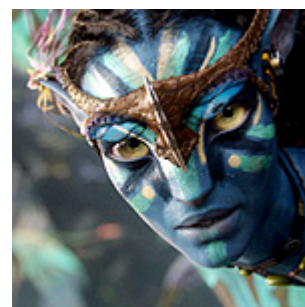


# Avatar and the Longing for Eden

*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.”<sup>{4}</sup>

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

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

## Notes

1. Jo Piazza, “Audiences experience ‘Avatar’ blues” CNN Entertainment, [www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html), accessed 11 Jan. 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 513.
4. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1970), 82.



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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."<sup>{8}</sup> 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 its 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](http://www.townhall.com/hagelin).

3. Suzanne Fields, "Can the Internet Change How You Think?" 15 January 2010, [www.townhall.com/fields](http://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](http://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](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-playing-field/200905/how-twitter-makes-you-stupid).

9. George Barna, "Media Addiction," 25 January 2010, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

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## **Facing Facebook: Social Networking and Worldview**

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

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

site, nearly double from a year earlier.[{2}](#)

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

So what is *social networking*? At a social site like Facebook.com, when you find another member, you click a button that says "Add as Friend." Now, you and that person have a connection on the Web site that others can see. They are a member of your network, and you are a member of theirs. Also, you can see who your friends know, and who your friends' friends know. You're no longer a stranger, so you can contact them more easily. As the website Common Craft explains, "This solves a real-world problem because your network has hidden opportunities. Social networking sites make these connections between people visible."[{4}](#)

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

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

One commentator said, "Time bends when I open Facebook: it's as if I'm simultaneously a journalist/wife/mother in Berkeley and the goofy girl I left behind in Minneapolis."[{6}](#) But the accessibility and immediacy is not always good or profound. Be

ready to have your life history, long-lost friends and personal ghosts pop up in unexpected ways through social networking. In the same way, the future could be at stake with each post and link you put up: Whatever goes online, stays online. One's reputation will be marked for years to come by her online life for good or ill.

However, the meteoric rise of social networking has occurred for good reason. In Facebook, Xanga or MySpace, research shows that we *extend* current relationships online. It can all be very trivial or fairly meaningful, depending on how it's used. In this way, social networking is not unlike meeting up at a coffee shop or at the back fence. Younger generations are known to be more conversational than older ones. In my middle-aged circles, many seem to have written it off prematurely.

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

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

## **"The Medium is the Message"**

*McLuhan famously stated that "the medium is the message,"*

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

In discussing social networking sites like Facebook and their effect on people, it's helpful to look back at other media to see their culture-shaping influence. Note that I didn't write "the content of other media," but rather, "other media." For example, before Gutenberg's movable-type printing press, faith was passed down orally and through imagery like stained glass windows and church icons. The concrete stories from the synoptic Gospels ruled the day; the Apostle Paul's deep, abstract letters were virtually ignored. Then, print technology unleashed a new way to think and even to believe—an emphasis on *individual faith* accessed through *critical reason*. This print phenomenon *retrieved* the abstract, doctrinally rich letters of Paul from the dusty shelves of history. This, in turn, ignited the Reformation, writes Shane Hipps. One result: the church transformed from a highly communal body into a mass of individuals and put religious mystery largely out of touch.

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

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

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

While writing this transcript, I had to fight to get alone and maintain focus. I consciously avoided the distraction and fragmentation my mind easily undergoes while *Twittering* (or “tweeting”) and *Facebooking* (see, social networking even spawns new verbs, like “friending”!). The social networking experience is like walking around at a party filled with friends in various conversations: lots of brief comments, retorts and jokes. My need for individual, abstract thinking was at risk at the “Facebook party.” (Ironically, I was in the abstract writing mode regarding a very different sort of medium: non-abstract, simplistic, disjointed, visually based, online digital “communities.”)

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

David Watson is an entrepreneurial “pastor” exploring the legitimacy of online shepherding. He believes it’s a general relationship issue not confined to online participation: “Any time you are not fully present with whatever community you

happen to be with—whether online or offline—you can hurt people... We just notice the online stuff more because it is new and people tend to spend lots of time with new things before they figure out how everything balances out.”[\[12\]](#)

So what’s the big deal? Most Facebook, MySpace or Orkut members aren’t changing their entire view of reality, truth, God or mankind based on interactions with online friends. No, it’s not the obvious pitfall of cults or wild philosophies that people usually deal with day to day anyway. Under-the-radar ways of being and communicating can incrementally change who we are. It’s the subtle way that our *view* of life changes that concerns me most. Are moment-by-moment Tweets dumbing us down in various ways? Have we come to expect meaning in 140-character bits? Twitter shows the flow of life in tiny chunks some call a lifestream. But are those snippets, especially when seen intermittently, meaningful?

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

## **Social Networking Redeems and Resurrects Good Things**

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

McLuhan stated that new media always “enhances and retrieves”

good things. For example, we long for the days of chatting with neighbors on the front porch. Social networking restores this dynamic to a surprising degree. One writer reflected, "It could be . . . that Facebook marks a return to the time when people remained embedded in their communities for life, with connections that ran deep. . . ."[\[13\]](#)

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

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

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

Campus Crusade for Christ uses Facebook for campus ministry. They recently stated that 66 million students are active Facebook users. That's three times the population of Australia! In an outreach training video produced by Campus Crusade, the camera pans an empty library and the question



*"Where are the students?"* flashes across the screen. Then it shows a computer lab chock-full of kids, most logged into Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or YouTube. Another banner reads, "The average college student spends three hours on Facebook each visit." Going where the people hang out is wise! But Campus Crusade knows you can't just post *The Four Spiritual Laws* tract on Facebook and be effective. Long-term engagement with a live person or social community is required to make a positive difference.

If relationships are healthy, they *can* be helped online. "A study published in 2007 in *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* suggested that hanging onto old friends via Facebook may alleviate feelings of isolation for students whose transition to campus life had proved rocky."[{14}](#)

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

## **Social Networking Makes Obsolete and Obscures Other Good Things**

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

Studies show that people tend to continue and expand their real-life relationships online. But people can be fooled. Nothing replaces face-to-face contact. Hipps writes in *Flickering Pixels* about mutual friends of his who live very nearby but who had not seen each other in months. They communicate online daily, yet their relationship has deteriorated. Hipps commented on so-called *virtual*

*communities*: “It’s virtual—but it ain’t community. . . . Meaningful, missional Christian community” should consist of several essential things:

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

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

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

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

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

Technology always makes something obsolete. It seems probable that too much online use compromises our ability to concentrate and think abstractly and form a coherent argument. Given a steady diet of fragmented imagery and spontaneous status updates, a new generation is losing the ability to think through issues from a coherent framework. “Through

YouTubing, Facebooking, MySpacing . . . people take in vast amounts of visual information. But do they always comprehend the meaning of what they see. . . ? They are easily manipulated as students, consumers and citizens.”[{18}](#)

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

Social networking can steal your time. A friend recently told me that his wife’s use of Facebook is hindering their family time and communications. This is likely a widespread problem. “2.6 billion minutes are used daily by the global population on Facebook.”[{20}](#) If you already struggle with addictive tendencies or wasting time, think twice about launching into this absorbing lifestyle change. Get help for your online habit if it’s destructive as you would for any addiction.

## **Balancing Social Networking, Keeping a Christian Worldview in Mind**

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

Remember Narcissus, the mythological character who was so enamored by his own image in the pool of water that it eventually became his undoing? Most people focus on his self-absorption. But the point Hipps makes isn’t how stuck on himself Narcissus was, but rather his inability to perceive and control the low-tech medium of a reflective pool. He seemed oblivious to what was going on, as people tend to be regarding the media maelstrom that surrounds us. “When we fail

to perceive that the things we create are extensions of ourselves, the created things take on god-like characteristics and we become their servants.”[{21}](#) Media intake stealthily becomes idolatry.

The legendary Perseus, on the other hand, realized the power of a medium that if put under his control, could destroy the deadly effects of staring into the eyes of Medusa. Using a shield as a mirror, he deflected her deadly gaze and turned it into a chance to kill her. Even ancient Greek pagans understood the difference between these two fictional characters: Narcissus became enamored and then ensnared by a medium; Perseus, on the other hand, stepped back, realized the mirror was just an extension of his eyes, and so was able to master that medium. This echoes biblical commands to guard our heart and mind and not be conformed to the world.[{22}](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reach out: post a Scripture, share your faith.

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

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## 2012: Is The Sky Really Falling?

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

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

### **The Hype:**

Lawrence E. Joseph, author of *Apocalypse 2012: An Investigation Into Civilization's End*, has stated that "The

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

### **The Reality:**

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

*Steve and Dave: What is the Maya long calendar and what is its significance?*

*Dr. Sitler: The Long Count Calendar is multifaceted, It is primarily a way of establishing a specific day in lineal time, much like our own yearly calendar, The calendar surely had powerful symbolic dimensions but our current understanding of them is limited.*

*S&D: Does the Maya Calendar give any indication of an apocalypse, end of the world, or a great transformation that could be cataclysmic?*

*Dr. Sitler: The calendar itself does not indicate such things, It tells you what day it is, There is only one reference to the Dec. 21, 2012 date in the ancient hieroglyphs, Monument 6 from Tortuguero, and unfortunately, the text says very little.*

*S&D: Why do you think many websites and books claim that Maya predicted the end of the earth?*



*Dr. Sitler: Very few of these websites have substantive ties to the Maya world, and as a result, they are often extremely misinformed.*

*S&D: Do you see any detriment or loss to Maya studies because of the 2012 predictions?*

*Dr. Sitler: It's great for Maya studies in terms of drawing attention to the Maya themselves and hopefully more serious scholarship. The 2012 hype bases itself on extremes of misinformation.*[{1}](#)

### **The Hype:**

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

### **The Reality:**

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

happened and never will.”[\[3\]](#)

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

## Notes

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**See Also:**

[2012: Doomsday All Over Again](#)

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# Faith-based Film Faith Like Potatoes

It’s movie night with Mom; so I’m at the video store browsing the new releases and I come across *Faith Like Potatoes*. I’m not sure I would have picked it up if I were looking just for

myself, but I saw the words, "Based on an inspiring true story," and thought, Mom will like this. She did. But much to my surprise, so did I. Oh, I thought I'd enjoy it tolerably, but I didn't expect to be, yes, actually inspired.

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

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

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

unclear; accepting Jesus doesn't make everything rosy and happily-ever-after all at once.

As Christians we ought to know better than anyone that complete resolution will never take place until Christ returns at long last to bring Justice and Peace to a hurting world. If we want our productions to speak to real people in real ways, we need to get real. We need to stop avoiding the wonderfully complex simplicities of the paradoxical life God designed (the last is first, die to live, etc.). *Potatoes'* Regardt Van Den Bergh understands this. The well-known South African actor and director writes this of his work (of which *The Visual Bible's Matthew* is his best known): "I, as a director, love telling true stories. To tell stories of how God impacts the lives of people is the best, but with it comes an awesome responsibility: the responsibility of being truthful and also representing the way of God in the person's life accurately." ([www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/faithlikepotatoes/about/production-bios.html](http://www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/faithlikepotatoes/about/production-bios.html)).

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

You've heard the old adage: It's not what you say, but how you

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

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## **Exponential Times – Applying Christian Discernment**

*Kerby Anderson discusses some of the trends in our rapidly changing world, calling for Christians to “understand the times” with discernment.*

You may have seen the YouTube video asking, “Did you know”? Sometimes it has the title “We are living in exponential times.” I want to look at some of the trends that illustrate the fact that we live in exponential times. While I will use the video as a starting point, I will also be citing other authors and commentators as well.

The video begins by talking about population. How often we forget that there are countries like China and India that have a billion people. For example, the video says that if you are one in a million in China, there are thirteen hundred other people just like you. That is because there are over a billion

people in China.

The video also points out that twenty-five percent of India's population with the highest IQs is actually greater than the total population of America. Put another way, India has more honors kids than America has kids.

This reminds me of a statement in *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman. He says that when he was growing up his parents would tell him "Finish your dinner. People in China and India are starving." Today he tells his daughters, "Girls, finish your homework—people in China and India are starving for your jobs."[{1}](#)

Consider the population explosion. There were one billion people in 1800. We did not reach two billion until 1930. The planet had three billion people in 1960 and four billion in 1975. We reached five billion people in 1987 and six billion people in 1999. It is estimated that the planet will hold seven billion people in 2012.

Of course, life expectancy has been going up, and this is changing the demographic of various countries. Many more people are living to age 100 and beyond. For example, there were only two hundred centenarians in France in 1950. The number is projected to reach a hundred fifty thousand by year 2050. That is a seven-hundred-fifty-fold increase in one hundred years.[{2}](#)

Or consider the United States population increase in this demographic group. In 1990, there were approximately, thirty thousand centenarians. Some believe that estimate may be a bit too high, but it provides an approximate baseline. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates there will be two hundred sixty-five thousand centenarians by 2050.[{3}](#)

One last trend is that world population growth is slowing down as populations are aging. Demographers tell us that we need 2.1 children per woman to replace a population. Back in the

1950s, the average number of babies per woman of child-bearing age was 5.0 but has been dropping ever since. It will most likely reach 2.3 in 2025.[{4}](#)

In the developing world, fertility is already moderately low at 2.58 children per woman and is expected to decline further to 1.92 children per woman by mid-century.[{5}](#) While only three countries were below the population replacement level of 2.1 babies in 1955, there will be one hundred and two such countries by 2025.[{6}](#)

## Exponential Growth

What is the impact of exponential growth on society? Richard Swenson argues in his book *Margin* that this has created unprecedented problems for us:

*One major reason our problems today are unprecedented is because the mathematics are different. Many of the linear lines that in the past described our lives well have now disappeared. Replacing them are lines that slope upward exponentially.*[{7}](#)

Exponential growth is very different from arithmetic growth. We live our lives in a linear way. We live day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month. But the changes taking place around us are increasing not in a linear way but in an exponential way.

Exponential growth is not something that we would consider intuitive. Scott Armstrong demonstrated that when he asked a graduate class of business students the following question. If you folded a piece of paper in half forty times, how thick would it be? Most of the students guessed it would be less than a foot. A few guessed it would be greater than a foot but less than a mile. Two students guessed it would be greater than a mile but less than two thousand miles. The correct answer is

that the paper would be thick enough to reach from here to the moon.[\[8\]](#)

This is the challenge of living in exponential times. If the graph is linear, we have a fairly good grasp of what that will mean for us in the future. When the graph curves upward exponentially, we have a difficult time comprehending its impact.

But will the graph continue to trend upward? It will until it reaches some limit. Eventually there is an upper limit to most of the trends we are seeing. Objective things (people, government buildings, and organizations) have limits. Subjective things (relationships, creativity, and spirituality) also have limits.

At this point the curve changes from a J-curve to an S-curve. The exponential slope begins to flatten and reach a new equilibrium. Eventually there is a turning point at which the upward curve no longer grows exponentially. Finally, the curve levels as growth and limits reach an equilibrium.

One of the challenges of living in exponential times is that the various trends are at different points on the curve. The amount of new information seems to be exploding exponentially and looks like a J-curve. The number of e-mails you receive might not be growing exponentially like it did a few years ago but may still be increasing. Population in many developing countries has been leveling off (and often decreasing), and so the graph looks more like the S-curve. All of these trends are at different parts of the curve and are happening simultaneously. Thus, it is often difficult for us to comprehend what this means to us personally.

Futurists who are trying to understand what will happen in the future are faced with an even more daunting task. If they look at each trend in isolation, they can begin to get an idea of what might happen. But as soon as someone tries to integrate



all of these trends into a comprehensive whole, the future becomes blurred.

Trying to integrate all the various trends (many growing exponentially) creates a challenge for anyone trying to accurately predict the future. We might know the individual trends, but trying to integrate hundreds of trends into a comprehensive picture is difficult, if not impossible.

## **Warnings About Exponential Growth**

In the past, a number of authors have warned about the dangers of exponential growth. And because their predictions did not come to pass, the concept of exponentiality and its impact have faded from current discussion.

In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Malthus wrote his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* in which he argued that population growth would outstrip food production. He reasoned that population would grow exponentially while food production would merely grow arithmetically. Thus, he predicted a future crisis due to this exponential growth.

In 1968, Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich published his controversial best-seller, *The Population Bomb*. He also noted that population was growing exponentially and made numerous predictions about catastrophes that would befall the human race in the 1970s and 1980s.

Dennis Meadows and others with a group known as The Club of Rome published their report in the book *The Limits to Growth*. The authors used a computer simulation to consider the interaction of five variables (world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion). By changing the various assumptions about population and resources, they predicted various dire scenarios for the future.

Of course these doomsday predictions never came to pass. So it was inevitable that discussion and warning about exponential growth were no longer published on the front pages of newspapers and newsmagazines.

Another reason we have ignored the potential impact of exponential growth is due to the remarkable technological achievements of the twentieth century. Automobile manufacturers have been able to significantly increase gas mileage in cars. Petroleum engineers have been able to find more effective and efficient ways to pull oil from the ground. Farmers and scientists have essentially tripled global food production since World War II, thereby outpacing even population growth.

Nevertheless, there are indeed limits to growth. If we understand what those limits are and work within them, then the future will be bright. If we ignore them, the human race could be in for some rough times. Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson expressed this dichotomy when he asked, "Are we racing to the brink of an abyss, or are we just gathering speed for a takeoff to a wonderful future? The crystal ball is clouded; the human condition baffles all the more because it is both unprecedented and bizarre, almost beyond understanding."[{9}](#)

Columnist Tom Harper is more pessimistic: "Currently we are behaving like insane passengers on a jet plane who are busy taking all the rivets and bolts out of the craft as it flies along."[{10}](#)

Whatever our future, it is certain that it will be more complex than ever before. And it will be a world in which information has exploded exponentially.

## **Information Explosion**

One aspect of exponential times is the information explosion. The YouTube video by the same title reminds us that

information is exploding exponentially. For example, it points out that there are thirty-one billion searches on Google every month. The best estimate is now there are about thirty-six billion searches on Google each month. In 2006, it was 2.7 billion. That's a thirteen-fold increase in just three years.

In order to keep up with this information explosion, engineers have been working at a breakneck pace to increase the efficiency and capacity of computers and other devices that process and store information. Every year, fifty quadrillion transistors are produced. That is more than six million for every human on the planet.[{11}](#)

Look at the exponential growth of Internet devices. In 1984, there were a thousand. By 1992, there were one million. By 2008, there were one billion and the number is about to exceed two billion. Some experts believe that there will be fifteen billion Intelligent Connected Devices by the year 2015.[{12}](#)

The YouTube video estimates that a week's worth of *The New York Times* contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a lifetime in the eighteenth century. This figure is more difficult to quantify even though it, or variations of it, is cited all the time.

In fact, this may be our biggest challenge in the twenty-first century. There is so much information that most of us are having a difficult time trying to make sense of all the data. Facts, figures, and statistics are coming at us at an accelerating rate. That is why we need to evaluate everything we see, read, and hear from a Christian worldview in order to make sense of the world around us.

One last point is that most of this information is still in the English language. The YouTube video says that there are about 540,000 words in the English language. And this is five times as many words as in the time of Shakespeare.

It turns out that these estimates may be a bit off. Part of

the problem is deciding what constitutes a word. After all, we have so many derivatives of a word and we have many words that have multiple meanings. Do you count the word or the various meanings of a word?

Let's start with the English vocabulary at the time of Shakespeare. We know how many words he used. If you count all the words in his plays and sonnets there are 884,647 of them. The estimate for the number of different words he used varies from eighteen to twenty-five thousand. I might also mention that it appears that Shakespeare coined or invented about fifteen hundred new words. Even so, it seems like the estimate that there were a hundred thousand English words in Shakespeare's time might be too high.

Do we have over five hundred thousand words in the English language today? Again, it depends how you count words. The largest English dictionary has about four hundred thousand entries. A more realistic number is around two hundred thousand. The latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains entries for 171,476 words in current use, and 47,156 obsolete words.

Nevertheless, English has become the language of choice for the world. Approximately three hundred seventy-five million people speak English as their first language. Another seven hundred million speak English as a foreign language. English is also the language most often studied as a foreign language in the European Union. English is more widely spoken and written than any other language.

English is the medium for eighty percent of information stored in the world's computers. English is the most common language used in the sciences as well as on the Internet. Not only have the number of English words expanded since Shakespeare's time, its influence has expanded as well.

# Exponential Times and a Biblical Worldview

The Bible tells us that we are to understand the times in which we are living. First Chronicles 12:32 says that the sons of Issachar were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do.” Likewise we need to understand our times with knowledge of what we as Christians should do.

We have also been looking to the future by trying to plot trends from today into tomorrow. The Bible also tells us that we should plan for the future. Isaiah 32:8 says that “the noble man devises noble plans, and by noble plans he stands.” Proverbs 16:9 says “the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” So we should not only plan for the future, but commit those plans to the Lord and be sensitive to His leading in our lives.

When you live in a world that is increasing exponentially, you have to be ready for change. In fact, it is probably true that most of us now expect change rather than stability in our world. Not so long ago, there were those telling us that change would shock our senses and disorient us.

As commentator Mark Steyn points out, we developed a whole intellectual class of worriers. He says:

*The Western world has delivered more wealth and more comfort to more of its citizens than any other civilization in history, and in return we've developed a great cult of worrying. You know the classics of the genre: In 1968, in his bestselling book *The Population Bomb*, the eminent scientist Paul Ehrlich declared: “In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.” In 1972, in their landmark study *The Limits to Growth*, the Club of Rome announced that the world would run out of gold by 1981, of mercury by 1985, tin by 1987, zinc by 1990, petroleum by 1992, and copper, lead and gas by*

1993. {13}

Obviously none of that happened. But we shouldn't dismiss the potential impact of exponential growth, but learn to be more careful in our predictions.

*I believe one of the greatest challenges for Christians will come from the information explosion. Not only are we inundated with facts, figures, and statistics, but we must also confront various philosophies, worldviews, and religions. It is absolutely essential that Christian develop discernment. We must work to evaluate everything we see, read, and hear from a Christian worldview.*

This is one of the foundational goals of Probe Ministries. We are dedicated to helping you to think biblically about every area of life. I would encourage you to visit the Probe website ([www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)) to read other articles. You can also get a podcast of this program or any other program, and even sign up for the *Probe Alert*.

Kerby Anderson discusses some of the trends in our rapidly changing world, and calls for Christians to 'understand the times' with discernment. We live in a world of change. And as I have discussed above, many of these changes are not linear but exponential. May all of us be found faithful in speaking biblical truth to a culture in the midst of change.

## **Notes**

1. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 237.
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3. "Centenarians in the United States," U.S. Census Bureau,

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5. "World population to increase by 2.6 billion over next 45 years," *World Population Prospects*, 24 February 2005.

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7. Richard Swenson, *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 44.

8. Scott Armstrong, *Long-Range Forecasting: From Crystal Ball to Computer* (NY: Wiley, 1985), 102.

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11. George Gilder, "Happy Birthday Wired: It's Been a Weird Five Years," *Wired*, January 1998, 40.

12. "15 Billion Connected Devices – Powered by the Embedded Internet," *Small Forms Factors Blog*, 28 April 2009.

13. Mark Steyn, "It's the Demography Stupid," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2006.

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# Consumerism – A Biblical Perspective

*Kerby Anderson examines ways in which a consumerist mindset is a concern for both society and the church. He concludes by providing a biblical perspective.*

Consumerism is a concern within society and within the church. So I would like to analyze both of these areas of concern by citing books that address this issue. The classic secular book on this subject is *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*.[{1}](#) An excellent Christian book that deals with the topic of consumerism (in one of its chapters) is Michael Craven's book *Uncompromised Faith: Overcoming Our Culturalized Christianity*.[{2}](#)

What is consumerism? Many people use the terms *materialism* and *consumerism* interchangeably. But there is a difference. Consumerism is much more than mere materialism. It is a way of perceiving the world that has affected all of us (especially Americans)—young and old, rich and poor, believer and non-believer—in significant ways. Essentially it is a never-ending desire to possess material goods and to achieve personal success.

Others have defined consumerism as *having* rather than *being*.[{3}](#) Your worth and value are measured by what you have rather than by who you are. It is buying into a particular lifestyle in order to find your value, worth, and dignity. As Christians we should be defined by the fact that we are created in God's image and have intrinsic worth and dignity.

Even secular writers see the problems with consumerism. The writers of *Affluenza* say that it is a virus that "is not confined to the upper classes but has found its way throughout our society. Its symptoms affect the poor as well as the rich



. . . *Affluenza* infects all of us, though in different ways.”[{4}](#)

The authors go on to say that “the *Affluenza* epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called the American dream.”[{5}](#)

*Affluenza* is rooted in a number of key concepts. First, it is rooted in the belief that the measure of national progress can be measured by the gross domestic product. Second, it is rooted in the idea that each generation must do better economically than the previous generation.

The consequences of this are devastating to both the nation and individuals. We are living in a time when the economic realities should be restraining spending (both as a nation and as individuals). Instead, we have corporately and individually pursued a lifestyle of “buy now and pay later” in order to expand economically. As we have discussed in previous articles, this philosophy has not served us well.

In an attempt to find happiness and contentment by pursuing “the good life,” Americans have instead found it empty. Consumerism seems to promise fulfillment, but alas, it is merely an illusion. Consumerism does not satisfy.

## **Inverted Values and Changing Attitudes**

Anyone looking at some of the social statistics for the U.S. might conclude that our priorities are out of whack. For example, we spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches than on higher education. We spend much more on auto maintenance than on religious and welfare activities. And three times as many Americans buy Christmas presents for their pets than buy a present for their neighbors.[{6}](#)

Debt and waste also show skewed priorities. More Americans

have declared personal bankruptcy than graduated from college. Our annual production of solid waste would fill a convoy of garbage trucks stretching halfway to the moon. We have twice as many shopping centers as high schools.[{7}](#)

Americans seem to be working themselves to death in order to pay for everything they own or want to buy. We now work more hours each year than do the citizens of any other industrial country, including Japan. And according to Department of Labor statistics, full-time American workers are putting in one hundred sixty hours more (essentially one month more) than they did in 1969.[{8}](#) And ninety-five percent of our workers say they wish they could spend more time with their families.[{9}](#)

Americans do recognize the problem and are trying to simplify their lives. A poll by the Center for a New American Dream showed a change in attitudes and action. The poll revealed that eighty-five percent of Americans think our priorities are out of whack. For example, nearly nine in ten (eighty-eight percent) said American society is too materialistic. They also found that most Americans (ninety-three percent) feel we are too focused on working and making money. They also believed (ninety-one percent) that we buy and consume more than we need. More than half of Americans (fifty-two percent) said they have too much debt.[{10}](#)

The poll found that many Americans were taking steps to work less, even if that meant reducing their consuming. Nearly half of Americans (forty-eight percent) say they voluntarily made changes in their life in order to get more time and have a less stressful life. This increase in the number of self-proclaimed "down-shifters" suggests the beginning of a national change in priorities.

Perhaps Americans are coming to the realization that more consumer goods don't make them happy. Think back to the year 1957. That was the year that the program *Leave it to Beaver*

premiered on television. It was also the year that the Russians shot Sputnik into space. That was a long time ago.

But 1957 is significant for another reason. It was that year that Americans described themselves as “very happy” reached a plateau.[\[11\]](#) Since then there has been an ever declining percentage of Americans who describe themselves that way even though the size of the average home today is twice what it was in the 1950s and these homes are filled with consumer electronics someone back then could only dream about.

## **Undermining the Family and Church**

What has been the impact of consumerism? Michael Craven talks about how consumerism has undermined the family and the church.

The family has been adversely affected by the time pressures created by a consumer mentality. Family time used to be insulated to a degree from employment demands. That is no longer true. “We no longer hesitate to work weekends and evenings or to travel Sundays, for example, in order to make the Monday-morning meeting.”[\[12\]](#) As we have already mentioned, Americans are working more hours than ever before. The signal that is being sent throughout the corporate world is that you must be willing to sacrifice time with your family in order to get ahead. And that is exactly what is taking place.

Sociologists have concluded that “since 1969 the time American parents spend with their children has declined by 22 hours per week.”[\[13\]](#) Some have questioned this study because its estimate of the decline came from subtracting increased employment hours of parents from total waking hours. But I believe it makes the point that families are suffering from consumerism and this study parallels other studies that have looked at the decline in quality parent-child interaction at home.

The bottom line is this: Americans may talk about family values and quality time with their kids but their behavior demonstrates that they don't live those values. Frequently children and their needs are sacrificed on the altar of career success. The marketplace trumps family time more than we would like to think that it does.

The church has also been undermined by consumerism. Busy lifestyles and time pressures crowd out church attendance. Weekly church attendance has reached an all-time low in America. And even for those who try to regularly attend church, attendance is sometimes hit-or-miss. Years ago I realized how difficult it was to teach a series in a Sunday School class because there was so little continuity in attendance from one week to the next.

Craven points out that those who are dissatisfied with a consumerist-created lifestyle turn to church for meaning and purpose. Unfortunately, they think that "by integrating a 'little religion' into their lives they will balance and perfect the lifestyle. Tragically, they do not realize it is not their lifestyle that is in need of salvation, it is their very souls."[\[14\]](#)

Consumerism also affects the way we go about the Christian life. Religious consumerists add spiritual disciplines to their life in the same way they approach work (as a task to be fulfilled with measurable goals). In the end, spiritual activity becomes one more item on a to-do list.

Craven reminds us that Jesus Christ is not to be treated as one good among many. Jesus Christ should be the supreme Good and the source of all life.

## **Undermining the Community and Character**

What has been the impact of consumerism? Craven talks about how consumerism has undermined community and how it has also

undermined virtue and character. “With the increased priority given to the marketplace, there follows a decreased commitment to neighbors, community, and connections to extended family; children are displaced in pursuit of opportunities, and familial priorities become subverted to company demands.”[{15}](#)

This has an adverse impact on citizenship. People are no longer citizens but consumers. Citizens have duties and responsibilities to their fellow citizens. Consumers do not. They are merely partaking of what the consumer economy provides for them. Citizens care about others and their community. Consumers only care about what the society can provide to them.

Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer predicted that as society moved from the “death of God” to what today we can call the “death of truth” there would only be two things left: “personal peace and personal prosperity.” Schaeffer argued that once Americans accepted these values, they would sacrifice everything to protect their personal peace and affluence.[{16}](#)

Consumerism also undermines virtue and character. It “shifts the objective of human life away from cultivating virtue and character, knowing truth, and being content to an artificially constructed, idealized lifestyle that is continually reinforced through media, entertainment, and advertising.”[{17}](#)

With this view of life, things become more important than people. Having is more important than being. And it is a lifestyle that pursues distraction (sports, entertainment, hobbies, etc.) almost in an effort to keep from thinking about the real world and its circumstances.

As we have already noted, consumerism does not satisfy. In fact, it can be argued that a consumerist mentality puts us in an emotional place where we are perpetually discontent. We are unable to rest in that which is good because we always want

more. This is made even more difficult in our world where advertising images provide a seemingly endless series of choices that are promoted to us as necessary in order to achieve the perfect life.

Michael Craven points out that when Christians talk about being content, this is often ridiculed as being willing to “settle for less” and even condemned as “lazy, defeatist, and even irresponsible.”<sup>{18}</sup> Instead we are spurred on by talk of “doing all things to the glory of God” which can be used to justify a consumerist mentality.

## **A Biblical Perspective on Materialism and Consumerism**

We live in a culture that encourages us to buy more and more. No longer are we encouraged to live within our means. We are tempted to buy more than just the necessities and tempted to spend more on luxuries. The Bible warns us about this. Proverbs 21:17 says, “He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.”

In our lifetimes we have lots of money that flows through our hands, and we need to make wiser choices. Consider that a person who makes just \$25,000 a year will in his lifetime have a million dollars pass through his hands. The median family income in America is twice that. That means that two million dollars will pass through the average American family’s hands.

A tragic aspect of consumerism is that there is never enough. There is always the desire for more because each purchase only satisfies for short while. Then there is the need for more and more. Essentially, it is the law of diminishing returns. Economists use a more technical term—the law of diminishing marginal return. Simply put, the more we get, the less it satisfies and the more we want.

Once again the Bible warns us about this. Haggai 1:5-6 says, "Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Consider your ways! You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes.'"

We should also be responsible citizens. A tragic consequence of consumerism is what it does to the average citizen. James Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, believes we have "mutated from citizens to consumers." He says that "consumers have no duties or responsibilities or obligations to their fellow consumers. Citizens do. They have the obligation to care about their fellow citizens and about the integrity of the town's environment and history."[19](#)

America was once a nation of joiners. Alexis de Tocqueville noted this in his book *Democracy in America*. Americans would join in all sorts of voluntary associations. But we seem to no longer be joiners but loners. Sure, there are still many people volunteering and giving their time. But much of this is "on the run" as we shuffle from place to place in our busy lives.

Christians are called to be the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13) and the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16). We are also called to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). We must resist the temptations of consumerism that encourage us to focus on ourselves and withdraw from active involvement in society.

## Notes

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  5. *Ibid.*, 3.
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  7. *Affluenza*, 4.
  8. *Ibid.*, 42.
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  10. Center for a New American Dream, 2004 survey, [www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/PollRelease.pdf](http://www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/PollRelease.pdf).
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  13. L.C. Sayer, et. All, "Are Parents Investing Less in Children?", paper presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, August 2000.
  14. *Affluenza*, 80.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan: NJ: Fleming Revell, 1976), 205.
  17. *Affluenza*, 81.
  18. *Ibid.*, 83.
  19. James Kunstler in discussion with David Wann, March 1997, quoted in *Affluenza*, 65.



# Frasier Worldview Check

I got hoodwinked tonight.

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

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

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

*Roz: Is it weird to have a son brought up in a different religion from yours?*

*Frasier: Not at all, Roz. It's a faith that espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. All values which I cherish.*

What tricked me was not what Frasier said but what he didn't say. Jewish culture definitely espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. I completely agree. Several friends who have helped me through dark times in my life have been Jewish. I feel a special affinity for the Jews as a Christian because I read the Hebrew Bible as a part of my own Christian Bible—essentially the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# **Tough Economic Times**

## **The Bailout**

Anyone watching the news or looking at their checking account knows that we are in for some tough economic times. I want to spend some time looking at how we arrived at this place and set forth some biblical principles that we collectively and individually need to follow.

Who would have imagined a year ago we would be talking about spending such enormous amounts of money on a bailout? The

first bailout was for \$700 billion. When these numbers are so big, we lose all proportion of their size and potential impact. So let me use a few comparisons from a recent *Time* magazine article to make my point.[\[1\]](#)

If we took \$700 billion and gave it to every person in America, they would receive a check for \$2,300. Or if we decided to give that money instead to every household in America, they would receive \$6,200.

What if we were able to use \$700 billion to fund the government for a year? If we did so, it would fully fund the Defense Department, the State Department, the Treasury, the Department of Education, Veterans Affairs, the Department of the Interior, and NASA. If instead we decided to pay off some of the national debt, it would retire seven percent of that debt.

Are you a sports fan? What if we used that money to buy sports teams? This is enough money to buy every NFL team, every NBA team, and every Major League Baseball team. But we would have so much left over that we could also buy every one of these teams a new stadium. And we would still have so much money left over that we could pay each of these players \$191 million for a year.

Of course this is just the down payment. When we add up all the money for bailouts and the economic stimulus, the numbers are much larger (some estimate on the order of \$4.6 trillion).

Jim Bianco (of Bianco Research) crunched the inflation adjusted numbers.[\[2\]](#) The current bailout actually costs more than all of the following big budget government expenditures: the Marshall Plan (\$115.3 billion), the Louisiana Purchase (\$217 billion), the New Deal (\$500 billion [est.]), the Race to the Moon (\$237 billion), the Savings and Loan bailout (\$256 billion), the Korean War (\$454 billion), the Iraq war (\$597 billion), the Vietnam War (\$698 billion), and NASA (\$851.2

billion).

Even if you add all of this up, it actually comes to \$3.9 trillion and so is still \$700 billion short (which incidentally is the original cost of one of the bailout packages most people have been talking about).

Keep in mind that these are inflation-adjusted figures. So you can begin to see that what has happened this year is absolutely unprecedented. Until you run the numbers, it seems like Monopoly money. But the reality is that it is real money that must either be borrowed or printed. There is no stash of this amount of money somewhere that Congress is putting into the economy.

## **What Caused the Financial Crisis?**

What caused the financial crisis? Answering that question in a few minutes may be difficult, but let me give it a try.

First, there was risky mortgage lending. Some of that was due to government influence through the Community Reinvestment Act which encouraged commercial banks and savings associations to loan money to people in low-income and moderate-income neighborhoods. And part of it was due to the fact that some mortgage lenders were aggressively pushing subprime loans. Some did this by fraudulently overestimating the value of the homes or by overstating the lender's income. When these people couldn't pay on their loan, they lost their homes (and we had a record number of foreclosures).

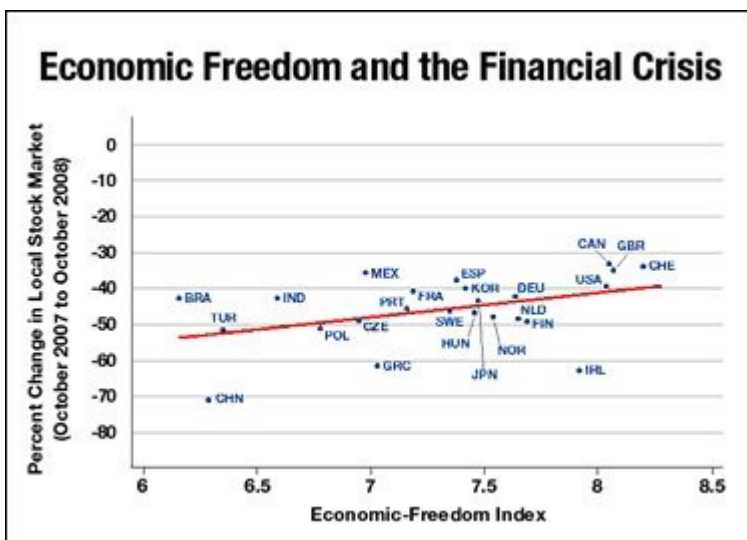
Next, the lenders who pushed those bad loans went bankrupt. Then a whole series of dominoes began to fall. Government sponsored enterprises like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac as well as financial institutions like Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch and AIG began to fail.

As this was happening, commentators began to blame government,

the financial institutions, Wall Street, and even those who obtained mortgages. Throughout the presidential campaign and into 2009 there was a cry that this was the result of shredded consumer protections and deregulation.

So is the current crisis a result of these policies? Is deregulation the culprit? Kevin Hassett has proposed a simple test of this view. [\[3\]](#) He points out that countries around the world have very different regulatory structures. Some have relatively light regulatory structures, while others have much more significant intrusion into markets.

If deregulation is the problem, then those countries that have looser regulations should have a greater economic crisis. But that is not what we find. If you plot the degree of economic freedom of a country on the x-axis and the percent of change in the local stock market on the y-axis, you find just the opposite of that prediction.



The correlation is striking. Draw a line from countries with low economic freedom (like China and Turkey) to countries with greater economic freedom (like the United States) and you will notice that most of the countries hug the line. Put another way, the regression line is statistically significant.

If the crisis were a result of deregulation, then the line should be downward sloping (meaning that countries that are freer economically had a biggest collapse in their stock

markets). But the line slopes up. That seems to imply that countries that are economically free have suffered less than countries that are not. While it may be true that a single graph and a statistical correlation certainly does not tell the whole story, it does suggest that the crisis was not due to deregulation.

## The End of Prosperity

It is interesting that as the financial crisis was unfolding, a significant economic book was coming on the market. The title of the book is *The End of Prosperity*.[\[4\]](#)

Recently I interviewed Stephen Moore with the *Wall Street Journal*. He is the co-author with Arthur Laffer and Peter Tanous of *The End of Prosperity*. The book provides excellent documentation to many of the economic issues that I have discussed in the past but also looks ahead to the future.

The authors show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the middle class has been doing better in America. They show how people in high tax states are moving to low tax states. And they document the remarkable changes in Ireland due to lowering taxes. I have talked about some of these issues in previous articles and in my radio commentaries. Their book provides ample endnotes and documentation to buttress these conclusions.

What is most interesting about the book is that it was written before the financial meltdown of the last few months. Those of us who write books have to guess what circumstances will be when the book is finally published. These authors probably had less of a lag time, but I doubt any of them anticipated the economic circumstances that we currently find.

Arthur Laffer, in a column in the *Wall Street Journal*, believes that “financial panics, if left alone, rarely cause much damage to the real economy.”[\[5\]](#) But he then points out

that government could not leave this financial meltdown alone. He laments that taxpayers have to pay for these bailouts because homeowners and lenders lost money. He notes: "If the house's value had appreciated, believe you me the overleveraged homeowners and the overly aggressive banks would never have shared their gain with the taxpayers."

He is also concerned with the ability of government to deal with the problem. He says, "Just watch how Congress and Barney Frank run the banks. If you thought they did a bad job running the post office, Amtrak, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and the military, just wait till you see what they'll do with Wall Street."

The reason the authors wrote *The End of Prosperity* was to set forth what has worked in the past as a prescription for the future. They were concerned that tax rates were headed up and not down, that the dollar is falling, and that America was turning it back on trade and globalization. They also were concerned that the federal budget was spiraling out of control and that various campaign promises (health care, energy policy, environmental policy) would actually do more harm than good.

One of their final chapters is titled "The Death of Economic Sanity." They feared that the current push toward more governmental intervention would kill the economy. While they hoped that politicians would go slow instead of launching an arsenal of economy killers, they weren't too optimistic. That is why they called their book *The End of Prosperity*.

## **The Future of Affluence**

Let's see what another economist has to say. The Bible tells us that there is wisdom in many counselors (Proverbs 15:22). So when we see different economists essentially saying the same thing, we should pay attention.



Robert Samuelson, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, talks about "The Future of Affluence."[\[6\]](#) He begins by talking about the major economic dislocations of the last few months:

*"Government has taken over mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The Treasury has made investments in many of the nation's major banks. The Federal Reserve is pumping out \$1 trillion to stabilize credit markets. U.S. unemployment is at 6.1 percent, up from a recent low of 4.4 percent, and headed toward 8 percent, by some estimates."*

Samuelson says that a recovery will take place but we may find it unsatisfying. He believes we will lapse into a state of "affluent deprivation." By that he doesn't mean poverty, but he does mean that there will be a state of mind in which people will feel poorer than they feel right now.

He says that the U.S. economy has benefited for roughly a quarter century "from the expansionary side effects of falling inflation—lower interest rates, greater debt, higher personal wealth—to the point now that we have now overdosed on its pleasures and are suffering a hangover." Essentially, prosperity bred habits, and many of these habits were bad habits. Personal savings went down, and debt and spending went up.

Essentially we are suffering from "affluenza." Actually that is the title of a book published many years ago to define the problem of materialism in general and consumerism in particular.

The authors say that the virus of affluenza "is not confined to the upper classes but has found its ways throughout our society. Its symptoms affect the poor as well as the rich . . . affluenza infects all of us, though in different ways."[\[7\]](#) The authors go on to say that "the affluenza epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called

the American dream.”

Anyone looking at some of the social statistics for the U.S. might conclude that our priorities are out of whack. We spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches than on higher education. We spend much more on auto maintenance than on religious and welfare activities. We have twice as many shopping centers as high schools.

The cure for the virus affluenza is a proper biblical perspective toward life. Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones (Luke 12:18). He is not satisfied with his current situation, but is striving to make it better. Today most of us have adjusted to a life of affluence as normal and need to actively resist the virus of affluenza.

## **Squanderville**

Warren Buffett tells the story of two side-by-side islands of equal size: Thriftville and Squanderville.<sup>{8}</sup> On these islands, land is a capital asset. At first, the people on both islands are at a subsistence level and work eight hours a day to meet their needs. But the Thrifts realize that if they work harder and longer, they can produce a surplus of goods they can trade with the Squanders. So the Thrifts decide to do some serious saving and investing and begin to work sixteen hours a day. They begin exporting to Squanderville.

The people of Squanderville like the idea of working less. They can begin to live their lives free from toil. So they willingly trade for these goods with “Squanderbonds” that are denominated in “Squanderbucks.”

Over time, the citizens of Thriftville accumulate lots of Squanderbonds. Some of the pundits in Squanderville see trouble. They foresee that the Squanders will now have to put in double time to eat and pay off their debt.

At about the same time, the citizens of Thriftville begin to get nervous and wonder if the Squanders will make good on their Squanderbonds (which are essentially IOUs). So the Thrifts start selling their Squanderbonds for Squanderbucks. Then they use the Squanderbucks to buy Squanderville land. Eventually the Thrifts own all of Squanderville.

Now the citizens of Squanderville must pay rent to live on the land which is owned by the Thrifts. The Squanders feel like they have been colonized by purchase rather than conquest. And they also face a horrible set of circumstances. They now must not only work eight hours in order to eat, but they must work additional hours to service the debt and pay Thriftville rent on the land they sold to them.

Does this story sound familiar? It should. Squanderville is America.

Economist Peter Schiff says that the United States has “been getting a free ride on the global gravy train.” He sees other countries starting to reclaim their resources and manufactured goods. As a result, Americans are getting priced out of the market because these other countries are going to enjoy the consumption of goods that Americans previously purchased.

He says: “If America had maintained a viable economy and continued to produce goods instead of merely consuming them, and if we had saved money instead of borrowing, our standard of living could rise with everybody else’s. Instead, we gutted our manufacturing, let our infrastructure decay, and encouraged our citizens to borrow with reckless abandon.”[\[9\]](#)

It appears we have been infected with the virus of affluenza. The root problem is materialism that often breeds discontent. We want more of the world and its possessions rather than more of God and His will in our lives. What a contrast to what Paul says in Philippians where he counts all things to be loss (3:7-8) and instead has learned to be content (4:11). He goes

on to talk about godliness with contentment in 1 Timothy 6:6-7. Contentment is an effective antidote to materialism and the foundation to a proper biblical perspective during these tough economic times.

## Notes

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# On Engaging Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crouch has some questions for Christians:

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



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

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

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

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

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

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