. And fell into a pit of manic-depressive-suicidal state."{22}

One Christian teenager, clearly under conviction, wrote this comment on a blog:

> As a 15-year-old, reading those books was a . . . strange experience for me.
>
> I didn't think they were too bad or morally lacking until I heard my old high-school chaplain [a thirty-something woman, I think. Never dared to ask] praise them. And then something inside me clicked, because it struck me as wrong that a Godly woman would find this series good. . . .
>
> Another problem with *Twilight* that I had is that it drives girls to think of love before they are emotionally and mentally ready for the idea. It pretty much skews their ideas of love up. I know it's done that to me. Because what this series has done is stick Edward Cullen in one category (i.e. "pure perfection") and "everyone else" lumped together in another as a portrayal of pure "ocker"ness. I am now not sure to what percentage *gentlemanliness* exists in a normal, TANNED boy. So it's not really fair to guys, or girls, because of skewed expectations. . . .
>
> Otherwise, I enjoyed the *Twilight* series, but I don't feel that I should have, so I'm going to pray about that one.{23}

The third fruit is a spirit of divisiveness. Some Christians

are inordinately defensive about *Twilight*, choosing the books over relationships with other believers who take a negative view of the series. One Christian speaker who shared her deep concerns over *Twilight* at a church conference was verbally attacked at the break by supposedly mature women. Some of them still refuse to speak to her.

Of course, we hear the refrain, "Oh come on. It's just a book. It's just fiction." But all forms of entertainment are a wrapper for values and a message, and we need to be aware of what it is. Remember, what we take into our imaginations is really like food for our souls. If something has poison in it, it shouldn't be eaten. Saying "It's just a book, who cares what it is as long as we're reading," is equivalent to saying, "If you can put it in your mouth and swallow it, it must be food." What are you feeding your soul? Goodness or poison?

Readers resonate with the important themes of life and literature: romantic love, family love and loyalty, beauty, sacrifice, fear, danger, overcoming, conflict, resolution. But these themes are laced with spiritual deception: "You, too, can be like God." You hear that *Twilight* is a love story on steroids, and people—especially young girls—are drawn to God's design for a woman to be cherished, protected, and provided for. They are drawn to the way Bella responds to Edward with love, respect and submission, which is also God's design. So it is especially devious that the elements that resonate with our God-given desires for love are poisoned as occult principles are interwoven with the story.{24}

One teenage girl made this comment on a blog: "I never thought of [the books] as arousing or erotic in any way. Like many other girls, I found myself falling for Edward as I delved into the story. Before I knew it, my heart was beating faster during the mushier scenes." Like millions of others, she is unable to discern the line between emotional and sexual arousal. Swooning because you are in love with a fictional character, when you long for this character when you're not

reading the book, means you've been taken captive (Col. 2:8). And God does not want us in bondage to anything except Him!

Twilight is dangerous because it subtly stretches us into accommodating that which God calls sin. People don't leap from embracing good to embracing evil in one giant step; it's a series of small, incremental allowances. Readers easily accept unthinkingly an unmarried couple spending every single night together when the Word says to avoid every form of evil and to flee temptation, not lie there cuddling with it! Readers are led to accept as heroes and friends vampires who murder human beings to drink their blood.

Commentator Michael O'Brien makes a stunning analysis of *Twilight*:

> In the *Twilight* series, vampirism is not identified as the root cause of all the carnage; instead the evil is attributed to the *way* a person lives out his vampirism. Though Bella is at first shocked by the truth about the family's old ways (murder, dismemberment, sucking the blood from victims), she is nevertheless overwhelmed by her "feelings" for Edward, and her yearning to believe that he is truly capable of noble self-sacrifice. So much so that her natural feminine instinct for submission to the masculine suitor increases to the degree that she desires to offer her life to her conqueror. She trusts that he will not kill her; she wants him to drink her essence and infect her. This will give her a magnificent unending romance and an historical role in creating with her lover a new kind of human being. They will have superhuman powers. They will be *moral* vampires—and they will be *immortal.*
>
> Here, then, is the embedded spiritual narrative (probably invisible to the author and her audience alike): You shall be as gods. You will overcome death on your own terms. You will be master over death. Good and evil are not necessarily what Western civilization has, until now, called good and

> evil. *You* will define the meaning of symbols and morals and human identity. And all of this is subsumed in the ultimate message: The image and likeness of God in you can be the image and likeness of a god whose characteristics are satanic, as long as you are a "basically good person."
>
> In this way, coasting on a tsunami of intoxicating visuals and emotions, the image of supernatural evil is transformed into an image of supernatural good.{25}

Twilight is not dangerous because people will literally want to become vampires. *Twilight* is dangerous because, through the powerful medium of storytelling, dangerous ideas and messages go straight to the heart like a poisoned-tipped arrow, without being passed through a biblical filter. Beware the darkness of *Twilight*.

Addendum: Should I Let My Children/Grandchildren/Students Read *Twilight*?

I have read all four books in the *Twilight* series. I strongly recommend against reading these books.

But I also understand that it's a cultural phenomenon, and lots of people are going to read the books no matter what anyone says. So allow me to attempt to redeem the cultural pressure inherent in these books' popularity by suggesting how you can help the tender, untaught minds of your loved ones to think critically as they read.

If your teen or tween expresses a desire to read the books, give an explanation for why you think they shouldn't. ("Just say no" just doesn't work with most kids. They need to know why, and that's fair.) I would suggest something along the lines of, "I love you and I want what is best for you, and that means protecting you from dangers you are not aware of. This series is steeped in the occult and in demonic influence,

both of which God strongly warns us against in His word. There is also a powerful emotional draw into unhealthy fantasy which could sabotage future relationships with real people. There are spiritual dangers and emotional dangers that I want to protect you from."

If you receive pushback, then you might respond by saying, "If you want to read the books, then I'll read them with you. We'll talk about them, a chapter or a scene at a time. The choice is yours." This gives your loved one the power of choice, but you remain involved in the process. What would be especially powerful for young girls is for Dad to read the books as well and talk to his daughter(s) about what's in them. Men would have a very different take on the emotional lust in these books, as well as a sensitivity to the unfair expectations of a lover that would be formed in their daughters' hearts. Girls need their father's input in this adolescent time of emotional and sexual confusion, and *Twilight* is almost guaranteed to add to the confusion.

Talk about the books' content frankly and openly; if they are embarrassed for you to know what they are reading, their well-placed shame will make a powerful statement about the wisdom of reading this kind of book. Make sure they know that you are completely aware of what they are taking into their minds and spirits, just as you would want to know if they were taking drugs into their bodies. Reframe the book's content in terms of what the Bible says, and ask questions: Does this agree with the Bible's explanation of life and reality? Does this help you draw near to God, or does it make you want to avoid Him and His Word? How do the descriptions of Bella's, Edward's and Jacob's thoughts and feelings make you think about the people in your real life? Are you tempted to look down your nose at the "mere humans" you do life with?

Even though this work is fiction, it is still making statements about reality. What is it saying about life on earth? About God? About sin? About love? About the soul? About

heaven and hell? About biblical truth?

How does the book compare to what the Bible says? For example, look together at the Ephesians 5 passage about marriage and why it is important. (Marriage is an earthbound illustration of the union of Christ and the church.) And what Jesus said about the nature of the marriage relationship in heaven in Matthew 22:30. (The marriage relationship is ended by death.) How does it compare with the ideas about marriage in *Twilight*? Look for the ways Bella relates to her father. Is it according to God's command to children to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20)? Does she get away with her deceptions and repeated acts of disobedience? (Yes.) Is this consistent with the Bible's teaching on the consequences of sin (Gal. 6:7)?

Talk about the gold standard for what God wants us to expose ourselves to: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). Look for what is true and not true, noble and not noble, right and not right, etc. The books are not without statements and ideas that are true, noble, and right; the problem is that they are mixed in with even more compelling ideas that are false, ignoble, wrong, impure, unlovely, and shameful.

"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 7:23). The things we think about by filling our minds and hearts will shape us. What are you filling your mind and heart with? Longing for the perfect lover that no human being can fulfill? Discontent with being human and wishing you could have supernatural powers? Will that serve you well?

Lia Carlile, a teacher at a Christian school in Washington State, offered these excellent critical thinking questions to help students think through *Twilight* or any other cultural phenomenon. Lia cites many Scriptures in her notes, which I highly recommend.{26}

Question 1 – Me and God

- *How is this thing building my relationship with the Lord?*

- *How does my interest in this area compare with my time invested in my relationship with the Lord?*

Question 2 – Me and the People Around Me

- *Is this creating conflict in my family or with others?*

- *Does it offend other believers or is it confusing them in their faith?*

- *What am I saying to my non-Christian friends or what example am I setting for others?*

Question 3 – The Bible

- *What does the Bible have to say about this? Who does it glorify—God or Satan? Jesus or the things of the World?*

Question 4 – Me and *Twilight* (or whatever applies)

- *How is this affecting what I think about; my attitude, heart, and mind?*

- *Does it help me to do what is right according to God? Or, does it promote things of the world?*

- *Does it distract me from the Lord and my relationships with others? Serving, praying, reading Bible, ministry, etc.*

- *Does it cause me to say, think, or do things that are contrary to Jesus and his life?*

Notes

1. www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight.html

2. www.Twilightgear.net/Twilight-news-and-gossip/stephenie-meyer-reveals-details-of-new-dream-about-edward-cullen/2493, March 29, 2009.

3. Steve Wohlberg, "The Menace Behind *Twilight*," *SCP Journal*: Vol. 32:2-33:3 (2009), p. 27.

4. Ibid., 28.

5. Ibid.

6. Personal conversation with the author, May 2010.

7. Michael O'Brien, "Twilight of the West,"www.studiobrien.com/writings_on_fantasy/Twilight-of-the-west.html

8. I am indebted to Steve Wohlberg's article cited above for this insight.

9. Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005), 288.

10. Meyer, *Twilight*, 342.

11. Meyer, *Twilight*, 414.

12. http://www.truthinlovetomormons.com/basic_mormon_doctrine/doctrine/theo/fall.htm

13. www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight_faq.html

14. "As God now is, man can become. As man now is, God once was." James E. Talmadge, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976).

See also Oscar W. McConkie, Jr., *God and Man* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Corporation of the Presiding Bishop, 1963), 5. Cited in Russ Wise, "Mormon Beliefs About the Bible and Salvation," www.probe.org/mormon-beliefs-about-bible-salvation.

15. Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2007), 68.

16. Douglas Wilson has written a series of insightful reviews of *Twilight* at Credenda: www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=author&id=64&Itemid=127

17. Lev Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer: A New JK Rowling?" *TIME* Magazine, April 24, 2008, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html). Cited in Marcia Montenegro, "A Girl and Her Vampire: The Frenzy Over Twilight." www.christiananswersforthenewage.org/Articles_Twilight.html

18. spesunica.wordpress.com/

19. bit.ly/9m4Nje

20. Meyer, *Twilight*, 268.

21. www.radicalparenting.com/2009/05/14/the-new-bible-Twilight-mini-article/

22. spesunica.wordpress.com/is-Twilight-anti-christian-yes/

23. bit.ly/aSKdWl/

24. I am indebted to the wisdom shown in the comment by Jae Stellari on spesunica.wordpress.com.

25. O'Brien, "Twilight of the West."

26. www.ericbarger.com/twilight.carlile.pdf

© 2010 Probe Ministries

Avatar and the Longing for Eden

Dr. Patrick Zukeran examines the blockbuster movie from a biblical perspective, identifying reasons for why this movie resonated with so many people despite its false worldview of pantheism.

Introduction



James Cameron's hit movie *Avatar* ranks as a ground-breaking epoch. This movie features new technology and special effects that make it landmark fantasy film, joining the elite group of movies which include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings.*

What accounts for the tremendous popularity of this movie? I believe the cutting edge technology, combined with the strong environmental message, stirred the hearts of people throughout the world. I believe the movie also awakened a deep longing in all of us for Eden.

In *Avatar* we are projected into the twenty-second century and enter the alien world of Pandora, a spectacular tropical paradise inhabited by the ten foot tall, blue skinned Na'vi. Through innovative 3-D technology, we are immersed into experiencing this stunning paradise in vivid detail as never before encountered in cinema.

CNN news reported that after the movie, numerous fans

experienced depression and even suicidal thoughts as they reflected on the present state of our planet and longed for the paradise of Pandora. Several websites included hundreds of entries from individuals who expressed their sense of loss and regret. In Pandora many saw a paradise that was lost, or one that can never be attained on this earth.

An individual identified as Ivar Hill wrote on one of the Avatar forum sites: “When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed . . . gray. It was like my whole life, everything I’ve done and worked for, lost its meaning,” Hill wrote on the forum. “It just seems so . . . meaningless. I still don’t really see any reason to keep . . . doing things at all. I live in a dying world.”{1}

What accounts for this deep longing that was aroused by this movie? I believe within all people there is a longing for Eden, a pristine paradise where mankind and nature live in perfect harmony. Where does this longing of Eden derive from?

In Genesis God created a perfect world in which sin was not present. Man and woman lived in a beautiful and perfect world free from the effects and decay of sin. After the fall, this paradise was lost and the effects of sin began to tear apart God’s good creation. Since then, man has sought to recover what was lost. However, can we ever regain what was lost? How should we view our environment now in this fallen world? Should we resign ourselves to living in a dying world or is there a message of hope? Can we attain Eden or is it forever lost?

In this article I will discuss the pantheist and biblical environmental message and the future hope of Eden restored.

Paradise Lost

In the movie *Avatar*, we are projected into the twenty-second century and arrive on the planet Pandora, a beautiful tropical paradise of glimmering trees and psychedelic colored flowers. There are crystal rivers and breathtaking floating mountains in the clouds. Here the Na'vi live in harmony with the animals and nature.

What made *Avatar* special was that through cutting edge 3-D technology, we could encounter this world in a deeper and richer way. The movie awakened in many the longing for a paradise. I believe this longing is rooted in the Genesis account of creation. Man had a paradise but it was lost through a great tragedy. What was Eden and what was lost in the beginning?

In Genesis 1, God creates the universe out of nothing. The length of time or age of the universe is not the issue in this article. Whichever position you may hold on the age of the earth, we should all agree that the Genesis account explains how the sovereign God brings order out of the chaos and creates a masterpiece. He sets the stars and galaxies in place. He produces plant life and vegetation. He then creates animal life on land and in the oceans. The pinnacle of creation is man and woman whom He creates in His image. At the end of chapter one, God reflects upon His creation and states that " . . . it was very good."

In chapter 2:8-9 the text reads, "Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." The text reveals that Eden was a beautiful and lush paradise which was untarnished by sin or its effects. Man lived in harmony with nature and the animals in garden.

The text also states that the trees of Eden were pleasing to

the eye and good for food. Eden was a place of wonder and tremendous beauty. What was most significant is that man lived in a perfect fellowship with his companion, woman, and they both lived in a perfect relationship with their creator.

In Genesis 3, the greatest tragedy in history takes place. Through man's disobedience, sin enters into the created order. From Genesis 3 on, we witness the effects of sin infiltrate God's good creation. Sin disrupts the harmony in all aspects of God's creation. The perfect relationship between God and man is disrupted. The perfect relationship between man and woman is broken and now they live in distrust of one another. The harmony between man and the created order also comes to an end. The power of sin and death have taken its toll on creation but will these forces ever be defeated? Will the curse of sin ever be ended?

Stewardship Over the Earth

The appeal of the hit movie *Avatar* was not only its technology but its strong environmentalist message. In the story, the blue skinned Na'vi live in perfect harmony with their environment. This harmony is made possible when the Na'vi become one with Eywa, the "all mother." Eywa is not a personal being but the impersonal force of nature made up of all things. Eywa is ever present in all things and all things are a part of Eywa. At death, the life energy in all things returns to Eywa. Her energy is concentrated in a large sacred tree located in the middle of the forest. The Na'vi attain enlightenment when they attach their ponytails to one of her vines. The Na'vi also achieve oneness with the animals as well when they attach their pony tails to similar features on the creatures they seek to domesticate.

Avatar presents the worldview of pantheism, and the environmentalist message is wrapped up in this worldview. In pantheistic religions, "salvation" and restoration comes when

man attains oneness with the universe. This oneness is achieved through meditation and the altering of one's consciousness. Harmony with the environment and healing to mankind will come when mankind attains oneness with Mother Earth. Many have responded to the pantheistic religions such as the New Age movement because of their environmentalist message. Today, there is a heightened awareness and attention being paid to our environment. Pantheists care for the environment because they view man and nature as one, therefore man is of equal value to the animals and the plants. In pantheism, man worships nature or Mother Earth. Nature is valuable because all the universe and mankind are one in essence.

Does the Christian worldview present an environmentalist message? It certainly does, but very few are aware of or hear the Christian environmentalist message. At a time when so much attention is on the environment, it is unfortunate that the Christian message is not being promoted effectively. The Bible teaches a great deal about the relationship between man and the environment.

Unlike pantheism, the Bible teaches that God created the universe but is independent of it and not dependent on it. He rules and sustains the universe. God created man alone in his image and delegated to man stewardship over the earth. Man is to guard and care for God's creation. Having dominion over the earth does not give us the freedom to misuse the earth's resources or be careless in managing the environment.

We are not to exploit the earth as the humans portrayed in *Avatar* sought to, nor are we to worship the earth as the Na'vi worshipped their "all mother." Instead, the Bible teaches that we rule over the earth, but as wise stewards who exercise care and guardianship over what God has created. The Bible does indeed offer the best environmentalist message.

Paradise Restored

Can paradise be restored? In the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi lived in a tropical paradise on the planet Pandora. Many who saw the movie were awed by the beauty of the planet Pandora but disgusted when they reflected on the state of our planet today. On an Avatar blog site Ivar Hill wrote, "One can say my depression was twofold: I was depressed because I really wanted to live in Pandora, which seemed like such a perfect place, but I was also depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth. I so much wanted to escape reality."{2}

The pantheists' hope is reflected in *Avatar*. Pantheist religions like the New Age teach that when enough of mankind is enlightened, the forces of the universe will respond and restore paradise on earth. In Genesis 1 and 2, man once lived in paradise in Eden, but this was lost in Genesis 3. Will paradise ever be restored or have we lost Eden forever?

The Bible teaches that we all look forward to that day when creation will be restored. In Romans 8:18-22 Paul states,

> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

In this passage Paul exhorts Christians to patiently endure the suffering they presently face for there is a glorious future awaiting the believer. One day not only the Christian, but creation also will be transformed and delivered from the present state which is in subjection to decay as a result of sin. At this time all creation experiences frustration and

incompleteness as we await this coming transformation.{3}

The Bible promises that paradise will be restored—not by the work of man or an enlightened mind, but through the return of the King of Creation. When Christ returns, He will defeat evil and then Revelation 21:1 promises that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, for the old earth which was under the curse of sin is done away.

The message of hope presented by the Bible is not limited to an individual hope of one's eternal salvation. It is a message of hope for all mankind and for all of creation.

Until Creation is Restored

The new 3-D experience of the pristine paradise of Pandora and the strong environmentalist message of the movie Avatar, stirred the hearts of many people to appreciate and preserve the natural beauty that we have on earth. Avatar wrapped its environmentalist message in the worldview of pantheism. The solution to the environmental problem is enlightenment to true reality. Man is one with all of nature, thus lowering the value of man, making him equal to the plants and animals. When enough people attain enlightenment, there is hope that restoration will come to our planet.

The Bible teaches that one day the world will be transformed and paradise will one day be restored when the king of creation returns. Until that day comes, what are Christians called to do in regards to the environment?

As mentioned previously, man was given dominion over the earth. We are to use the resources of the earth to improve our lives in our struggle against the curse of sin and death. However, we are stewards of God's creation and we are commanded to exercise great care over the earth. Throughout the Bible, God commands believers to care for the land. Here are a few examples.

In Leviticus 25, God commands His people to sow the fields for six years but in the seventh year, they must not sow but to give the land rest. In Deuteronomy 22:1-12, God commands His people to care for the animals, both domesticated and the wild animals that live in the land. Therefore, if anyone should have a strong environmentalist message, it should be the Christian.

The Christian must address the environmental problem. The problem is rooted in human sinfulness. This sinfulness manifests itself in two primary ways, greed and haste. Christians must stand against the exploitation, wasteful destruction, and abuse of land by companies seeking maximum profits with no regard for their surroundings. Francis Schaeffer rightfully stated that the Christian community must "refuse men the right to ravish the land, just as we refuse them the right to ravish our women."{4}

Few churches and schools preach or teach on the Christian view of the environment. This message must be taught once again in our churches and schools. Christians must also practice sound ecological principles such as recycling, using cleaner energy sources, and the conservation of energy. Christians should also be involved in environmental causes that seek to preserve the beauty of the land and promote responsible mining and use of our natural resources.

Although nature is affected by the fall, we must be involved in the healing process from the fall. Christians must restore the relationship between God and man which is done through the ministry of the gospel. We must also seek to restore the proper view of our role in caring for the environment.

Notes

1. Jo Piazza, "Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues" CNN Entertainment, www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index

.html, accessed 11 Jan. 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 513.
4. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1970), 82.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

Facing Facebook: Social Networking and Worldview

Byron Barlowe digs beneath the surface of the various social networking phenomena like Facebook and Twitter.

It seems like everybody is on *Facebook*! At 350 million members worldwide and growing exponentially, this social networking community would be the third largest country in the world! One hundred million Americans,{1} including 86 percent of American women, now have a profile on at least one social networking site, nearly double from a year earlier.{2}

"…Twitter has radically changed the face of online communication. This year alone [2009], usage has grown by 900 percent…."{3} But kids prefer the ever-popular YouTube video-sharing site. Two-thirds of Internet users around the world visit blogs and social networks, making it more popular than email. And older users are flocking to social sites. So this is about you and your friends, too, mom and dad!

So what is *social networking*? At a social site like Facebook.com, when you find another member, you click a button

that says “Add as Friend.” Now, you and that person have a connection on the Web site that others can see. They are a member of your network, and you are a member of theirs. Also, you can see who your friends know, and who your friends’ friends know. You’re no longer a stranger, so you can contact them more easily. As the website Common Craft explains, “This solves a real-world problem because your network has hidden opportunities. Social networking sites make these connections between people visible.”{4}

“These applications have given users an entirely new dimension of interactivity on the Web, as people are able to share videos, photos, links, ideas, and information at a heretofore unseen speed and with uncanny ease that enhances the Web experience of every Internet user.”{5}

But some push back. “It’s just trivia, a waste of time,” they say. Silly games and self-centered platforms where folks can parade their lives. There is some truth in that charge. But it’s important to understand such a powerful, widespread medium and seek to redeem it.

One commentator said, “Time bends when I open Facebook: it’s as if I’m simultaneously a journalist/wife/mother in Berkeley and the goofy girl I left behind in Minneapolis.”{6} But the accessibility and immediacy is not always good or profound. Be ready to have your life history, long-lost friends and personal ghosts pop up in unexpected ways through social networking. In the same way, the future could be at stake with each post and link you put up: Whatever goes online, stays online. One’s reputation will be marked for years to come by her online life for good or ill.

However, the meteoric rise of social networking has occurred for good reason. In Facebook, Xanga or MySpace, research shows that we *extend* current relationships online. It can all be very trivial or fairly meaningful, depending on how it’s used. In this way, social networking is not unlike meeting up at a

coffee shop or at the back fence. Younger generations are known to be more conversational than older ones. In my middle-aged circles, many seem to have written it off prematurely.

We'll explore some worldview implications of social networking through the insightful book *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith.*{7} Using a grid introduced by media professor and technology prophet Marshall McLuhan that traces media's culture-shaping influence, we'll briefly assess how this technology enhances our capabilities, retrieves lost ones, makes obsolete other things, and reverses into unintended consequences. In other words, we'll ask and partially answer basic questions like: What will this blossoming media change? What am I giving up if I use it? How can I control it for myself and my kids? Will it end up controlling me—or has it already?

"Hanging out" online, for all its similarities to in-person conversation **is** fundamentally different. And those differences are sure to change not only our socializing, but our worldviews—maybe even our faith.

"The Medium is the Message"

McLuhan famously stated that "the medium is the message," meaning that the content of media is overshadowed in its influence by the influence of the very medium (technology) through which it is communicated. Hipps believes media has been a fundamental change agent of culture, even faith. We'll explain and explore a bit McLuhan's grid of change and how it applies to social networking.

In discussing social networking sites like Facebook and their effect on people, it's helpful to look back at other media to see their culture-shaping influence. Note that I didn't write "the content of other media," but rather, "other media." For example, before Gutenberg's movable-type printing press, faith

was passed down orally and through imagery like stained glass windows and church icons. The concrete stories from the synoptic Gospels ruled the day; the Apostle Paul's deep, abstract letters were virtually ignored. Then, print technology unleashed a new way to think and even to believe—an emphasis on *individual faith* accessed through *critical reason*. This print phenomenon *retrieved* the abstract, doctrinally rich letters of Paul from the dusty shelves of history. This, in turn, ignited the Reformation, writes Shane Hipps. One result: the church transformed from a highly communal body into a mass of individuals and put religious mystery largely out of touch.

Hipps writes that, *in its extremes*, the influence of print reduced the gospel to incomplete abstract propositions and made many Christians arrogant about what we can know with certainty. [This is what some in the emerging church conversation react against, but we cannot pursue that topic here.]

Perhaps less controversially, Hipps shares the maxim that any media—social networking included—changes its users in a similar way print technology did. Marshall McLuhan famously stated that "the medium *is* the message." He meant that the medium itself does more to affect people than even the content that it carries.

The adage, "We become what we behold"{8} seems to hold forth in social science and neurology, as well. Brain scientists are finding that exposure to and use of media of any kind changes the brain's wiring, so there's more at stake here than just bad content or how we use our time.{9}

While writing this transcript, I had to fight to get alone and maintain focus. I consciously avoided the distraction and fragmentation my mind easily undergoes while *Twittering* (or "tweeting") and *Facebooking* (see, social networking even spawns new verbs, like "friending"!). The social networking experience is like walking around at a party filled with

friends in various conversations: lots of brief comments, retorts and jokes. My need for individual, abstract thinking was at risk at the "Facebook party." (Ironically, I was in the abstract writing mode regarding a very different sort of medium: non-abstract, simplistic, disjointed, visually based, online digital "communities.")

New media may bring us to and keep us more "in the moment" and in touch with real people, all good things. But so-called *virtual communities* may create very unreal relationships. Not to mention a loss of in-depth thinking, conversation and fellowship to build current relationships. Two years ago a commentator wrote regarding American youth on social networks, "The rules of relationship are…being rewritten, and…are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.{10} However, things may be changing, at least among Australian youth, where "they want more connections with their friends that aren't digital, that are tangible. They're starting to question the authenticity of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. They want technology to assist rather than dominate the way they communicate."{11}

David Watson is an entrepreneurial "pastor" exploring the legitimacy of online shepherding. He believes it's a general relationship issue not confined to online participation: "Any time you are not fully present with whatever community you happen to be with—whether online or offline—you can hurt people…. We just notice the online stuff more because it is new and people tend to spend lots of time with new things before they figure out how everything balances out."{12}

So what's the big deal? Most Facebook, MySpace or Orkut members aren't changing their entire view of reality, truth, God or mankind based on interactions with online friends. No, it's not the obvious pitfall of cults or wild philosophies that people usually deal with day to day anyway. Under-the-radar ways of being and communicating can incrementally change who we are. It's the subtle way that our *view* of life changes

that concerns me most. Are moment-by-moment Tweets dumbing us down in various ways? Have we come to expect meaning in 140-character bits? Twitter shows the flow of life in tiny chunks some call a lifestream. But are those snippets, especially when seen intermittently, meaningful?

Media swirls around us and we become immune to the white noise. But McLuhan was a master at stepping back to study what is going on with media to see how to cooperate with and thus handle the vortex. Churches and ministries love to jump on new technologies to share the old, old story—but before diving in headlong, we need to remember McLuhan's warning: we become like the media that we use.

Social Networking Redeems and Resurrects Good Things

What is the technology of social networking enhancing and bringing back from disuse? What are some redeeming characteristics of this new phenomenon? They include renewed friendships and acquaintances, helpful networking made easy, ministry possibilities and relational fun. Mainly, it enhances real-world relational communities.

McLuhan stated that new media always "enhances and retrieves" good things. For example, we long for the days of chatting with neighbors on the front porch. Social networking restores this dynamic to a surprising degree. One writer reflected, "It could be . . . that Facebook marks a return to the time when people remained embedded in their communities for life, with connections that ran deep. . . ."{13}

Reconnections frequently happen too. One former neighbor messaged me on Facebook, "Are you the Byron that lived beside us 25 years ago?" She was thrilled to know I was still walking with Christ and asked for prayer for her drug-addicted brother. She'd located me out of the blue a quarter century

later and seven states away through the wonder of social networking.

Social networks have great potential for ministry. Yet Shane Hipps' primary message for Christ-followers in *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* is that simply broadcasting the gospel message in an old style into this new medium will not be effective. The medium itself changes the way people perceive *and* receive the message.

Social media are *not* a kind of broadcast medium, but rather a *conversation medium*. Online social ministry pioneer Paul Watson tells incredible stories of fruit borne online. He shepherds groups who stay current on Twitter and Facebook. One online community of Christ-followers raised funds over the Internet for a non-Christian tarot-card-reader to take her premature son to a hospital half a state away for medical treatment. A blogger, a practicing witch, warned her visitors not to harass Watson after he privately initiated prayer regarding her health issue.

Campus Crusade for Christ uses Facebook for campus ministry. They recently stated that 66 million students are active Facebook users. That's three times the population of Australia! In an outreach training video produced by Campus Crusade, the camera pans an empty library and the question *"Where are the students?"* flashes across the screen. Then it shows a computer lab chock-full of kids, most logged into Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or YouTube. Another banner reads, "The average college student spends three hours on Facebook each visit." Going where the people hang out is wise! But Campus Crusade knows you can't just post *The Four Spiritual Laws* tract on Facebook and be effective. Long-term engagement with a live person or social community is required to make a positive difference.

If relationships are healthy, they *can* be helped online. "A study published in 2007 in The Journal of Computer-Mediated

Communication suggested that hanging onto old friends via Facebook may alleviate feelings of isolation for students whose transition to campus life had proved rocky."{14}

A Christian apologist wrote regarding social networking and the Internet, "We should note well Thomas Morris's 'Double Power Principle'—'To the extent that something has power for good, it has corresponding power for ill.'"{15}Next, we'll discuss the downsides of social media.

Social Networking Makes Obsolete and Obscures Other Good Things

What is the technology of social networking making obsolete, obscuring or obliterating? Taken to extremes, how might it make its users regress rather than progress? What other troublesome dynamics does it create?

Studies show that people tend to continue and expand their real-life relationships online. But people can be fooled. Nothing replaces face-to-face contact. Hipps writes in *Flickering Pixels* about mutual friends of his who live very nearby but who had not seen each other in months. They communicate online daily, yet their relationship has deteriorated. Hipps commented on so-called *virtual communities*: "It's virtual—but it ain't community. . . . Meaningful, missional Christian community" should consist of several essential things:

1. ***Shared history or experiences*** *that help establish a sense of identity and belonging*

2. ***Permanence*** *or relational staying power—"it's how you get shared history." Members of a transient community never get shared memories.*

3. ***Proximity****—"you have to be with one another in order to create the kind of meaningful connections to have community."*

> *4. **Shared imagination of the future** —a sense of "We're all going in the same direction." Hipps says this is the one thing you get automatically with online social networking—people flock together who already share a future vision. But it's not community just because of that. If online "friends" are not able to meet together over time and share life experiences as they work toward a common vision, then it's just an online affinity group.*

"Electronic culture disembodies and separates [yet]. . . . most of us. . . believe our technology is bringing us closer."{16} The Bible exhorts believers not to forsake group gatherings.{17} Why? Because corporate worship and teaching, personal shepherding, mutual encouragement, even non-verbal signals are irreplaceable. We can take our cues on being physically present from the incarnation: God's most powerful gospel medium was the Man, Christ Jesus.

Technology always makes something obsolete. It seems probable that too much online use compromises our ability to concentrate and think abstractly and form a coherent argument. Given a steady diet of fragmented imagery and spontaneous status updates, a new generation is losing the ability to think through issues from a coherent framework. "Through YouTubing, Facebooking, MySpacing . . . people take in vast amounts of visual information. But do they always comprehend the meaning of what they see. . . ? They are easily manipulated as students, consumers and citizens."{18}

Another endangered characteristic is deep conversation. Within the space of 140 character status updates and Tweets, all hope of profound, meaningful dialogue seems lost. Instead, images rule. ". . . Image culture is eroding and undermining imaginative creativity" which is "extremely important to our functioning as healthy, creative people."{19}

Social networking can steal your time. A friend recently told

me that his wife's use of Facebook is hindering their family time and communications. This is likely a widespread problem. "2.6 billion minutes are used daily by the global population on Facebook."{20} If you already struggle with addictive tendencies or wasting time, think twice about launching into this absorbing lifestyle change. Get help for your online habit if it's destructive as you would for any addiction.

Balancing Social Networking, Keeping a Christian Worldview in Mind

What are some more guiding principles for using social networking (and the Internet)? How do users balance their lives and retain a Christian worldview in a social networking age?

Remember Narcissus, the mythological character who was so enamored by his own image in the pool of water that it eventually became his undoing? Most people focus on his self-absorption. But the point Hipps makes isn't how stuck on himself Narcissus was, but rather his inability to perceive and control the low-tech medium of a reflective pool. He seemed oblivious to what was going on, as people tend to be regarding the media maelstrom that surrounds us. "When we fail to perceive that the things we create are extensions of ourselves, the created things take on god-like characteristics and we become their servants."{21} Media intake stealthily becomes idolatry.

The legendary Perseus, on the other hand, realized the power of a medium that if put under his control, could destroy the deadly effects of staring into the eyes of Medusa. Using a shield as a mirror, he deflected her deadly gaze and turned it into a chance to kill her. Even ancient Greek pagans understood the difference between these two fictional characters: Narcissus became enamored and then ensnared by a medium; Perseus, on the other hand, stepped back, realized the

mirror was just an extension of his eyes, and so was able to master that medium. This echoes biblical commands to guard our heart and mind and not be conformed to the world.{22}

Remember, we're not really talking about what content goes *on* your Facebook page. Rather, it's the hidden power of the Internet and social networking that concerns us. Count the cost each time you use it.

One good use of the immediacy of Twitter is intercession. I got stuck in Delhi, India on a mission trip and *tweeted* a prayer request through my cell phone that in turn updated my Facebook page. Instant access and 140-character-long brevity can be good.

More advice from this worldview watcher trying to redeem social networking: read widely. Read deeply. Keep those parts of your mind and soul in shape while navigating the quick communications of social networking.

Guard your time like a night watchman. Guard your heart and mind like a jealous lover. Set "no unclean thing" before your eyes{23} and if others try to, take down that post or don't follow them. Also, guard against not only physical but "psychological nudity."{24}

Mix into everyday wall posts some meaningful thoughts, worthy articles and video clips that cause people to think. Become a fan at the Facebook or MySpace pages of organizations like Probe. Link to articles at Probe.org, Bible.org, or some good cause to help fund.

Balance is key: not everything is worthy of immediate broadcast or attention. "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him."{25} Trivia can be genuine but tiresome.

Reach out: post a Scripture, share your faith.

As Shane Hipps said, “The most important medium, the most powerful medium is you, you are God’s chosen medium to incarnate the hands and feet of God in an aching world. . . . The more we understand [the hidden power of media], the more we can understand how to use our media rather than be used by them.”{26}

Notes

1. Facebook Reaches 100 Million Monthly Active Users in the United States,” InsideFacebook.com, accessed December 14, 2009, posted December 7, 2009. http://bit.ly/bQXlRV
2. Aliza Freud, “SheSpeaks Second Annual Media Study,” http://bit.ly/dD7xsG
3. “Teens Use Sites to Expand Offline Relationships, Avoid Twitter,” The Future of Children Blog, posted Aug. 4, 2009, accessed Feb. 4, 2010, http://bit.ly/9X3J9C
4. Social Networking in Plain English, Common Craft, www.commoncraft.com/transcript-social-networking-plain-english.
5. “Equip,” Christian Research Institute, Vol. 22, Issue 5, Sept/Oct 2009, p. 1.
6. “The Way We Live Now: Growing Up on Facebook,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Peggy Orenstein, March 10, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/magazine/15wwln-lede-t.html.
7. Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Kindle Reader version.
8. Hipps quotes McLuhan on this adage often. See this video clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnXoPQHPnlw&feature=related
9. Doidge, Norman, M.D., The Brain That Changes Itself (Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2007)
10. Stephanie Bennett, quoted by Byron Barlowe, “MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking,” https://www.probe.org/myspace-parents-and-kids-wisely-navigating-online-social-networking/#text20
11. “Everything old is new again for Internet-weary young adults,” News.com.au, posted July 14, 2009, accessed September

23, 09, http://bit.ly/bNQNBY.
12. David Watson, Reaching the Online Generation blog, posted July 16, 2009, http://bit.ly/96N04E.
13. Orenstein, *The New York Times Magazine*.
14. Ibid.
15. Hank Hannegraf, Equip, CRI, p. 3.
16. Hipps, Locations 981-987, 2015.
17. Hebrews 4:12
18. Weeks, Linton, "The Eye Generation Prefers Not to Read All About It: Students in Film Class a Microcosm of a Visually Oriented Culture," *Washington Post*, posted 7-6-07, accessed 9-27-09, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/05/AR2007070502055.html
19. Hipps, Locations 718-725, 2015.
20. Hank Hannegraf, Equip, CRI, p. 2.
21. Shane Hipps, Flickering Pixels, Kindle Version, Locations 269-75, 2015.
22. Proverbs 4:23, Acts 20:31, Romans 12: 1-2.
23. Psalm 101:3.
24. Byron Barlowe, "MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking," https://www.probe.org/myspace-parents-and-kids-wisely-navigating-online-social-networking/#hanging.htm
25. Proverbs 29:20, NIV.
26. YouTube video of interview by Rob Bell at pastor's conference posted and accessed at www.internetevangelismday.com/christian-communication-blogs.php on 9-27-09. YouTube text: Rob Bell interviews Shane Hipps about his new book Flickering Pixels during the 2009 National Pastors Convention in San Diego, CA. March 09, 2009.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

2012: Is The Sky Really Falling?

Probe's former intern Dave Sterrett and Steve Lee of Prestonwood Christian Academy (Plano TX) planned to publish a book about the 2012 buzz. After interviewing a number of Ph.D.s who are experts in Maya studies, astronomy, astrobiology, theology and New Testament, they concluded that the hype is "much ado about nothing."

The ancient Mesoamerican culture of the Maya had a meticulous calendar that abruptly ends on December 21, 2012. Many so-called scholars and believers think that either the world is going to end, as the recently released movie *2012* depicts, or humanity will move into a new age of enlightenment that will elevate us into a higher state of being or consciousness. The prediction of this "end of the world" or "end of the age" phenomenon has morphed into a multifaceted issue ranging from Maya studies, astronomy, New Age, to biblical studies.

The Hype:

Lawrence E. Joseph, author of *Apocalypse 2012: An Investigation Into Civilization's End*, has stated that "The year 2012 will be pivotal, perhaps catastrophic, possibly revelatory, to a degree unmatched in human history." Many people have been concerned about the connection between the Maya prediction and astronomy. Some New Age advocates believe the 2012 event will bring about a higher level of consciousness. Sol Luckman, author of *Conscious Healing*, has written, "Are you aware that a Shift in human consciousness is occurring even as you read these words that employs celestial triggers such as supernovas and Earth's alignment with Galactic Center in the years leading up to 2012 to trigger the evolution of our species?"

The Reality:

We interviewed Dr. Robert Sitler, Director of the Latin American Studies program at Stetson University.

> *Steve and Dave: What is the Maya long calendar and what is its significance?*
>
> *Dr. Sitler: The Long Count Calendar is multifaceted, It is primarily a way of establishing a specific day in lineal time, much like our own yearly calendar, The calendar surely had powerful symbolic dimensions but our current understanding of them is limited.*
>
> *S&D: Does the Maya Calendar give any indication of an apocalypse, end of the world, or a great transformation that could be cataclysmic?*
>
> *Dr. Sitler: The calendar itself does not indicate such things, It tells you what day it is, There is only one reference to the Dec. 21, 2012 date in the ancient hieroglyphs, Monument 6 from Tortuguero, and unfortunately, the text says very little.*
>
> *S&D: Why do you think many websites and books claim that Maya predicted the end of the earth?*
>
> *Dr. Sitler: Very few of these websites have substantive ties to the Maya world, and as a result, they are often extremely misinformed.*
>
> *S&D: Do you see any detriment or loss to Maya studies because of the 2012 predictions?*
>
> *Dr. Sitler: It's great for Maya studies in terms of drawing attention to the Maya themselves and hopefully more serious scholarship. The 2012 hype bases itself on extremes of misinformation.{1}*

The Hype:

While Maya scholars such as Dr. Sitler see no legitimacy to the end of the world scenarios coming from Maya culture or calendars, many doomsday predictions have turned to astronomical studies to confirm their prophecies of a coming apocalypse. Theories such as a pole shift are propounded as likely events that will bring earth to destruction. Patrick Geryl, co-author of *The Orion Prophecy: Will the World be Destroyed in 2012? Prophecies from the Maya and the Old Egyptians*, predicts that "In 2012 the next polar reversal will take place on earth. This means that the North Pole will be changed into the South Pole. Scientifically this can only be explained by the fact that the earth will start rotating in the opposite direction, together with a huge disaster of unknown proportions. In my books I reveal the immense cataclysm that is going to torment the earth in the near future."{2}

The Reality:

Again, we went to the experts in the fields of astronomy and astrophysics. The claim that doomsday advocates are making turns out to be a bait and switch. David Morrison, the senior scientist at the NASA Astrobiology Institute, clarifies, "A reversal in the rotation of Earth is impossible. It has never happened and never will."{3}

In reality there is one thing that can be predicted with great accuracy according to Dr. Gene Byrd, professor of astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Alabama. He told us, "The only thing that is predictable is that some folks will be predicting the end of the world a few years from now and making new predictions of the end after this date [i.e., 2012] has passed."

Notes

1. Interview on July 17, 2009.

2. Patrick Geryl, “Pole Shift & Pole Reversal in 2012” survive2012.com/index.php/geryl-pole-shift.html, accessed August 29, 2009.

3. astrobiology.nasa.gov/ask-an-astrobiologist/intro/nibiru-and-doomsday-2012-questions-and-answers, accessed September 6, 2009.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

See Also:
2012: Doomsday All Over Again

Faith-based Film Faith Like Potatoes

It’s movie night with Mom; so I’m at the video store browsing the new releases and I come across *Faith Like Potatoes*. I’m not sure I would have picked it up if I were looking just for myself, but I saw the words, “Based on an inspiring true story,” and thought, Mom will like this. She did. But much to my surprise, so did I. Oh, I thought I’d enjoy it tolerably, but I didn’t expect to be, yes, actually inspired.

Faith Like Potatoes centers around a young, white African farmer who is forced to move his family to South Africa and start all over. As he does, he must overcome drought, tension in his family and his own deep-seated anger, as well as the tension and violence between white and black South African farmers. It’s a story of pain, truth, beauty, and redemption.

Nonetheless, even though I was able to read all this on the

back cover, I wasn't expecting to be very impressed. To be entirely truthful, I've come to expect a fair amount of cheesy dialogue and frankly, poor artistry (cinematography, plot nuance, imagery, symbolism, subtlety, etc.) from Christian film, with a few notable exceptions. To be fair, I like those "weird artsy films" that make you think, and I understand that isn't everyone's cup of tea. But that also means I've seen my fair share of high-quality, low-budget film. And while I think we still have lots of ground to recover as we relearn how to engage the arts, I'm also aware that we have and are making progress.

Faith Like Potatoes from Affirm Films, is evidence of this progress. The producers, editors, directors, and composers are highly experienced, award-winning experts both within and without faith-based film-making, and it shows. Often, faith-based films come across as unrealistic because they lack engaging, believable characters and dialogue and they over-simplify characters and their issues. These movies often provide one-size-fits-all answers and end up resolving problems and characters so pristinely that there are no complications, no loose ends, no lingering struggles or doubts, no ambiguities, no room for interpretation… no depth. Real people in real circumstances aren't like that. People are complicated; what's right and what's wrong is sometimes unclear; accepting Jesus doesn't make everything rosy and happily-ever-after all at once.

As Christians we ought to know better than anyone that complete resolution will never take place until Christ returns at long last to bring Justice and Peace to a hurting world. If we want our productions to speak to real people in real ways, we need to get real. We need to stop avoiding the wonderfully complex simplicities of the paradoxical life God designed (the last is first, die to live, etc.). *Potatoes'* Regardt Van Den Bergh understands this. The well-known South African actor and director writes this of his work (of which *The Visual Bible's*

Matthew is his best known): "I, as a director, love telling true stories. To tell stories of how God impacts the lives of people is the best, but with it comes an awesome responsibility: the responsibility of being truthful and also representing the way of God in the person's life accurately." (www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/faithlikepotatoes/about/production-bios.html).

Overall, I think the film is successful in doing this. It doesn't shy away from the tragedy that happens in Buchan's life. (*Faith Like Potatoes* is based on the life of Angus Buchan, and is also the title of Buchan's autobiography.) I did, however, feel that the aftermath of the death of his nephew was covered a bit speedily. I understand there are limits on film as a medium, and time is almost always a factor—*Faith Like Potatoes* is almost an even two hours long as it is—however, I still feel it was an important part of the whole of this man's experience that shouldn't have been rushed. We only glimpse rather than truly encounter the shame and guilt and anger Buchan struggled with. The film brings us face-to-face with Buchan's immense sadness, but his other, darker feelings and struggles are only hinted at. Nonetheless, this dose of realism which portrays both the triumphs and tragedies of life is a good step in the right direction.

You've heard the old adage: It's not what you say, but how you say it that matters most. We all have experience with this. We know that how we say what we're saying affects how people receive it, and often whether they receive it at all. This being the case, we can see how bad art is an impediment to a good message; we begin to understand how it is nearly impossible to communicate a good message through a movie that just isn't good. This is why I want to highlight Regardt's *Faith Like Potatoes*. It's good art. Not exceedingly great perhaps, but good. This film has quality acting, dialogue, cinematography—all believable, which allows its message to be believable too. And that is inspiring.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

Frasier Worldview Check

I got hoodwinked tonight.

I was watching re-runs of the old NBC television show Frasier—based on the minor character from *Cheers*, Frasier Crane—when I found myself agreeing with Frasier's words describing Judaism. It wasn't until later that night, as I passed those words through my worldview filter, that I came to realize something was wrong about Frasier's comments. Frasier (at least the writers) was not giving Judaism a fair shake.

In the episode, Frasier's son Freddy is celebrating his thirteenth birthday. Freddy's mother is Jewish, which makes Freddy Jewish as well. The thirteenth birthday is a special one for Jewish children; it is the point in their lives when they become adults. To commemorate their passage into adulthood, a celebration is in order: a *bar–mitzvah*.

Frasier's friend Roz knows that he is not Jewish, and asks him what that's like for him. His response is what hoodwinked me:

> *Roz: Is it weird to have a son brought up in a different religion from yours?*
>
> *Frasier: Not at all, Roz. It's a faith that espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. All values which I cherish.*

What tricked me was not what Frasier said but what he didn't say. Jewish culture definitely espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. I completely agree. Several friends

who have helped me through dark times in my life have been Jewish. I feel a special affinity for the Jews as a Christian because I read the Hebrew Bible as a part of my own Christian Bible– essentially the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

But Frasier made no mention of the Hebrew God, who is the central figure of their faith. He is their Creator, Sustainer, Protector, and Savior. The Hebrew Bible is the story of this God and his special, chosen people. How then could Frasier have completely ignored Him?

To be fair, Frasier was merely speaking about the points of Judaism with which he agrees. We all understand that intuitively as soon as we read the dialogue. However, if these aspects of love, compassion, duty, education, and art are the only elements of Judaism that resonate with him, then I suspect he does not truly identify with the heart of the Hebrew faith because he has not mentioned anything about their God.

Granted, this represents one comment in one episode. However, there may be something else going on beneath Frasier's words. When asked about the apparent conflict between Frasier's religious beliefs and his son's, in some sense he responds by saying that they are not so different. But he only says they are not so different in those five specific aspects: love, compassion, duty, education, and art. If he's saying that's all there is to Judaism, then I would have to disagree.

Philosophers have a fancy name for what Frasier did: *reductionism*. He has reduced Judaism down to smaller constituent parts which, when reassembled, do not recreate the whole. It seems unfair to equate Judaism solely with these five aspects because many other causes, beliefs, or even organizations can be characterized as espousing precisely the same principles, but not be Jewish in the least.

For example, Ancient Greece had a culture that espoused all such principles, yet it had no particular religious affiliation at all. Culturally we could also consider Italy during the Renaissance, or even the Chinese under the Tang dynasty.

Yet, cultures like these that valued love, compassion, duty, education, and art are in other ways very dissimilar to Judaism. Similarities do not equate to identity. That is, just because a religion or culture shares certain attributes does not mean that they are the same in essence. However, *reductionism* falsely makes them seem equivalent just because they share some traits.

So there must be more to Judaism than just these five aspects mentioned by Frasier.

Frasier's religious synopsis may not seem like a very big deal because it is, after all, only one statement. But this one sentence is not what bothers me. I run across people making claims like these all the time in conversation, in magazines, news, practically everywhere. It's sloppy thinking, really. I just want to encourage us not to slip into *reductionism* ourselves—and further, to be even more careful about what we take in, keeping that worldview filter on at all times.

© 2009 Probe Ministries