

Banned Books Week

Oct. 1, 2010

We have come to the end of Banned Books Week, where avid readers everywhere band together to protest the idea of banning books (or more accurately, band together to celebrate books they love that have been banned by having readings and themed parties). Books are banned and protested for a sundry of reasons, reasons we sympathize with and some we certainly do not sympathize with. But even when it comes to books we don't think are appropriate, movements for the outright, absolute banishment of these books from libraries or from Christian society is rarely helpful. Such movements cause division over matters which are disputable and sometimes simply draw more attention to and raise more interest in the book a particular group is trying to get rid of.

Often, books are banned by people who haven't read them and do not understand them; people simply join the banned books bandwagon. And while fight or flight may be more natural, only the act of humbly engaging is constructive. We are called to act in creative and redemptive ways as we pray, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is essential to engage, not merely absorb or avoid, books (and ideas) that scare and/or anger us, books that feel wholly foreign to us. Although—for of a variety of factors, not the least of which because each of us has our own sin-issues particular to our personality and set of experiences—not everyone will be able to engage with everything at the same level. And it's the which and by whom and the how that requires more individual discernment than broad banishings. Even when you cannot personally engage by reading this or that book for whatever reason, abiding an attitude of general engagement as a member of the Body of Christ fosters that humility-infused unity so foundational to our new life.

As we celebrate Banned Books Week here at [Probe](#), we invite you to chew with us on the questions such an acknowledgment brings to the table. We'd love to hear your thoughts, and as always, keep reading.

- *What are some constructive alternatives to banning or burning books? ie. discussion forum, panel discussion (even at the library in question) or for a meeting of the PTA*
- *Should a Christian pause and ask, Am I being retributive to "those liberals" and others who certainly ban Christian or conservative viewpoints? Is that something that promises to be profitable, biblically speaking? Is it a Christlike motive?*
- *While understandably fighting for convictions, could I be guilty of putting my own personal convictions on others inappropriately? How could this be detrimental or even wrong to do with non-believers? With believers? [disputable matters passage, like meat offered to idols]*
- *Would it be more profitable to read and discuss the book in question with my children and even others' kids w/parental permission (perhaps with some blocking of objectionable portions) than to rail against the author, message or library?*
- *Pragmatically speaking, am I simply bringing objectionable materials to light and putting them up on a stage by the attention they are now getting because of my lobbying efforts? Am I offering ammo to those who oppose any censure or social accountability?*
- *Am I giving the Enemy a foothold for bitterness in me or my kids? In onlookers?*

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2010/10/01/banned-books-week/

Privacy 2010

Introduction

Ten years ago, I did a Probe radio program called [“Privacy 2000.”](#)^{1} At the time, American citizens were concerned about some of the new technological advances and government programs that seemed to be threats to their privacy.

So much has happened in the last ten years. Technological developments have provided individuals, companies, and governments with new tools which could be used to violate our privacy. A war on terror has changed our perception of what is or is not appropriate for government to know about its citizens. In fact, I developed a week of radio programs on [“Homeland Security and Privacy.”](#)^{2}

One thing I have noticed is that most Americans seem less concerned about intrusions into their lives. Part of it may be due to a resigned assumption that we have to give up some of our privacy to fight the terrorists. But another significant reason, I believe, is a younger generation that seems completely unconcerned with threats to their privacy. After all, many of them are sharing intimate details of the lives on [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#). Why be concerned if companies, the government, or the general public knows details of their lives when they voluntarily share those details on social networks?

This is not to say that all citizens are unconcerned about privacy violations. Recent debates about a national ID card and the collecting and centralization of medical information for government health care programs illustrate that many people are concerned about privacy. But the percentage of citizens concerned about privacy seems to be decreasing.

Privacy is something that most of us take for granted until we lose it. And often we lose our privacy in incremental steps so we are less aware of our increased exposure. Some events can shock us back to reality. Identity theft or the posting of embarrassing information on the Internet can quickly remind us how much privacy we have lost.

We should also make a distinction between privacy and secrecy. Whenever someone expresses concern over a violation of their privacy, another is sure to ask, "What do you have to hide?" The question confuses privacy with secrecy. You may not have anything to hide, but that doesn't mean that you are willing to have companies collect lots of information about you and then sell it to other companies for a profit. You may not want your future boss to know about a medical procedure that was done twenty years ago. You may not want a telemarketer to have your purchasing history so he can call your mobile phone.

In this article we look at various ways we have lost our privacy. These range from intrusion to deception to profiling to identity theft.

Seven Sins against Privacy: Intrusion

Privacy is a common word but often misunderstood because of its various meanings. We know when we feel that someone has violated our privacy, but we can't always give a definition to it, especially in this age in which new technology allows perpetrators to cross boundaries more easily than in the past.

David Holzman describes three basic meanings for privacy.^{3} They are easy to remember because they all begin with the letter s. The first is seclusion. That is the right to be hidden from the perceptions of others. The second meaning is solitude. This is the right to be left alone. The third meaning is self-determination, which is the right to control information about oneself.

He suggests that privacy violations can be viewed as seven sins ranging from intrusion to deception to profiling to identity theft. Let's look at each one of these sins against privacy.

Sin of Intrusion – The classical form of privacy abuse is intrusion. This “is the uninvited encroachment on a person's physical or virtual space.”[{4}](#) In previous ages, it took the form of voyeurism or peeping. Technology today allows for a much greater intrusion into our lives and is often much more difficult to detect.

In recent years, we have read about how actors, models, and sportscasters have had their privacy violated by people who placed cameras or listening devices in their rooms or on their person and recorded them. But it isn't just the famous that are being recorded. Every day pictures are being taken of us as we walk into banks, into grocery stores, or past ATM machines. We are being recorded on the streets and at traffic lights. It has been estimated that the average person is caught on surveillance cameras three hundred times a day in London.[{5}](#)

And it is not just big brother that is watching and listening to you. Voyeurism technology is available to anyone who wants to purchase it. Stores and Web sites “sell remote listening devices, digital optics, scanners for picking up cell-phone conversations, and even infrared scanners.”[{6}](#)

Radio Frequency Identification Devices (RFID) act like a wireless bar code and is being used more often in stores and other establishments (such as libraries) for inventory control. Geographic Positioning System (GPS) receivers are satellite locating devices that are found in cars, cell phones, and many other devices.

Intrusion violations have been made easier by technology. In the past, someone had to get near to you in order to spy on

you. And that increased the possibility that you would find out that someone is watching you. Now we live in a world where your privacy is being violated, and you are probably not even aware that it is happening.

Seven Sins against Privacy: Latency and Deception

Sin of Latency – Most of the damage to your privacy comes from stored information. The harm is minimized if personal information is not retained. The sin of latency comes from the excessive hoarding of information beyond an agreed-upon time. Most companies do not have a data-aging policy.

It is understandable why companies and the government collect excessive information. First, they need to have enough information so they know they have the right person. There are lots of John Smiths in a particular locality. They need to know you are the particular John Smith they want. In the past, a telephone number was sufficient identification. Now we have more than one phone and change numbers regularly. So our Social Security number and other identifiers are necessary.

A second reason for companies to collect information is so they can more effectively sell their products and services to you. They collect that information from the forms you fill out and even place cookies on your computer in order to catalogue your visits to their Web site.

We might assume that a company would delete your information when you close your account. Most companies merely mark your file as inactive. And many of them sell your information to others. "A consumer record with up-to-date information is worth around \$200 for cell phone information. Social Security information sells for \$60 and a student's university class schedule goes for \$80." [\[7\]](#)

One of the largest collectors of personal data is Google. When you search for items on the Internet, Google collects that information, and that reservoir of information can begin to paint a picture of your interests, opinions, and worldview. And because Google saves that information for a long time, it can do extensive database matching.

Google was involved in a legal battle with the U.S. Department of Justice that subpoenaed their log files. They wanted to use them to make the case that pornography constitutes a substantial part of Internet searching. A judge ruled that Google needed to only turn over a limited set of information with identifying notations stripped off.[\[8\]](#)

Sin of Deception – With so much electronic information available in databases, it is tempting for individuals, companies, and even bureaucrats to use personal information in a way that was not authorized by the person.

Here are some principles that arise from our discussion so far. When a company or governmental agency asks for personal information we should have the right to know three things: what they are going to do with it, how long they will keep it, and whether they will make it available to others. When we fill out a form for a credit card or enter into a contract for a car or house, we reveal lots of information. We may naively assume that they will be the only ones who will see that information. That is not so. Regularly we see stories in the news about companies selling consumer data to third parties. Most of us would be shocked at how much information about us in the hands of people who have never met or done business with.

Seven Sins against Privacy: Profiling and Identity Theft

Sin of Profiling – Past behavior is not always a perfect

predictor of future behavior, but it can be a surprisingly accurate one. That is where profiling comes in. Collecting information about what goods and services someone purchases can enable companies to predict a consumer's future purchases.

Profiling is often used to predict more than that. David Holzman says that he worked with one credit card company that said "it was able to pinpoint when its consumers were having life crises such a mid-life depression by psychographically analyzing their buying patterns."[\[9\]](#)

One of the best known examples of profiling is credit scoring. Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion rely on FICO scores. A high score will help you get a home loan. A low score may result in being denied a home loan and even having to pay higher interest on other forms of credit. Most Americans don't know their credit score (only about two percent), and most do not understand the algorithm used to calculate it.

Profiling is also used to fight terrorism, but have also caught innocent people in their profiling net. For some time my name was on a watch list, and people like columnist Cal Thomas and Senator Ted Kennedy were on a no-fly list.

These mistakes prove an important point: profiling is a guessing game. And sometimes a wrong guess can have a detrimental impact on citizens and consumers.

Sin of Identity Theft – Most of us know what identify theft is because it has happened to someone we know or else we have heard commercials about how to protect ourselves from identity theft. Although this crime did exist in the past, it has exploded on the scene now because of technology and the changing nature of transactions. Personal information is readily accessible on the Internet. And in the electronic marketplace of today, purchases are not made face-to-face. It is easy for someone to assume your identity and leave you with the consequences.

How easy is it? A New York busboy was caught stealing the identities of people on the Forbes 400 list. He used the Internet to do the research and had been successful in stealing the identities of famous people like Steven Spielberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Ted Turner. [{10}](#)

Sometimes all a hacker or thief needs is your Social Security number and your mother's maiden name. Unfortunately it is relatively easy to obtain this information. Universities, banks, and all sorts of institutions use your Social Security number as your identification number. Genealogy files online most likely have your mother's maiden name. Once a thief has that information, he or she is ready to access your financial accounts.

Sometimes we inadvertently give out that information. A phone call from someone pretending to be a bank executive can often elicit confidential information. "Phishing" is a mass e-mail with a message pretending to be a bank or brokerage. People who believe that it is genuine will enter information that the thief can use to drain their bank accounts.

Seven Sins against Privacy: Outing, Lost Dignity

Sin of Outing – Some privacy violations are deliberate and can take place when someone reveals information that another person would like to remain hidden. The term "outing" is usually used to describe a public revelation of a closet homosexual, but we can use the term to describe any information that is published about a person they do not want to be public.

Citizens, politicians, and even corporations have been the targets of Internet messages that have been used to damage their reputation. A number of court cases have attempted to force Web site managers to reveal the identities of those who

are spreading false and libelous information.

Sometimes outing is a good thing. Think of all the potential pedophiles that have been caught because they thought they were chatting online with a potential underage victim. Sting operations by the police have successfully revealed the motives of some who intend to proposition their young victims.

Sin of Lost Dignity – This last concern is more difficult to quantify, but we all realize that when private information is made public, we can lose a part of our dignity. What if all of your medical records were made public? What if every essay you ever wrote in school was available online?

Even public figures (like politicians) believe they should have a zone of privacy. Past and current presidents have refused to publish all of their medical records, school records, and other private information. While we may debate whether public figures should reveal all of this information, we would probably all agree that private citizens should not lose a zone of privacy in their lives.

In this article we have talked about how technology allows us to peer into other people's lives. That is why we need to revisit the subject of ethics as it relates to technology that can violate our privacy. We shouldn't use technology to spy on others or to hurt their reputation. Christians should express their concerns about intrusions into their privacy.

This subject also reminds us that we must live our lives above reproach. Philippians 2:14-15 says "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world." 1 Timothy 3:2 says that an elder must be "above reproach" which is an attribute that should describe all of us. Live a life of integrity and you won't have to be so concerned about what may be made public in

age where we are losing our privacy.

Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, "Privacy 2000," Probe Web site, 2000, www.probe.org/privacy-2000/.
2. Kerby Anderson, "Homeland Security and Privacy," Probe Web site, 2003, www.probe.org/homeland-security-and-privacy/.
3. David Holzman, *Privacy Lost: How Technology is Endangering Your Privacy* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2006), 4.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Ibid., 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Ibid., 13.
9. Ibid., 19.
10. Ibid., 23.

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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 its 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.

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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.

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Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America

Steve Cable looks at the results of the National Study on Youth and Religion and concludes the real need for evangelicals in America is not redirecting a pent-up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, or overcoming an emotional aversion to organized religion, but instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

This article examines the trajectory of Christianity in America by looking at what researchers are learning about "the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults." This last phrase is the subtitle of a recent book by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell which summarizes the results of a groundbreaking study based on the results of the National

Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR).^{1} In 2002/3, Smith and his team surveyed over three thousand teenagers and conducted detailed interviews with over 250 of the survey respondents. These same people were surveyed again in 2005 and again in 2007/8. The 2007/8 survey also included over 230 in-depth interviews. Through this effort, we can gain insight not only into the current beliefs and practices of these young adults but also how those beliefs and practices have changed over the five year transition from teenager to young adult.

Emerging Adults: A New Life Stage

These 18- to 23-year-olds represent the future leaders of our nation and our churches and will be the parents of the children who will lead America into the second half of the twenty-first century. Barring a major change in our culture, their attitudes toward Christianity are a preview of the role of Christianity in America in the near future. Those of us committed to Jesus' Great Commission should recognize the importance of understanding these cultural trends so that we effectively communicate the truth of the gospel to an increasingly confused culture.

Let's begin by highlighting a few aspects of the culture which shape the thinking and actions of these young adults. The first point that Smith and Snell make is that a new life phase has developed in American culture. The experience of young Americans as they age from 18 to 30 is much different today than during most of the twentieth century. Full adulthood "is culturally defined as the end of schooling, a stable career job, financial independence, and new family formation."^{2} Four factors have contributed to making the transition to full adulthood an extended, complex process:

- 1. the dramatic growth in higher education*
- 2. the delay of marriage*
- 3. the expectation of an unstable career*

4. the willingness of parents to extend support well into their children's twenties

Because of these factors, most young adults assume that they will go through an extended period of transition, trying different life experiences, living arrangements, careers, relationships, and viewpoints until they finally are able to stand on their own and settle down. Many of those surveyed are smarting from poor life choices and harmful lifestyles, yet they profess to have “no regrets” and are generally optimistic about their personal future when they finally get to the point they are able to stand on their own. Some researchers refer to this recently created life phase as “emerging adulthood,” covering the period from 18 to 29. Through the rest of this article, we will refer to this age range as *emerging adults*. Keep in mind that the surveys and interviews are limited to the range from 18 to 23 and there will certainly be some difference between 29-year-olds and this lower range.

Although, these emerging adults face a period of significant changes, we will see that for many that profess to be Christians, they have already established a set of beliefs and attitudes that have them on a trajectory moving away from a vital Christian walk with Jesus Christ. To put it in the words of Paul, they have already been “taken captive” by their culture (Col. 2:8).

Emerging Adults: Cultural Themes

Through their interviews and the results of other studies, Smith and his team identified over forty cultural themes that impact the overall religious perspective of emerging adults. A sample of those themes gives a feel for the general cultural milieu shaping the lives of today's emerging adults.

Theme #1: Reality and morality are personal and subjective, not objective.

Most emerging adults cannot even conceive of, much less believe in, the existence of a common shared reality that applies to all people. According to Smith and Snell, "They cannot, for whatever reason, believe in—or sometimes even conceive of—a given, objective truth, fact, reality, or nature of the world that is independent of their subjective self-experience and that in relation to which they and others might learn or be persuaded to change. . . . People are thus trying to communicate with each other in order to simply be able to get along and enjoy life as they see fit. Beyond that, anything truly objectively shared or common or real seems impossible to access." {3} It appears that the perceived inability to know objective truth causes emerging adults to settle for getting along and enjoying life as the highest good they can aspire to. This cultural theme is driving them into the life of vanity Solomon warns us of in Ecclesiastes rather than the life of higher calling Paul knew when he wrote:

One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal

This subjective view of reality is clearly reflected in the conversations of emerging adults. Based on their interviews, the authors report,

The phrase "I feel that" has nearly ubiquitously replaced the phrases "I think that," "I believe that," and "I would argue that"—a shift in language use that express[es] an essentially subjectivistic and emotivistic approach to moral reasoning and rational argument . . . which leads to speech in which claims are not staked, rational arguments are not developed, differences are not engaged, nature is not referenced, and universals are not recognized. Rather, differences in viewpoints and ways of life are mostly acknowledged, respected, and then set aside as incommensurate and off limits for evaluation." {4}

Our young people are growing up into a culture where there is no context for real dialogue about truth and truth's impact on our life choices.

The inability to believe in or search for objective truth stands in contrast to Jesus' claims that He came "to testify to the Truth" (John 18:37) and that He is "the Truth" (John 14:6) and Paul's instruction to Christians to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

Without any concept of an objective standard, morality is determined by one's individual feelings. If you feel good about an action then it is right. If you feel bad about an action it is wrong. Most emerging adults would say, "If something would hurt another person, it is probably bad; if it does not and is not illegal, it's probably fine." {5}

Theme #2: It's up to the individual, but don't expect to change the world.

Most emerging adults have no concept of a common good that would motivate us to put another's interests ahead of our own or to attempt to influence another's behavior for the common good. "The most one should ever do toward influencing another person is to ask him or her to consider what one thinks. Nobody is bound to any course of action by virtue of belonging to a group or because of a common good." {6}

The authors continue:

Again, any notion of the responsibilities of a common humanity, a transcendent call to protect the life and dignity of one's neighbor, or a moral responsibility to seek the common good was almost entirely absent among the respondents. . . . {7}

Most emerging adults in America have extremely modest to no expectations for ways society or the world can be changed for the better. . . . Many are totally disconnected from

politics, and countless others are only marginally aware of what today's pressing political issues might be. . . . The rest of the world will continue to have its good and bad sides. All you can do is live in it, such as it is, and make out the best you can.[{8}](#)

Theme #3: Uncertain about purpose, but consumerism is good stuff.

Most emerging adults are still unsure as to what their purpose in life might be. Is there something greater that they should devote themselves to? Lacking any concept of a common good takes the teeth out God's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39) and to "regard others as more important than yourself, do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4).

Self-sacrifice for others was clearly not a part of their life purpose, but almost all of them are sure that being able to buy the things they want and to live a comfortable affluent lifestyle are key aspects of their purpose. There does not appear to be any tension in their thinking between loving God and loving material things as well. "Not only was there no danger of leading emerging adults into expressing false opposition to materialistic consumerism; interviewers could not, no matter how hard they pushed, get emerging adults to express any serious concerns about any aspect of mass-consumer materialism."[{9}](#) In this cultural environment, Jesus' admonition in Luke 12 is desperately needed:

Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions (Luke 12:15).

Theme #4: Sex is not a moral issue.

Partying, hooking up, having sex, and cohabitating are

generally viewed as an essential aspect of the transition from teen years to adulthood. This cultural theme creates a dissonance with their attitude toward serious practice of religion since they recognize that most religions are not favorable towards partying and sex outside of marriage. Choosing to ignore any religious moral teaching from their teen years, “the vast majority of emerging adults nonetheless believe that cohabiting is a smart if not absolutely necessary experience and phase for moving toward an eventual successful and happy marriage. . . . None of the emerging adults who are enthusiastic about cohabiting as a means to prevent unsuccessful marriages seem aware that nearly all studies consistently show that couples who live together before they marry are more, not less, likely to later divorce than couples who did not live together before their weddings.”[\[10\]](#)

Emerging Adults: Cultural Perspective on Religion

Within these broader cultural themes, Smith and Snell identified a set of prevailing religious cultural themes which create a framework for how many emerging adults view religion. These themes were dominant messages across the 230 interviews and the survey results, but do not reflect the views of all emerging adults.

Feelings towards religion

The general feelings of emerging adults toward religion appear to be driven by their years of diversity training and adherence to religious pluralism. Religion does not seem to be viewed as a controversial topic by emerging adults. They are not averse to talking about religion, but they are not very likely to bring it up for discussion. As the authors discovered,

there are many more important things to think and talk about.

In any case, for most it's just not a big issue, not a problem, nothing to get worked up over. . . . For very many emerging adults, religion is mostly a matter of indifference. Once one has gotten belief in God figured out . . . and . . . feels confident about going to heaven . . . there is really not much more to think about or pay attention to. In this way, religion has a status on the relevance structures or priority lists of most emerging adults that are similar to, say, the oil refinery industry.[{11}](#)

Even though they realize that religions claim to be different and to have the truth, most emerging adults believe that all religions share the same basic principles. Basically, religion is about belief in God and learning to be a good person. One respondent put it this way: "The line of thought that I follow is that it doesn't matter what you practice. Faith is important to everybody, and it does the same thing for everybody, no matter what your religion is." Another said, "I find it really hard to believe that one religion is exactly true. I would say that if anything's right, it would be probably something common in most religions."[{12}](#)

Consequently, even for the faith that you affiliate with it is fine to only select those aspects that feel right to you and mix in aspects from other faiths to find what works for you.

Purpose of religion

All major world religions answer the major questions of life: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What happens when I die? Is there anything I can do during this life which will impact what happens to me after I die? Consequently, religions provide a perspective on how to be in a right relationship with our creator during this life and how to maximize our benefits in the afterlife (or after-lives, for some religions). However, most emerging adults take a more pragmatic view. According to the interviews, "The real point

of religion, ultimately, in the eyes of most emerging adults, is to help people be good, to live good lives.”{13}

In fact, it is not really important if they have true answers to these key questions. As one of the interviewees stated, “What do you mean by religious truth? Because all religions pretty much have a good message that people can follow. I would say that basic premise of the religions, like where they get their message from, is false, but the message itself is good.”{14}

Kids learn right and wrong from church activities. “By the time a kid becomes a teenager or young adult, that person has pretty much learned his or her morals and so can effectively ‘graduate’ and stop attending services at the congregation. What is the point, after all, of staying in school after you have been taught everything it has to teach?”{15}

The results of this research confirm that the “cultural captivity” or “sacred/secular split” (identified by [Nancy Percy](#) as a major challenge for American Christianity) is a dominant factor among emerging adults. Most emerging adults have religious beliefs, but “they do not particularly drive the majority’s priorities, commitments, values, or goals.” One observed, “I don’t think it’s the basis of how I live, it’s just, I guess I’m just learning about my religion and my beliefs. But I still kinda’ retain my own decision or at least a lot of it on situations I’ve had and experiences.”{16}

Perhaps the most chilling quote from Smith and Snell is their conclusion on this theme: “It was clear in many interviews that emerging adults felt entirely comfortable describing various religious beliefs that they affirmed but that appeared to have no connection whatsoever to the living of their lives.”{17}

These insights make it very clear that it is not enough to equip teenagers with a set of basic Christian doctrines that

define a good Christian. We must also get them to understand that these truths relate to the real, everyday world, and that we can trust them to inform and enlighten our daily choices, attitudes, and activities.

Some of the other themes identified by Smith and Snell are listed below:

- *The family's faith is associated with dependence.*
- *Religious congregations are not a place of real belonging.*
- *Friends hardly talk about religion.*
- *Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is still alive and well. (see ["Is This the Last Christian Generation."](#))*
- *What seems right to me" is authoritative.*
- *Take or leave what you want.*
- *Evidence and proof trump "blind faith."*[{18}](#)
- *Mainstream religion is fine, probably.*
- *Religion is a personal choice—not social or institutional.*
- *There is no way to finally know what is true.*

Emerging Adults: Trends in Religious Participation and Belief

What impact does this postmodern cultural milieu have on the religious lives of emerging adults? The survey results provide a lot of insight into that question.

First we find that these emerging adults are much less involved in organized religion and personal religious practice than are older adults. For example, the percentage of emerging adults praying daily is only about two-thirds of the percentage of Baby Boomers who currently are daily pray-ers. Similarly, the percentage of emerging adults who regularly attend worship services is only about half of the percentage of Baby Boomers who currently are regular worship service attendees. It is important to note that when these metrics are

compared against the behavior of Baby Boomers when they were in their twenties, the Baby Boomers had numbers that were almost as low as today's emerging adults. This comparison gives some reason to believe that today's emerging adults will exhibit increased levels of religious involvement as they mature.

However, before banking on that historical trend, we need to remember that these emerging adults will be entering their thirties in a culture very different than the culture of the late 70s and early 80s. During this period, as Smith points out, "the larger popular culture of that era was still oriented around the outlook of ideological modernity." This outlook supported the ideal that if we applied ourselves diligently we could uncover absolute truths on which to base a successful life. Today's emerging adults are immersed in a postmodern culture that "stressed difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason." In this cultural environment there is little reason to be hostile toward organized religion, but there is also little reason to pursue it either.

The effects of this can be seen in two major differences between the religious practices of Baby Boomers during their early twenties and those of today's emerging adults. First, the survey results show that the number of mainline Protestants and Catholic young adults regularly attending church has dropped by almost fifty percent from the 1970s to today. Today, less than fifteen percent of Catholic emerging adults and less than ten percent of mainline Protestants attend religious services on a weekly basis. In contrast, the attendance percentage for evangelical Protestants has actually grown slightly over the same time period. Second, the number of young adults who identify themselves as not religious or as a religious liberal has grown from thirty-seven percent in 1976 to sixty-one percent in 2006; an increase of sixty-five

percent.

The NSYR not only gives us insight into the differences between generations and age groups, it also lets us examine the changes in the practices and thinking of these young people as they moved from teenage high school students into their early twenties. For our purposes, we will look at two primary areas of change: religious affiliation and religious beliefs. At the top level, these surveys show that there is a high degree of continuity in these two areas. That is, the majority of the young adults surveyed have retained the same affiliation and basic beliefs through this five year period. At the same time, there is a large minority that has experienced changes in these areas.

Over one third of the emerging adults surveyed are now affiliated with a different religious group than they were five years ago. On the positive side, twenty-five percent of those who originally identified themselves as Not Religious are now affiliated with a Christian religion (mostly evangelical denominations). However, over the same period, seventeen percent of those who originally identified themselves as Christian now identify themselves as Not Religious. The greatest changes were seen among mainline Protestant denominations where fully one half of the emerging adults changed their affiliations with half of those identifying as Not Religious and most of the rest now affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations.

Lest we mistake these changes for a positive trend, keep in mind that the absolute number of emerging adults converting to Not Religious is five times the number of those converting from Not Religious to a Christian affiliation. In fact, when we analyze the change in religious beliefs and activities as those surveyed moved from teenagers to emerging adults, we find that over forty-one percent of them became less religious over the five year span while only 3.6 percent of them became more religious during that period.

If we define cultural captivity as looking to the culture rather than to Christ and the Bible as truth and our primary guide for living, then the following seven beliefs would give a good indication of someone who is not culturally captive.

Percent of those surveyed who ascribed to a particular religious belief

Belief	U.S.	CP		MP
	2008	2003	2008	2008
My religious faith is very or extremely important in shaping my daily life.	44	70	57	33
Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead.	68		83	59
Only people whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus go to heaven.	43		64	33
Only one religion is true.	29	49	45	22
Morals are not relative; there is a standard.	51		65	50

God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today.	63	79	74	57
Demons or evil spirits exist.	47	66	63	32
Ascribe to seven biblical beliefs above (based on 2008 affiliation).	10		22	10

CP – Conservative Protestant MP – Mainline Protestant

As seen in the last row of the table, nine out of ten emerging adults do not hold to a consistent set of basic biblical teachings. For those affiliated with an evangelical Protestant church the number drops to about eight out of ten, an alarming figure for denominations which stress the authority and accuracy of the Bible. For those affiliated with a mainline Protestant church, the number remains at nine out of ten, consistent with the average for all emerging adults.

Christian Smith and other researchers suggest that one interpretation of this data is that it is a result of the success of liberal Protestantism capturing the culture. The views taken by the majority of emerging adults are more consistent with those espoused by liberal Protestant theologians than by those espoused by conservative theologians. However, this success has the effect of making mainline Protestant churches irrelevant to the younger generations since the church offers the same relativism as the culture.

Emerging Adults: Teenage Factors

Influencing Current Behavior

One topic of interest to evangelicals is what aspects of a teenager's life will most impact their religious beliefs and behaviors as an emerging adult. In his study, Smith analyzed the religious trajectories from the teenage years into emerging adulthood. As these teenagers left home for college and careers, moving out from under the more or less watchful eyes of their parents, how did their religious beliefs and behaviors change? Overall, they found a significant decline in religiousness with the percent of the group that was highly religious dropping from thirty-four percent in 2003 down to twenty-two percent in 2008. Basically, one in three highly religious teenagers is no longer highly religious as an emerging adult.

Smith and his team used statistical analysis techniques, comparing the original teenage survey results with the emerging adult survey results taken five years later, to identify the factors in teenage lives that were associated with significantly higher levels of religiousness during emerging adulthood. The teenage period factors they found consistently very important in producing emerging adults with higher involvement in their religion were:

- *frequent personal prayer and scripture reading*
- *parents who were strongly religious*
- *a high importance placed on their own religious faith*
- *having few religious doubts*
- *having religious experiences (e.g., making a commitment to God, answered prayers, experiencing a miracle)*

Some teenage practices had a surprisingly weak correlation with emerging adult religious involvement. These weaker factors included:

- *level of education*

- *frequency of religious service attendance*
- *frequency of Sunday School attendance*
- *participating in mission trips*
- *attending a religious high school*

Let's explore some of these influencing factors to see what lessons we can glean.

Religiously Strong Parents

First, teenagers who view their parents as strongly committed to their religion are more likely to be highly religious as emerging adults. Even though the teenage years begin the process of developing independence from one's parents, it does not mean that what parents think, do, and say is not important. As Smith points out,

the best empirical evidence shows that . . . when it comes to religion, parents are in fact hugely important . . . By contrast it is well worth noting, the direct religious influence of peers during the teenage years . . . proved to have a significantly weaker and more qualified influence on emerging adult religious outcomes than parents. Parental influences, in short, trump peer influences.[{19}](#)

Note this result is true regardless of whether the emerging adult felt close to their parents during their teen years. These results led Smith to chastise American adults for swallowing the myth that "parents of teenagers are irrelevant." He encourages us not to back away from discussing and promoting our religious beliefs with our children during their teenage years when they are first able to begin asking some of life's basic questions.

Personal Religious Disciplines

Second, the analysis showed that it was not participation in religious events, trips, or peer groups, but rather commitment

to individual religious disciplines that was a strong factor in predicting high religious involvement as an emerging adult. In other words, putting teenagers into a religious setting is not sufficient. However, if they come to the point where they realize the value of personal interaction with God through prayer and Scripture, they are much more likely to continue in that path. One reason for that correlation is that the practice of personal devotion which is *not* directly observed by peers, parents, or youth leaders, indicate a teenager that has placed a high value on the role of God and His truth in their lives. Another reason is that a consistent intake of God's truth helps to confirm the power and validity of the Scriptures as our guide for living. As Jesus told his followers, "If you abide in My Word, you are truly disciples of mine and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

One take-away from this finding: perhaps we should judge the success of our youth groups less on the number of teenagers attending events, trips, and classes and more on the number who are committed to personal spiritual disciplines because they recognize the value they bring. Perhaps it is worth risking the "attendance hit" of having fewer fun times in order to teach them the importance of "longing for the pure milk of the Word" (1 Peter 2:2).

College vs. Culture

One somewhat surprising result dealt with the impact of college attendance on religious faith and practice. Prior research on Baby Boomers has shown that higher education had an undermining effect on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults in these preceding generations. Many of us Baby Boomers discovered that the social network of our high school years which was generally supportive of religious belief and involvement was in stark contrast to our college campus where those beliefs were often viewed as backward and inappropriate for a college educated person. This environment contributed to

a higher decline in religiousness among college attendees compared to those who did not attend college. Today, however, several studies, including the NYSR, have shown that “in fact those who do not attend college are the most likely to experience declines in religious service attendance, self-reported importance of religion and religious affiliation.”^{20} For most measures, the differences are not large, but they are certainly counter to the results from the 70s and 80s.

Smith and other researchers have suggested several reasons for this major change. These possible causes include:

- *the growing influence of campus-based religious groups*
- *colleges changing attitudes to be more supportive of religious interests*
- *a growing number of committed Christian faculty*
- *the growth of religious colleges and universities*
- *the major long-term decline in American college students' interest in answering questions about the meaning of life*
- *the influence of postmodern relativism which undercuts the authority of the professors as a source of truth*
- *adolescents who are less rebellious and more conventional than earlier generations*

However, I would suggest that if all of these factors were significant, we should see less decline in religiousness from the teen to emerging adult years than we saw for the Baby Boomer generation. As we saw earlier, this is not the case. The decline in religious involvement and belief is greater for today's emerging adults as a whole than it was for the Baby Boomers. The transition period is just as corrosive if not more so. A reasonable conclusion would be that the culture itself has become just as corrosive as the college. Movies, television, music, and public schools are promoting the same counter-religious message once found primarily in academia.

Other studies have found that many teenagers have already conformed to the culture in their “real lives” before leaving high school and are maintaining the appearance of religiousness to please their parents and authority figures. Once they leave that environment to attend college or pursue a career, they are relieved to be able to set aside their faux religion and focus on their real-life pursuits.

One conclusion I would propose is that this data shows that the types of training and perspective that Probe offers to prepare students for the college environment are equally important for those students who are not headed for college. All teenagers need to be shown why they should value the perspectives taught in the Bible over the perspectives of their popular culture because the biblical perspectives are rooted in verifiable reality rather than the subjective postmodern morass of our popular culture.

Emerging Adults: Exposing Some Myths

As is often the case, a careful examination of well-designed cultural research identifies weaknesses in popularly held perceptions of reality; that is, facts often expose myths. Let's look at three popular myths that must be modified or discarded in the light of the NYSR results.

Myth 1: Emerging adults are very spiritual but are not into religion.

A popular perception is that although most young adults are not that interested in the external practice of organized religion, they are strongly committed to a personal faith and development of their spirituality. Although their outward involvement has declined, their inward commitment remains strong and their public involvement can be expected to return as they settle down into marriage and children. However, the data does not support this perception. As Smith states,

“little evidence supports the idea that emerging adults who decline in regular external religious practice nonetheless retain over time high levels of subjectively important, privately committed, internal religious faith. Quite the contrary is indicated by our analysis.”[\[21\]](#)

Smith and his team used the survey responses to categorize the respondents into six different religious types. Four of these types, representing seventy percent of emerging adults, are generally indifferent to both traditional religions and spiritual topics. Of the remaining thirty percent, half of those are what Smith labels Committed Traditionalists who are actively involved with organized religion. Another half of the remaining (i.e., fifteen percent of the total) are labeled Spiritually Open. It is important to understand that Spiritually Open is not the same as Spiritually Interested. Smith reports, “Most are in fact nothing more than simply *open*. They are not *actively* seeking, not taking a lot of initiative in pursuit of the spiritual.”[\[22\]](#) So, when the data is analyzed, it appears that less than five percent of emerging adults could be considered as spiritual but not religious.

Consequently, it appears that the challenge for the church is not redirecting a pent-up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, but, instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

Myth 2: Emerging adults are hostile toward the church.

Several recent books have suggested that the dominant attitude of unchurched young adults is one of critical hostility toward the church.[\[23\]](#) Their research suggests that emerging adults view the church as hypocritical, hateful and irrelevant. Although he acknowledges that some of these feelings exist, Smith believes that the data demonstrates that these attitudes are not as prevalent as others suggest. In fact, eight out of ten emerging adults state that they have “a lot of respect for

organized religion in this country” and seven out of ten disagree that “organized religion is usually a big turnoff for me.” Going a step further, a strong majority of emerging adults would disagree with the statement that “most mainstream religion is irrelevant to the needs and concerns of most people my age.”[{24}](#)

Given these results, why are we presented with strong cases to the contrary? First, there are a significant minority who view the church as an irrelevant turnoff, and a majority who believe that too many religious people are negative, angry, and judgmental. Second, Smith surmises that some of this perception comes from conducting “interviews with non-representative samples of emerging adults . . . by authors who are themselves alienated from mainstream religion . . . (or) by pastoral and ecclesial reformers within mainstream religion who want to make the case that traditional churches are failing to reach young people today and so need to be dramatically transformed in a postmodern or some other allegedly promising way.”[{25}](#)

Once again this is a good news / bad news story. The good news is that most emerging adults do not have strong emotional barriers build up against organized religion. However, the vast majority of them are indifferent to religion and confused about its role in life. According to Smith,

Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. . . . To whatever extent they do talk about it, most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good.[{26}](#)

Myth 3: Religious practice does not impact personal behavior.

Another common perception is that religiously devoted young adults are not appreciably different from other young adults

in their actual life practices when it comes to sexuality, generosity, community service, drug use, and integrity. We are often told that out of wedlock pregnancy, cheating, and drug use are the same for evangelical young adults as for the rest of society. It is certainly true that affiliation with an evangelical denomination makes only a small difference in those behaviors. But does a deep personal commitment to a relationship with Jesus Christ make a difference? The survey data allowed Smith and his team to differentiate between simple affiliation and devotion. What he discovered is that those emerging adults who are devoted to their faith exhibit significantly different lifestyles than the norm. In particular, these devoted emerging adults are:

- *more than twice as likely to give and volunteer their time*
- *more than four times less likely to engage in binge drinking or drugs*
- *twenty-five percent more likely to have attended college*
- *almost two times less likely to think that buying more things would make them happier*
- *twice as likely to abstain from pornography*
- *more than twice as likely to have abstained from sexual intercourse outside of marriage*

The results clearly show that a deep commitment to a Christian religious faith has a significant impact on one's lifestyle. As Smith concludes, "emerging adult religion—whatever its depth, character, and substance—correlates significantly with, and we think actually often acts as a causal influence producing, what most consider to be more positive outcomes in life for emerging adults." [\[27\]](#)

Exposing these myths helps us focus on the key challenge for the future. It is not redirecting a pent-up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, or overcoming an emotional aversion to organized religion, but instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

Notes

1. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 46.
4. Ibid., 51
5. Ibid., 47.
6. Ibid., 49
7. Ibid., 68.
8. Ibid., 72
9. Ibid., 67.
10. Ibid., 63.
11. Ibid., 145.
12. Ibid., 146.
13. Ibid., 148.
14. Ibid., 149.
15. Ibid., 149.
16. Ibid., 154.
17. Ibid., 154.
18. Meaning, since religion belongs to the category of faith, there can only be knowledge and truth in other areas.
19. Ibid., 285.
20. Ibid., 249.
21. Ibid., 252
22. Ibid., 296.
23. For example, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why it Matters* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
24. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 133, Table 4.15.
25. Ibid., 296.
26. Ibid., 286.
27. Ibid., 297.

See Also:

[Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths](#)

[Emerging Adults A Closer Look](#)

[The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults](#)

[Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults](#)

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.

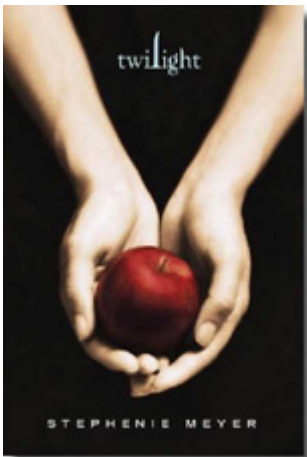
Demonic Origin of *Twilight*?

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 boomed. 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

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2.

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4. Ibid., 28.

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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

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

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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

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New Media and Society

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of the ups and downs of the new media such as Facebook and Twitter, and their impact on us.

How is the new media affecting the way we think and the way we interact with others in society? I want to look at the impact the Internet, social networks, and portable media devices are having on our world.

Rachel Marsden doesn't think it is positive. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* she says:

Spare me the stories of your "genius" tech-savvy child who can name every country on Google Earth, or how, because of your iPhone, BlackBerry and three cell phones, you juggle 20 tasks at once and never miss any business—even at 4 a.m., because you sleep with your portable devices. Does anyone care that technology is destroying social graces and turning

people into rude jerks?[{1}](#)

She isn't the first to notice that the new technology and new mobile devices are changing the way we interact with others. And, as we will discuss later, they apparently are also changing the way we think, affecting everything from creativity to concentration.

Rachel Marsden wonders, "When did it become acceptable for technological interaction to supersede in-person communication?" I have news for her. It happened long before cell phones were invented. When I was a graduate student at Yale University, I noticed something odd about my academic advisor. Whenever the phone would ring, he felt he had to answer it. He could be advising me or we could be deep in the midst of a discussion of a research project. But if the phone rang, he stopped the conversation and answered the phone, staying on the phone until that conversation was over. I began to think that the only way I could ever have a sustained conversation with him would be to call him on the phone.

Of course, mobile devices make it even easier to ignore face-to-face interaction. Now the world revolves around the person who has instant access to others using these devices. Rebecca Hagelin says that narcissism has crept into our world. In 2006, *Time* magazine voted "You" as the "Person of the Year." So much of media and advertising today is about indulging your fantasies.

Rebecca Hagelin is concerned about the impact this is having on our children. "Young people spend hours every day updating their Facebook pages, post and e-mail countless pictures of themselves, and plug their ears with music to create a self-indulgent existence shut-off from everyone around them."[{2}](#)

While some of the impact is positive, much more should concern us and cause us to change our behavior.

The Internet and the Way You Think

Can the Internet change how you think? That was a question columnist Suzanne Fields asked recently.[\[3\]](#) If you go to Edge.org, you will notice that the question they pose for this year is slightly different. It is, “How is the Internet changing the way you think?” They pose this provocative question because of the impact of computer chips, digitized information, and virtual reality on the way we think and how we receive information in this “collective high-tech electronic ecosystem for the delivery of information.”

I have also been wondering about the impact of the Internet and the new media on our thinking. Unlike Suzanne Fields, I wasn't wondering *if* the Internet was changing our thinking but *how* it is already changing the way we think. There were two reasons why I have been thinking about this.

First, look at the younger generation being raised on the Internet. If you haven't noticed, they think and communicate differently from previous generations. I have done radio programs and read articles about the millennial generation. They do think differently, and a large part of that is due to the Internet.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is an *Atlantic* article by Nicholas Carr entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He says, “Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory.”[\[4\]](#)

It's not that he believes his mind is going, but he notices that he isn't thinking the way he used to think and he isn't concentrating like he used to concentrate. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose.

That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages."

He believes this comes from using the Internet and searching the web with Google. And he gives not only his story, but he also gives many anecdotes and as well as some research to back up his perspective.

For example, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University explains, "We are not only what we read. We are how we read." The style of reading on the Internet puts "efficiency" and "immediacy" above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

Now you might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says, "The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions."[\[5\]](#)

The Internet does appear to be altering the way we read and think, but more research is needed to confirm if this true. If so, parents and educators need to take note of what is happening in our cyberworld.

BlackBerries, Twitter, and Concentration

Have portable media devices altered our ability to concentrate? That certainly seems to be the case. Nearly all of us have noticed that people with a BlackBerry sometimes seem distracted. And after they answer an e-mail, they seem to spend a few minutes trying to recollect their thoughts before they had the interruption.

An article in *Newsweek* magazine documents what many of us have

always suspected: there are two major drawbacks to these devices.[{6}](#) The first is distraction overload. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

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

But another hidden drawback associated is less creativity. Turning on a mobile device or a cell phone when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.” That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail reduces daydreaming.

We also can see how new technology affects the way we process information and react to it emotionally. The headline of one article asked this question: Can Twitter make you amoral?[{7}](#) Research was done at the Brain and Creativity Institute of the University of Southern California to see the impact of social networks like Twitter.

What the researchers found was that human beings can sort information very quickly. And they can respond in fractions of seconds to signs of physical pain in others. But other emotions (like admiration and compassion) take much longer to register. In fact, they found that lasting compassion in a

relationship to psychological suffering requires a level of persistent, emotional attention.

So how does that relate to a technology like Twitter? The researchers found that there was a significant emotional cost of heavy reliance on a rapid stream of news snippets obtained through television, online feeds, or social networks such as Twitter. One researcher put it this way: "If things are happening too fast, you may not even fully experience emotions about other people's psychological states and that would have implications for your morality."

The point of these studies is that media does have an impact. A wise and discerning Christian will consider the impact and limit its negative effects.

Social Networks

Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace create an interconnected web of friends and family. People who study these networks are beginning to understand the impact they are having on us.

At a social networking site, you find someone and ask to be his or her friend. Once you are accepted, you become a member of their network, and they become a member of your network. This opens the door to finding and making additional friends. The ability to extend your circle of friends is one of the many benefits of social networking.

One concern about social networking is that it, like most of the new media, increases distraction and fragmentation of thought. The quotes, stories, jokes, and video clips come at an increased rate. A concentrated conversation with one person is difficult. Look over the shoulder of someone in a social networking site who has lots of friends. Content quickly scrolls downward, and it feels like you are at a party where lots of people are all talking at once.

Also these networks tend to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler makes this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, "How Twitter Makes You Stupid." [\[8\]](#) He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the "8 Minute Meditation." The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that "most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes."

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter is reducing the time of concentration to a few dozen words. He thinks that constantly using Twitter will tune "the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time." He predicts "that if you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 [character] mark." I am sure someone is already testing that hypothesis. Soon we should know the results.

Social networks do help us keep track of people who do not live near us, and that's a plus. But we are kidding ourselves if we believe that social networks are the same thing as true community. Shane Hipps, writing in *Flickering Pixels*, says this about virtual communities: "It's virtual—but it ain't community."

Social networks also have a great deal of power to influence us. Sociologists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler document this in their new book, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. They believe that happiness is contagious and so is obesity and quitting smoking. We are not only influenced by our friends, but are even influenced by our friend's friends. They say the world is governed by what they call "three degrees of separation."

Addiction is another concern. Years ago, counselors discovered Internet addiction. Now they are starting to talk about Facebook addiction. Lots of youth and adults spend too much

time in front of a computer. Social networks are wonderful tools, but wisdom and discernment are necessary in order to use them correctly.

Media Addiction

The Barna Group does lots of surveys, and that has led George Barna to conclude that “media exposure has become America’s most widespread and serious addiction.”^{9} I have always been hesitant to label our high levels of media exposure an addiction. We seem to have an addiction label for every behavior. But George Barna makes a convincing case.

Addiction changes our brains by altering the chemical balance and flow within the brain and by even altering the structure of the brain. According to the American Psychiatry Association, we can legitimately call something an addiction when certain symptoms manifest themselves.

For example addictions change our brain structure, altering emotions, motivations, and memory capacity. Addictions cause withdrawal symptoms when exposure to the addictive item is eliminated. Addictions cause the people to abandon or reduce their involvement in normal and healthy activities.

Certainly media can be positive in terms of education and relaxation. But most media content, Barna argues, “winds up serving the lowest common denominator because that’s where the largest audience” is to be found.

There is a generational trend. The builder generation did not grow up with media and never became accustomed to it. The boomer generation embraced media, and the following generations expanded it use in ways unthinkable a few decades ago.

If we were truly serious about controlling the media input in our lives and our children’s lives, we would see examples of

parents putting boundaries on media exposure. We see nothing of the sort. Expenditures on personal media, in-home media, and mobile media continue to increase.

It is not that parents don't understand the dangers. Barna reports that three-quarters of parents say that exposure of their children to inappropriate media content are one of their top concerns. But they continue to buy their kids the media tools and continue to allow them to be exposed to inappropriate content.

By the time a young person reaches age 21, he or she will have been exposed to more than 250,000 acts of violence through TV, movies, and video games. He or she will have listened to thousands of hours of music with questionable lyrical content. Most parents know that much of what their children see or hear isn't wholesome

This may be one of the biggest challenges for society in general and even the church in particular. Most parents recognize the danger of the media storm in which they and their children live. But that are unwilling to take the necessary steps to set boundaries or end their media addiction.

Some Concluding Biblical Principles

In a previous article on [Media and Discernment](#), I talked about the need for Christians to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat and can easily conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Media is a powerful tool to conform us to a secular worldview and thus take us captive (Col. 2:8) to the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media.

The first is Philippians 4:8. “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.”

The second is Colossians 3:2–5. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

Notes

1. Rachel Marsden, “Technology and the New Me Generation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2009.
2. Rebecca Hagelin, “Narcissism and Your Family,” 15 February 2010, www.townhall.com/hagelin.
3. Suzanne Fields, “Can the Internet Change How You Think?” 15 January 2010, www.townhall.com/fields.
4. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Sharon Begley, “Will the BlackBerry Sink the Presidency?” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2009.
7. “Can Twitter Make You Amoral? Rapid-fire Media May Confuse Your Moral Compass,” 14 April 2010, www.in.com.
8. Steven Kotler, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid,” *Psychology Today*, 15 May, 2009, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-playing-field/200905/how-twitter-makes-you-stupid.
9. George Barna, “Media Addiction,” 25 January 2010, www.barna.org.