

Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film “Amazing Grace”

The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace,em> a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed[\[1\]](#) transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you’re so inclined, owning. Wilberforce’s story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

Slavery then & now

The term “slavery” usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world’s history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18th Century British slave trade “was legal, lucrative, and brutal.”[\[2\]](#) Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce’s day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.[\[3\]](#)

Latin America’s pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent conference:

My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples...

I don’t like it. I am not proud of it... It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries

to an end?[{4}](#)

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, “today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave.”[{5}](#) “About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States.”[{6}](#)

Relative to the *chattel* slaves of Wilberforce’s day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today’s illegally held human “property” comes cheap—and blends in. Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. “Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world’s third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms dealing.”[{7}](#)

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner, member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. “There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World.”[{8}](#)

An “alliance of modern Wilberforces” includes “lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz,” who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.[{9}](#) They seek to repeat Wilberforce’s success.

Opposition in Wilberforce’s day

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. “...The entire worldview of the British Empire

was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak.”{10}

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.”{11}

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled “Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement” in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, “A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed slavery and the slave trade{12}, was ignored.” Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the “revival of slavery” in Wilberforce’s time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies “...was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of pagans.”{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce’s convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce’s life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

...The moral and social behavior of the entire culture...was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.

Wilberforce's Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life's story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one's day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith, Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children,

certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: “because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries.”

The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he “appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen.”[\[16\]](#) Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* (“by faith alone”) and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”) formed the foundation of Wilberforce’s theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, “He really knew that he was as wicked a sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one’s own sinfulness, it’s very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee.”

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

...The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living... [The “Nominal Christians” or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce’s day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.[\[17\]](#)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."[{18}](#) Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[{19}](#) The status of slave was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. "...Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery...in the ancient world, Paul's words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery, then and for the future."[{20}](#)

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others[{21}](#) (much like contemporary believers who buy freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.[{22}](#)

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

...The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.[{23}](#)

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for "who knows which path leads to God?"

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life{24}—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.
2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/, accessed 3-22-07.
3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276. Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.
4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.
5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, www.worldmag.com/articles/12700, accessed 3-21-07.
6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.
7. *World*, Abraham.
8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day

reality of forced servitude around the world” according to World. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.

9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.

10. “Doing good and helping the poor,” interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: www.worldmag.com/articles/12703, accessed 3-22-07.

11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.

12. “The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: ‘Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.’ However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch.” From Wikipedia entry, “History of Slavery,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2, accessed 3-23-07.

13. Schmidt, 276.

14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07

15. Ibid, entire section.

16. Schmidt, 277.

17. “Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice,” John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, www.worldmag.com/articles/12691, accessed 3-22-07.

18. 2 Corinthians 3:17

19. Galatians 3:28

20. Schmidt, 273.

21. Ibid, 274.

22. Ibid, 289.

23. Ibid, 290.

24. John 14:6

Sex and Violence on Television – A Christian Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson takes a reasoned look at the amount of sex and violence portrayed on television and comes away with a sobering understanding of the intensity of the problem. From a biblical perspective, this level of consumption of disturbing images will result in a deadening of even Christian hearts to the clear call of Scripture to a life of purity in mind and action.

The Extent of the Problem

Is there too much sex and violence on television? Most Americans seem to think so. One survey found that seventy-five percent of Americans felt that television had “too much sexually explicit material.” Moreover, eighty-six percent believed that television had contributed to “a decline in values.”[{1}](#) And no wonder. Channel surfing through the television reveals plots celebrating premarital sex, adultery, and even homosexuality. Sexual promiscuity in the media appears to be at an all-time high. A study of adolescents (ages twelve to seventeen) showed that watching sex on TV influences teens to have sex. Youths were more likely to initiate intercourse as well as other sexual activities.[{2}](#)

A study by the Parents Television Council found that prime time network television is more violent than ever before. In addition, they found that this increasing violence is also of a sexual nature. They found that portrayals of violence are up seventy-five percent since 1998.[{3}](#)

The study also provided expert commentary by Deborah Fisher, Ph.D. She states that children, on average, will be exposed to a thousand murders, rapes, and assaults per year through television. She goes on to warn that early exposure to television violence has “consistently emerged as a significant predictor of later aggression.”[\[4\]](#)

A previous study by the Parents Television Council compared the changes in sex, language, and violence between decades. The special report entitled *What a Difference a Decade Makes* found many shocking things.[\[5\]](#)

First, on a per-hour basis, sexual material more than tripled in the last decade. For example, while references to homosexuality were once rare, now they are mainstream. Second, the study found that foul language increased five-fold in just a decade. They also found that the intensity of violent incidents significantly increased.

These studies provide the best quantifiable measure of what has been taking place on television. No longer can defenders of television say that TV is “not that bad.” The evidence is in, and television is more offensive than ever.

Christians should not be surprised by these findings. Sex and violence have always been part of the human condition because of our sin nature (Romans 3:23), but modern families are exposed to a level of sex and violence that is unprecedented. Obviously, this will have a detrimental effect. The Bible teaches that “as a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7, KJV). What we see and hear affects our actions. And while this is true for adults, it is especially true for children.

Television’s Impact on Behavior

What is the impact of watching television on subsequent behavior? There are abundant studies which document that what

you see, hear, and read does affect your perception of the world and your behavior.

The American Academy of Pediatrics in 2000 issued a “Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children.” They cited over one thousand studies, including reports from the Surgeon General’s office and the National Institute of Mental Health. They say that these studies “point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children.”[\[6\]](#)

In 1992, the American Psychological Association concluded that forty years of research on the link between TV violence and real-life violence has been ignored, stating that “the ‘scientific debate is over’ and calling for federal policy to protect society.”[\[7\]](#)

A 1995 poll of children ten to sixteen years of age showed that children recognize that “what they see on television encourages them to take part in sexual activity too soon, to show disrespect for their parents, [and] to lie and to engage in aggressive behavior.” More than two-thirds said they are influenced by television; seventy-seven percent said TV shows too much sex before marriage, and sixty-two percent said sex on television and in movies influences their peers to have sexual relations when they are too young. Two-thirds also cited certain programs featuring dysfunctional families as encouraging disrespect toward parents.

The report reminds us that television sets the baseline standard for the entire entertainment industry. Most homes (ninety-eight percent) have a television set. And according to recent statistics, that TV in the average household is on more than eight hours each day.[\[8\]](#)

By contrast, other forms of entertainment (such as movies, DVDs, CDs) must be sought out and purchased. Television is universally available, and thus has the most profound effect

on our culture.

As Christians we need to be aware of the impact television has on us and our families. The studies show us that sex and violence on TV can affect us in subtle yet profound ways. We can no longer ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perceptions and behaviors. So we should be concerned about the impact television (as well as other forms of media) has on our neighbors and our society as a whole.

Sex on Television

Most Americans believe there is too much sex on television. A survey conducted in 1994 found that seventy-five percent of Americans felt that television had “too much sexually explicit material.” Moreover, eighty-six percent believed that television had contributed to “a decline in values.”[\[9\]](#) As we documented earlier, sexual promiscuity on television is at an all-time high.

I have previously written about the subject of pornography and talked about the dangerous effects of sex, especially when linked with violence.[\[10\]](#) Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein document the volatile impact of sex and violence in the media. They say, “There can be relatively long-term, anti-social effects of movies that portray sexual violence as having positive consequences.”[\[11\]](#)

In a message given by Donnerstein, he concluded with this warning and observation: “If you take normal males and expose them to graphic violence against women in R-rated films, the research doesn’t show that they’ll commit acts of violence against women. It doesn’t say they will go out and commit rape. But it does demonstrate that they become less sensitized to violence against women, they have less sympathy for rape victims, and their perceptions and attitudes and values about

violence change.”[{12}](#)

It is important to remember that these studies are applicable not just to hard-core pornography. Many of the studies used films that are readily shown on television (especially cable television) any night of the week. And many of the movies shown today in theaters are much more explicit than those shown just a few years ago.

Social commentator Irving Kristol asked this question in a *Wall Street Journal* column: “Can anyone really believe that soft porn in our Hollywood movies, hard porn in our cable movies and violent porn in our ‘rap’ music is without effect? Here the average, overall impact is quite discernible to the naked eye. And at the margin, the effects, in terms most notably of illegitimacy and rape, are shockingly visible.”[{13}](#)

Christians must be careful that sexual images on television don’t conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Instead we should use discernment. Philippians 4:8 says, “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.”

Sex on television is at an all-time high, so we should be even more careful to screen what we and our families see. Christians should be concerned about the images we see on television.

Violence on Television

Children’s greatest exposure to violence comes from television. TV shows, movies edited for television, and video games expose young children to a level of violence unimaginable just a few years ago. The American Psychological Association says the average child watches eight thousand televised murders and one hundred thousand acts of violence

before finishing elementary school.{14} That number more than doubles by the time he or she reaches age eighteen.

At a very young age, children are seeing a level of violence and mayhem that in the past may have been seen only by a few police officers and military personnel. TV brings hitting, kicking, stabbings, shootings, and dismemberment right into homes on a daily basis.

The impact on behavior is predictable. Two prominent Surgeon General reports in the last two decades link violence on television and aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health issued a ninety-four page report, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties*. They found “overwhelming” scientific evidence that “excessive” violence on television spills over into the playground and the streets.{15} In one five-year study of 732 children, “several kinds of aggression, conflicts with parents, fighting and delinquency, were all positively correlated with the total amount of television viewing.”{16}

Long-term studies are even more disturbing. University of Illinois psychologist Leonard Eron studied children at age eight and then again at eighteen. He found that television habits established at the age of eight influenced aggressive behavior throughout childhood and adolescent years. The more violent the programs preferred by boys in the third grade, the more aggressive their behavior, both at that time and ten years later. He therefore concluded that “the effect of television violence on aggression is cumulative.”{17}

Twenty years later Eron and Rowell Huesmann found the pattern continued. He and his researchers found that children who watched significant amounts of TV violence at the age of eight were consistently more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spouse abuse at thirty.{18} They concluded that “heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the

causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of intelligence.”[\[19\]](#)

Violent images on television affect children in adverse ways and Christians should be concerned about the impact.

Biblical Perspective

Television is such a part of our lives that we often are unaware of its subtle and insidious influence. Nearly every home has a television set, so we tend to take it for granted and are often oblivious to its influence.

I’ve had many people tell me that they watch television, and that it has no impact at all on their worldview or behavior. However the Bible teaches that “as a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). What we view and what we think about affects our actions. And there is abundant psychological evidence that television viewing affects our worldview.

George Gerbner and Larry Gross, working at the Annenberg School of Communications in the 1970s, found that heavy television viewers live in a scary world. “We have found that people who watch a lot of TV see the real world as more dangerous and frightening than those who watch very little. Heavy viewers are less trustful of their fellow citizens, and more fearful of the real world.”[\[20\]](#) Heavy viewers also tended to overestimate their likelihood of being involved in a violent crime. They defined heavy viewers as those adults who watch an average of four or more hours of television a day. Approximately one-third of all American adults fit that category.

And if this is true of adults, imagine how television violence affects children’s perceptions of the world. Gerbner and Gross say, “Imagine spending six hours a day at the local movie

house when you were twelve years old. No parent would have permitted it. Yet, in our sample of children, nearly half of the twelve-year-olds watch an average of six or more hours of television per day." This would mean that a large portion of young people fit into the category of heavy viewers. Their view of the world must be profoundly shaped by TV. Gerbner and Gross therefore conclude, "If adults can be so accepting of the reality of television, imagine its effect on children. By the time the average American child reaches public school, he has already spent several years in an electronic nursery school."[\[21\]](#)

Television viewing affects both adults and children in subtle ways. We must not ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perceptions and behaviors. Our worldview and our subsequent actions are affected by what we see on television. Christians, therefore, must be careful not to let television conform us to the world (Romans 12:2), but instead should develop a Christian worldview.

Notes

1. National Family Values: A Survey of Adults conducted by Voter/Consumer Research (Bethesda, MD, 1994).
2. Rebecca Collins, et. al., "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 114 (3), September 2004.
3. Kristen Fyfe, "More Violence, More Sex, More Troubled Kids," *Culture and Media Institute*, 11 January 2007, www.cultureandmediainstitute.org.
4. Ibid.
5. Parents Television Council, Special Report: What a Difference a Decade Makes, 30 March 2000, www.parentstv.org.
6. Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children, *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 26 July 2000.
7. David Grossman, "What the Surgeon General Found; As Early as 1972, the Link Was Clear Between Violent TV and Movies and

Violent Youths," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 October 1999, B-11.
"Average home has more TVs than people," *USA Today*, 21 September 2006, www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2006-09-21-homes-tv_x.htm

9. National Family Values: A Survey of Adults conducted by Voter/Consumer Research (Bethesda, MD, 1994).
10. Kerby Anderson, "[The Pornography Plague](#)," Probe Ministries, 1997, <http://www.probe.org/content/view/821/169/> .
11. Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic, 1984).
12. Edward Donnerstein, "What the Experts Say," a forum at the Industry-wide Leadership Conference on Violence in Television Programming, 2 August 1993, in *National Council for Families and Television Report*, 9.
13. Irving Kristol, "Sex, Violence and Videotape," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 May 1994.
14. John Johnston, "Kids: Growing Up Scared," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 20, 1994, p. E01.
15. Cited in "Warning from Washington," *Time*, 17 May 1982, 77.
16. James Mann, "What Is TV Doing to America?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 2 August 1982, 27.
17. Leo Bogart, "Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined that TV Violence Is Moderately Dangerous to Your Child's Mental Health," *Public Opinion* (Winter, 1972-73): 504.
18. Peter Plagen, "Violence in Our Culture," *Newsweek*, 1 April 1991, 51.
19. Ibid.
20. George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer," *Psychology Today*, April 1976.
21. Ibid.

Crusader Terrorists? – How Should Christians Respond

In this day of multiculturalism and political correctness, Christians should have been prepared to learn that a New Jersey school district recently chose Christian Crusaders as an imaginary terrorist group for its first live action hostage response drill. To portray the terrorists, the school district organizers made up a right-wing fundamentalist group that denies the separation of church and state. Then, they created a fake hostage situation instigated by the supposedly angry parent of a student expelled for praying.

The stated goal of the event was summarized nicely by the district superintendent. He claimed that “You perform as you practice. We need to practice under conditions as real as possible in order to evaluate our procedures and plans so that they’re as effective as possible.” While many comments could be made about the phrase as real as possible, the most critical aspect of this issue is a deeper consideration.

Sadly, just as the impact of the aforementioned PC dogma on our schools is predictable, so is the vehement response of the local Christian community to this perceived offense. One Christian demanded that a public apology be given by school officials, along with their resignations. Other critics pointed out the obvious bigotry against Christians and the absurdity of the scenario itself. Christians have the legal right to pray in schools, and they are far more likely to bring their lawyers than their guns.

Still others mentioned that this is not the first time a school district had deliberately steered clear of the obvious terrorist groups, deciding instead to pick on Christians. For example, three years ago a Michigan school district substituted a group of crazed Christian homeschoolers called

Wackos Against Schools and Education for their mock terrorism drill to avoid offending any Muslims.

Unfair scenarios such as these have a lot of Christians upset, and in a perfect world, they have a right to be. But is this the best response to events such as these? How should an ambassador for Christ handle them? May I suggest an alternative?

Instead of the immediate declaration of how persecuted and indignant we Christians are, perhaps we should ask ourselves why school officials see the followers of Jesus in this light in the first place. Are we doing anything that prompts this kind of stereotyping? Unfortunately, many school administrators only hear from outraged believers when there is a problem. Rarely are Christians viewed as beneficial to the school and surrounding community.

I know of a small evangelical church in New Zealand that was marginalized as an almost cultish group until they decided to pick a school to bless each spring. Church members take one week each year to clean, paint, and repair at the church's expense whatever needs fixing at the selected school. Their Christ-like service has completely changed the surrounding community's attitude regarding the church, and school officials have even attended services as a result of their gratitude. A similar scenario played out recently in a small village in China. An underground church went from being persecuted to being appreciated when they decided to restore a bridge vital to that city.

It is relatively easy and natural to respond to negative stereotyping, even persecution, with a demand for political rights and privileges. It is far more difficult and supernatural to bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.

Reflection on the Virginia Tech Shootings

We moved our household this weekend, so I had not heard anything about the shootings at Virginia Tech until that same night. Next morning, I began reading articles to bring myself up to speed. The situation hurts. It was a student at the university, not some outsider. The gunman was 23, only three years younger than me.

Another person from my generation lashing out in violence; this is not the first time it's happened. This situation brings to mind several other recent occurrences, both locally and nationally. On a personal level, I recently found out that a guy from my high school who also graduated from my alma mater, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), committed suicide recently. He was 26, an accomplished musician, national merit scholar, and earned a computer science degree.

During my junior year at UTD, a friend of mine at a Christian university came home for Christmas. While she was in Dallas, she received word that her dormitory roommate had committed suicide. She was a bright girl with a promising future and was apparently from a Christian family.

A month after I had graduated UTD, a news report came out that a student drugged, raped, and assaulted another student—during an exam study session.

Lastly, while reading about the Virginia Tech gunman's angst that finally snapped into a violent rage, I could not help but remember the Columbine shootings. That report came out my senior year in high school. The two teenage perpetrators were my age.

With all of these cases of violent crimes on campuses among young, educated people, I have to wonder, *What is wrong with my generation?* Why are these twenty-somethings breaking like this? Crime and violence are a part of the fallen world that we live in, but the inordinate amount of violent and sexual crimes on campuses is staggering.

My generation has received the most “information” from media than any other. We have seen the rise of technological advances that only Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) could dream of. We have grown up thinking that every opportunity and possibility is at our fingertips (or at the click of a mouse). We have some of the fastest, most efficient cars, the biggest malls, and some of the best plastic surgery that money can buy. The nation is rich, and although material resources may not satisfy us in the long run, they sure feel good right now. We have medications for nearly everything, and beauty products for everything else. But apparently all of the riches, technology, beauty, and opportunities still leave us in despair—for some, despair to the point of death. Why? Is this an artifact for only this generation, or does the Bible speak to the despair plaguing us?

Consider the words of Solomon:

“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself... I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces... Also whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:4,7-8,10-11).

Just as Solomon was blessed and lived in a time of education, materialism, and plenty, I think his hopelessness rings true of my generation as well. Compared to prior generations, we have it all, and yet it only fills us with despair that is really no different. There is a void that only God can fill. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes that the end of the matter is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments (12:13). In other words, when all is said and done, no amount of education, riches, or technology can compare to knowing the Lord through His Son Jesus Christ.

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Deadly College Shootings in U.S.

Some deadly shootings at U.S. colleges or universities, listed by number of fatalities:

April 16, 2007

A gunman kills 32 people in a dorm and a classroom building at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. The suspect then dies by gunshot himself.

Aug. 1, 1966

Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

July 12, 1976

Edward Charles Allaway, a custodian in the library of California State University, Fullerton, fatally shoots seven

fellow employees and wounds two others. Mentally ill, Allaway believed his colleagues were pornographers and were forcing his estranged wife to appear in their movies. A judge found him innocent by reason of insanity in 1977 after a jury was unable to reach a verdict and he was committed to the state mental health system.

Nov. 1, 1991

Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including four members of the physics department, one other person is wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970

Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Oct. 28, 2002

Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Sept. 2, 2006

Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Jan. 16, 2002

Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from

Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 15, 1996

Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Jan. 26, 1995

Former law student Wendell Williamson shoots two men to death and injures a police officer in Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 2, 2007

University of Washington researcher Rebecca Griego, 26, is shot to death in her office by former boyfriend Jonathan Rowan who then turned the gun on himself.

Aug. 28, 2000

James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Source: Associated Press

Accessed Apr. 17, 2007 © 2007 MSNBC.com
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18137414/>

Civil Discourse?

Conservative Bridgebuilder

Think about the last time you channel-surfed the television news talk shows. Chances are, you encountered at least a few talking heads yelling at each other. Often, controversy reigns. Politics, religion, sex, or sports can ignite passion that can spill into incivility—on radio and TV, in workplaces, universities, neighborhoods, and families.

Are you exhausted or disgusted with debates and discussions that become food fights? This article considers some inspiring stories of risk-takers who build bridges of understanding across philosophical, political, and religious lines. They're helping put the "civil" back into "civil discourse" and have good lessons for us all.

First up is conservative commentator Cal Thomas. As vice president of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," Thomas saw his share of partisan political debate. But he tells a humorous story about civility.[\[1\]](#)

The Moral Majority often mentioned Senator Ted Kennedy in its fund appeals. The senator and his liberal friends often mentioned Falwell in their own letters, each side alerting their constituents to concerns about the other.

Once, by mistake, Falwell's group sent Kennedy a "Moral Majority membership card." When *The Washington Post* asked Thomas if his organization would request the card back, Cal replied, "No, we don't believe any man is beyond redemption. In fact, we'd like to invite the senator to visit Lynchburg [Virginia] and visit Jerry Falwell's school." The *Post* ran the quote.

A couple of weeks later, a Kennedy aid phoned to say, "The

senator has decided to accept your invitation.” “What invitation?” replied Thomas. “The one for the senator to visit Lynchburg,” came the response.

Kennedy made the trip, dined with Falwell and gave a warmly-received speech on tolerance and diversity at Liberty Baptist College (now Liberty University). Thomas says that began his own “treasured friendship” with Kennedy, who met with Falwell “on several subsequent occasions.” Cal notes, “More of eternal value was accomplished that night and in the subsequent relationship than years of political bashing and one-upmanship had produced.”

Thomas and his friend Bob Beckel, a liberal Democratic strategist who was Walter Mondale’s presidential campaign manager, have co-written lively *USA Today* columns called “Common Ground.” The two examine important issues—agreeing and disagreeing—but remain good friends. Disagreement needn’t torpedo friendship.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

What do you get when you assign a leftist Jewish journalist to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts?

Maybe you’d expect mutual animosity: “Those wacko God-squaders are at it again,” or “The biased secular humanist liberal media is ruining America.”

But this leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all. He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends.

[Mark Pinsky](#)’s book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*, [\[2\]](#) tells how this “nice Jewish boy from

Jersey”{3} ended up attending church “more often than many Christians” and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue.{4} During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on major evangelical leaders and had little connection with grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: in the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts. Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, “poor, uneducated and easy to command.”{5}

Disclosure: Pinsky, whom I’ve known since our university days, is a personal friend. His *Duke Chronicle* column was titled “The Readable Radical.” He was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy, and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Mark’s personal stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”{6}

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.{7}

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

Religious and political conservatives often complain about bias in secular universities. Here's how two university professors faced that issue in their own teaching

Elizabeth Kiss is president of Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Before that, she was a Duke political science professor and director of Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics.[\[8\]](#) With public policy lecturer Alma Blount, she wrote an intriguing 2005 article, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias."[\[9\]](#) They note:

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, we've witnessed the deep divide in this country around themes of religion and politics, the war in Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy. As faculty members at a leading university, we've also been struck by an uncomfortable realization: we need to confront liberal bias in the academy.

They cite two seminal experiences. In one, "colleagues tried to block an invitation to a conservative faculty member to speak in a class." In another, comments about "how liberal bias threatens open inquiry" met anger and disbelief.

Kiss and Blount considered how their own liberal assumptions subtly influenced their teaching. "Creating a culture of open inquiry on campus," they write, "means we first must face our everyday temptation toward political bias." They continue:

Political bias, from either the left or the right, is corrosive of open inquiry. It is the "in" joke or flippant comment suggesting that all rational people are on your side. It portrays opponents in the worst possible light, suggesting they are ignorant, self-righteous, or evil. Bias breeds an enclave mentality that encourages smug and lazy thinking. It blinds us to the complexity of public issues.

Blount and Kiss are arguing not for academic neutrality, but rather for conviction with disclosure, appreciating dissent as part of the learning process. They advocate political diversity in assigned readings, welcoming differing student viewpoints in class, inviting guest speakers of various perspectives, plus modeling dialogue and debate. “Confronting liberal bias won’t be easy,” they conclude. “But it’s the right thing to do.”

Their refreshing candor is all too rare. An excellent example for all sides in making civil discourse more “civil.”

“Gotcha” Politics

President Bill Clinton’s Special Counsel and scandal spokesperson was Lanny Davis, a prominent attorney and now-ubiquitous television figure.

Now, some of my readers may consider Bill and Hillary Clinton to be Mr. and Mrs. Antichrist. But I ask you to please segment your emotions about the Clintons momentarily to consider their former coworker’s passionate appeal for civility in public discourse.

Davis, a liberal Democrat, has authored an important book, *Scandal: How “Gotcha” Politics is Destroying America*.[{10}](#) He says, “The politics of healthy debate have been replaced by the politics of personal destruction, and the media, politicians, lawyers, and the Internet revolution are all complicit,” as are the American people who reward the politicians and consume the media.[{11}](#) With admirable transparency, he admits concerning parts of his past, “I am ashamed to say all this today—but I was just as much caught up in the gotcha culture as partisans on the Republican right.”[{12}](#) He regrets having jumped into “food fight” TV on occasion,[{13}](#) and admits to some past blindness to “politically expedient hypocrisy.”[{14}](#)

Davis often seeks to build bridges. During the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey “had been barred from delivering an anti-abortion, ‘pro-life’ speech to the convention.” Davis, who is pro-choice, asked some of his fellow liberal delegates to join him in a resolution to allow Casey to speak, in the name of freedom of expression and tolerance of dissent. Alas, he was shouted down.{15}

In 2000, his longtime friend Senator Joseph Lieberman—Democratic vice presidential candidate and an orthodox Jew—garnered liberal criticism for “bringing up God too much.” Reflecting on a famous Abraham Lincoln speech invoking divine assistance and encouraging prayer, Lanny wondered, “Would my liberal friends have regarded Abraham Lincoln as ‘bringing up God too much?’”{16} He decries intolerance and “contempt or disrespect for the deeply religious and those who believe in the power of prayer.”{17}

At the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, rock star Bono, advocating bipartisan cooperation to fight poverty, cited Jesus’ statement, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”{18} “You cannot believe in Bono’s words,” comments Davis, “without being tolerant of those whose religious faith leads them to political views vastly different from that of a pro-choice Democrat.”{19}

May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

How can we cultivate respect and learn to disagree without being disagreeable? Maybe you’ll enjoy this story.

I entered university in the turbulent late 1960s. The Vietnam War, Civil rights, sexual revolution, and campus upheaval

permeated our lives. The fraternity I joined was quite diverse. We had political liberals and conservatives; athletes and scholars; atheists, agnostics, Christians, and Jews. Late night bull sessions kept us engaged and learning from each other.

When I was a freshman and a new believer in Jesus, our fraternity agreed to allow a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting in the chapter room. I posted a sign inside the front door for all the guys to see, announcing the date and time. As a gag, at the bottom I wrote "Attendance Mandatory." Needless to say, the sign quickly filled with graffiti. My favorite said, "Jesus and His Lambda Chi Alpha disciples will be autographing Bibles in the hallway during intermission."

The night of the meeting, one fraternity brother welcomed visitors from the head of the stairway, literally tied to a cross. Some members heckled the speaker, who gracefully engaged them in dialogue. He demonstrated how to disagree but remain friendly.

Our diversity taught me lots about tolerance and civility. We lived, worked, studied, and played together and forged friendships that have endured despite time and distance. Many of us still gather for reunions and still enjoy each others' company. That environment was a crucible that helped me develop communication and relationship skills.

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

- 1. Learn about views different from your own. Read what others believe and ascertain why they feel and think as they do. Ask yourself how you might feel in their situation.*
- 2. Discover Common Ground. Starting where you agree can help overcome many emotional barriers.*
- 3. Befriend people with differing views. Friendly conversation or shared meals can help open hearts.*

Conservatives, take a liberal to lunch, and vice versa.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, had good advice on how to deal with those who differ. It applies in many contexts. He wrote:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. [\[20\]](#)

Notes

1. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 55-56.
2. Mark I. Pinsky, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).
3. Ibid., vii.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., vii.
7. Ibid., 148.
8. <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu>
9. Alma Blount and Elizabeth Kiss, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias," *Duke University News & Communications*, May 19, 2005; http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2005/05/politicalbias._print.ht, accessed March 4, 2007. Article first appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of the *KIE Connection* newsletter, produced by the Kenan Institute for Ethics; <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/newsletter/KIE.pdf>, accessed March 4, 2007.
10. Lanny Davis, *Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics is Destroying America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
11. Ibid., 199.
12. Ibid., 188.
13. Ibid., 88.

14. Ibid., 125-126.
15. Ibid., 211-212.
16. Ibid., 212.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Luke 6:31 NIV.
19. Davis, op. cit., 213.
20. Colossians 4:5-6 NIV.

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A Christian Response to the Horror at Virginia Tech

Many of us found ourselves glued to the television, watching videos of the events surrounding the mass murder in Blacksburg, Virginia. A day like all other days for thousands of college students, faculty, administrators, and all the rest that make up the mini-city of Virginia Tech University suddenly turned into a waking nightmare, the kind of experience that happens on TV but never really happens to us. Or so we think. I've been to the campus in Blacksburg; it isn't the kind of place one would imagine mass murder. But where *would* one expect such a thing, except in far away places like Iraq?

In such situations, our emotions typically take the lead since it takes awhile to get all the information that informs our thinking. What emotions do we experience? Shock? Fear, as we think about students of our own there or at similar campuses? Sadness for the loss of life, especially for such senseless loss? Another sense we have, sometimes not till after the initial shock has worn off, is moral outrage, a deep-seated sense that what happened was wrong: not in terms of economics

or simply the proper functioning of an organization, but in terms of moral wrong. Deep down we know there is good and there is evil, and this event was evil.

But upon what do we base this sense? Before you just brush the question aside with the ubiquitous “Duh!” or ask incredulously, “What kind of question is *that*?!” pause a moment and give it some thought. Why is such a thing wrong? After all, if we push a Darwinian, naturalistic worldview to the limit, we might think ourselves justified in seeing this kind of horror as really no different from animals attacking and killing each other. Keep in mind that the Nazis were able to carry out their slaughter because they had relegated Jews to a lower level in the evolutionary chain.

The first point I want to make is that *Christianity explains our moral outrage*. It’s explained by the fact that we are created in God’s image and have in us a sense of moral right and wrong. The apostle Paul wrote that “the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts,” that our “consciences [are] also bearing witness, and [our] thoughts now accusing, now even defending [us]” (Romans 2:15). God is the standard of moral right and wrong, and we reflect that knowledge in ourselves. Of course, we can deaden that knowledge; a conscience can be trained to ignore promptings to do good.

Have you seen someone get angry (or maybe you got angry yourself) when a person who commits such an evil act commits suicide immediately afterwards? Oh, I know: some people ultimately want the person to die himself. But there’s something about being denied to express our moral outrage at the person. We want justice for the crime committed, and we don’t always want it to be a quick and dirty justice. Frankly, we’d like the person to suffer and know what he’s suffering for.

How do we explain our desire for justice? What I described above is more a desire for vengeance. However, we do want

justice. We want the person to face up to the charges, to hear the condemnation (consider the trials where families of victims get to speak their minds to the accused). We want him to know he did wrong and to know he's going to suffer the consequences, and then we want justice meted out.

Along the same lines that Christianity explains moral outrage, it also *explains our desire for justice*. We know some things are morally wrong and are deserving of punishment. And we want to make a strong enough impression on the guilty that he (or observers of the case) doesn't do it again. God is very interested in justice. A quick search in the New International Version lists almost one hundred twenty instances of the word "justice" in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love" (33:5). "Truth is nowhere to be found," God said through Isaiah, "and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice" (Isa. 59:15). And, "Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:15-17).

This isn't just an Old Testament concern. In the New Testament we have this promise: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

A question comes naturally to mind. If God is so interested in justice, why doesn't He fulfill it now? This is an extremely important question. However, it's one I'm going to forego for now (search Probe's Web site for articles on the problem of evil; Sue Bohlin's article "[The Value of Suffering](#)" is a good start). The long and short of it is that we don't know just what God is up to. We can hazard some guesses. C. S. Lewis said that suffering is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf

world.”

Let’s say we *can’t* give an answer to the question, Why is evil allowed? What then? If that’s the primary criterion for accepting a particular religion or philosophy as true, we will be able to accept none, not even secularism!

What, then? Where does that leave us? Christianity does have an answer to that: *Christianity offers hope*. Even in the worst of situations, the person who has received the grace of God in salvation has the hope of a future in which death has no place. This isn’t “hope” as in cross-your-fingers hope, like, “I sure hope the game doesn’t get rained out this weekend.” In the New Testament, hope is presented as the assurance of the future. We have the hope of eternal life—of that life which has no room for death—by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The apostle Peter wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus proved that He had broken the hold of death through His own death on the cross by breaking free from the tomb and appearing live to hundreds of people. Because He rose and conquered death, we who trust in Him will, too.

Hope is a fundamental ingredient of Christianity. Faith enables us to say “yes” today to what we know we should do; hope enables us to say “yes” to the future, because it rests in the hands of the God Who loves us. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is in Romans. Paul wrote: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). This is God’s desire for us, to live in the (sure) hope that our future is secure in Him.

One more thing. Christianity isn’t just some set of religious dogmas and practices that keeps some of us off the streets on Sunday mornings! *Christianity provides a way of life that*

minimizes such tragedies. It provides both the framework within which we order our lives *and* the ability to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Blaise Pascal held out the value of Christian morality as an enticement to see if Christianity is true. Even if it isn't true, he said, look at the kind of life it calls us to lead! Thomas Jefferson, who so rejected the miraculous in the Bible that he edited out of the New Testament all such things, recognized a high level of morality in its pages. And when you ask people who the best exemplars of goodness have been in history, Jesus is typically on the list, even the lists of those who don't believe He is the divine Son of God.

The point is that built into Christianity is a structure of life that prohibits people hurting each other. Of course, this isn't to suggest that Christians never do wrong! But it *is* to say that we have more than just pragmatic reasons for doing right. We do right to honor God, to honor people, because we believe in moral right and wrong. Sometimes we do the right thing—only because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the rewards! However, I would be dishonest if I didn't note that there *does* lie in our future many blessings for obedient lives.

But Christianity goes beyond simply providing a moral code. It also provides the power to follow it! The Holy Spirit somehow resides in us (one of the mysteries of the faith!), and He transforms us, changes us through a number of ways into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:5-17; 12:1,2; Gal. 5:16-26).

To sum up: Christianity explains our moral outrage at the mass murders at Virginia Tech this week. It explains our desire for justice, and guarantees that it will be carried out eventually. It offers real hope, hope that is sure, for those who suffer. And it provides a way for people to live with one another without having a reason to give in to such evil impulses.

It's likely that some people will read this who aren't Christians. If you're one of them, I'd like to ask you to consider thoughtfully what I've said about Christianity, but also consider what *you* believe. You may be an adherent of another religion or philosophy, or you may simply be a secularist who believes in God but believes He doesn't really have much to do with our lives. My question is this: If you agree that the issues I've raised are important, how does your belief system answer them? If it *does* answer them, do the answers seem plausible? Is there good reason to believe them? If not, maybe the whole belief system needs to be evaluated.

If you'd like to know more about a Christian understanding of these issues, hunt around on our Web site for other articles. Or [send us an e-mail](#). You can even use the old-fashioned method of calling on the phone!

We'd love to hear from you.

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Virginia Tech Massacre: Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I've found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they

preferred I speak on death and dying: [One Minute After Death](#). Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn't claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

Death's Shuddering Finality

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor [Liviu Librescu](#), an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.[{1}](#)

God and Evil?

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^{2} He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

"Almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent," [Coffin told Religion and Ethics Newsweekly](#), "and it's not God's doing. It's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God."

"When [people] see the innocent suffering," continued Coffin, "every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, 'God, how could you let this happen?' it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: 'How could you let this happen?'"^{3}

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, "People who have never met you are praying for you.... In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God.... 'Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'"^{4} Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

Notes

1. Laurie Copans, "Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings," Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1>, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie

Reitman, "Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students," Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007;

<http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg>, accessed April 18, 2007.

2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine's April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at <http://www.vbdems.org/>, accessed April 18, 2007.

3. "Profile: William Sloane Coffin," Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t>, accessed April 18, 2007.

4. Text of the president's April 17, 2007 speech at the Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at <http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa>, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

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Paris Hilton and What We Want

Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton.

Please excuse the repetition, but I want this article to score highly in Google searches.

You see, [Google Zeitgeist](#), the mega-search engine's report on its most popular search topics, says the heiress scored number one on 2006 Google News searches. The report presents a glimpse of the "spirit of the times," giving clues to websurfers' interests.

In news (yes, I said "news," not "entertainment") searches,

Paris beat Orlando Bloom, cancer, and Hurricane Katrina. Borat and Hezbollah topped “Who is” searches. Among U.S. searches for “Scandal,” the [Duke Lacrosse](#) episode took three of the first four slots.

What else do people want to know about? Google’s top-ten lists in various categories include MySpace, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise, Britney Spears, Paul McCartney, Pamela Anderson, Reggie Bush, and Clay Aiken.

Why do celebrities and entertainment rank so high? Perhaps it’s the desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. Maybe boredom explains some celebrity obsession. And don’t rule out diversion.

For some—maybe many—daily life ranges from harried to overwhelming: soured relationships, job conflict, financial pressure, health distress. Diverting focus can ease your troubled mind, at least temporarily.

Of course, everyone needs mental and emotional breaks. Diversion can be a healthy coping mechanism—until it becomes obsessive. Then it can lead to denying reality, perhaps obscuring genuine wants and needs.

Suppose we had a mind/heart/soul reader to discover what people really want once their basic physical needs are met. What would we find? Psychologist Abraham Maslow’s renowned hierarchy of basic needs includes safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.[{1}](#) Perhaps our soul reader would detect desires for acceptance, thriving personal friendships, peace of mind, health, security.

Maslow also realized that several profound fears—including the fear of death—trouble humanity.[{2}](#) Our soul reader might find that people also want an answer to death.

Anthropologist Ernest Becker argued in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, [The Denial of Death](#),[{3}](#) that much human behavior

can be explained by a deep desire to deny death's reality, to repress "the terror of death." No wonder. Which would you enjoy more, right this minute: contemplating your own death and its aftermath . . . or reading, exercising, web- or channel surfing, conversing, partying, working, shopping, etc.?

If we don't have a solution to fear of death, we can invent ways to avoid thinking about it. Alas, attractive and even worthwhile pursuits can become enslaving. Amassing the most "toys"; rat-race schedules; obsession with career, job, education, sports or even friends can insulate people from facing their own mortality.

The biblical book of Hebrews presents a similar analysis of the human dilemma, reasoning that people "have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying." [{4}](#) It claims that Jesus died to "deliver" people from this slavery so they might connect with God in time and eternity.

It seems morbid to always be thinking about your own death. But could avoiding it altogether constitute unhealthy denial? Could excessive focus on certain pursuits become risky diversion from life's real issues, like personal meaning, personal worth, fulfilling relationships, and what Sigmund Freud called "the painful riddle of death"? [{5}](#)

Could obsession with Paris Hilton and her *Google Zeitgeist* pals conceal deep longings, insecurities and fears in individual websurfers and in society at large?

As the esteemed British philosopher and rocker Sir Mick Jagger [famously counseled](#), "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometime . . . you just might find you get what you need." [{6}](#) A friendly question for my fellow websurfers: Is what you want, what you need?

Notes

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Responding to Poverty – As a Christian

Poverty's Devastating Effects

I can still remember the feelings of curiosity, confusion and discomfort I felt as I watched the young boys. "What did those kids want?" I wondered.

As a child visiting Cuba with my parents, I was startled when some boys at a city park opened our taxi doors, then held out their hands. Later I asked my mother, "Did they work there? Did they want a tip?" She gently told me they were begging. My young upper-middle-class North American sensibilities were jolted by the harsh reality of poverty I had never seen.

One summer during university, while visiting Tijuana, Mexico, I was stunned to see people living in the city dump. Later that summer, I spent time with a friend in one of Miami's ghettos. One day, as I drove away, I noticed an ambulance headed toward the apartment building near where my friend hung out. The next day, my friend told me a woman had shot the man who was trying to seduce her, then she shot herself. Shocking as that news was for me, almost as much so was my friend's nonchalance. He seemed accustomed to events like this.

Those experiences kindled my personal interest in this theme. What is poverty? Why does it exist? How does it destroy minds and souls as well as bodies? What is a biblical perspective on poverty? And what should we do about it?

Income level and standard of living are often-used but insufficient measures of poverty. Some townships in South Africa and shanty towns in the Philippines make some North American housing projects seem like the Ritz.

Localized "relative deprivation" (i.e., large socioeconomic disparity between the poor and middle class) can multiply feelings of low self-esteem. Many social scientists emphasize psychological manifestations of poverty. Yale psychologist Ira Goldenberg defined poverty as "a psychological process which destroys the young before they can live and the aged before they can die. . . . [It] is a condition of being in which one's past and future meet in the present—and go no further."[^{\[1\]}](#)

The precise economic line may be difficult to draw, but

poverty's effects can be devastating. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs says, "More than 8 million people around the world die each year because they are too poor to stay alive. Every morning our newspapers could report, 'More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty.'" [\[2\]](#) They die from disease, lack of medicine, unsafe drinking water.

Homeless Assistance

The little girl was sleeping so peacefully on a cot in the nursery playroom. As I watched her, I imagined how she might have felt only a few days earlier, maybe trying to sleep in the tropical heat under a noisy highway overpass. Now she was inside a lovely, air conditioned room with nice toys. She and families just like hers could feel safe, clean and protected at Miami's Homeless Assistance Center, a facility organized and run through a coalition of community leaders, government agencies, churches, and faith-based organizations.

By its twelfth year, Miami's Community Partnership for Homeless had helped over twenty-seven thousand men, women and children leave the streets for a better life. Their Homeless Assistance Centers are a community success story in which private and public sectors teamed to create a national model for eliminating homelessness. Would you believe all this started from a church Bible class?

My friend Alvah Chapman served Knight Ridder Publishers as president and chairman for fourteen years. (Knight Ridder owned, for example, the *Miami Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *San Jose Mercury News*.) At retirement, he and his wife Betty participated in a thirty-nine-week church Bible study class that required personal application.

Alvah had become distressed observing the plight of Miami's homeless and the lack of community leadership. He recalls,

“The county said it was a city problem. The city said it was a county problem. And the Chamber of Commerce was not sure it was their problem.”[\[3\]](#) The Chapmans decided to tackle homelessness. “The commitment to ‘do something’ was very strong” in their hearts, he explains: “We made a commitment to our [Bible] class and to our God that we would together provide leadership to the homeless problem in Miami.”[\[4\]](#)

Today the Homeless Assistance Centers[\[5\]](#) they founded provide meals, showers, clothing, temporary housing, laundry facilities, health care, transportation, and job training—helping residents get back on their feet with dignity. The success rate for departed residents has been as high as sixty percent, considered remarkable in this field. Churches and synagogues have provided evening meals, companionship, and encouragement.

Often the poor feel trapped in poverty with no way out. Vicious circles breed feelings of worthlessness and despair. Drunkenness, violence, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases are just some of the physical manifestations of coping with life out of control. Efforts like the Homeless Assistance Centers can help break the cycle of poverty.

Helping the Total Person

Poverty brings multiple problems: physical, psychological, and spiritual. Which should we emphasize in seeking solutions? Consider three approaches.

1. The *Outside-In Approach* changes circumstances to alleviate stress factors. Education and job training can enhance employment and living standards, thus decreasing psychological problems. Right? Not necessarily. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis argued that an elimination of physical poverty may not by itself eliminate the culture of poverty.[\[6\]](#) Perhaps you know

some wealthy but unhappy people.

2. The *Inside-Out Approach* emphasizes counseling to encourage self-help. Attitude change is important, but if the economic system blocks options, what then?

3. The *Total-Person Approach* blends the other two, treating humans as physical, psychological, and spiritual creatures. The often-overlooked spiritual area, properly tapped, can influence both poor and rich.

John Perkins, an African-American, left his poor rural hometown of Mendenhall, Mississippi, vowing never to return. His brother had been shot by a policeman in that racially oppressed town. Later, Perkins placed his faith in Christ and returned to Mendenhall to help.

The organization he founded facilitated an inexpensive health care center, cooperative farms, a cooperative food store, house construction, tutoring, and raising college scholarships. Perkins' emphasis has been on helping local people help themselves. At the same time he's said, "I believe that the only commitment able to bring [interpersonal and community] healing is a commitment to Jesus."[\[7\]](#)

Jesus of Nazareth emphasized the total person. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He also told people how they could find meaning and fulfillment through faith in Him. Many Christian development programs have a similar focus, operating on the time-honored philosophy that if you give someone a fish you can feed them for a day; if you also teach them how to fish you can feed them for a lifetime.

World Relief, a Christian organization, provides worldwide disaster relief as well as self-help efforts like well-digging and agricultural training. Their microenterprise development programs establish community banking, savings and lending programs to help the poor become self sufficient. For example, a \$75 loan to a Cambodian grandmother allowed her to expand

her small home-front stand. She repaid the loan in full, entitling her to another, slightly larger loan. Eventually, she could support her sixteen grandchildren and serve as a role model for women in her village.[\[8\]](#)

World Vision, the Salvation Army, and most major Christian denominations have programs to help the poor.

Money and Poverty

We've been examining physical, psychological, and spiritual factors related to poverty and its possible remedies. Consider a common question.

Will money given to developing nations solve their poverty problems? Maybe it will help, but the extent depends largely on how the funds are managed. Sadly, Africa, for instance, is replete with examples of crooked officials diverting financial aid and national wealth into their own pockets. For instance, Nigeria's President Obasanjo estimates that corrupt African leaders have stolen at least \$140 billion from their people in the decades since independence.[\[9\]](#)

Obasanjo is a follower of Jesus who has tried to root out corruption in his own nation. The *New York Times* gives a glimpse into the task he still faces. Nigeria export billions of dollars of oil each year and returns thirteen percent of revenues from its states back to the states. The *Times* notes that "Much of that is siphoned off by corrupt regional officials who often pocket the money or waste it on lavish projects that do little, if anything, for ordinary people. For instance, one state produces a third of Nigeria's oil and has an annual budget of more than half a billion dollars to spend on its three million people. But most of [that money] goes to white elephants like a mansion for the governor and his deputy."[\[10\]](#)

On one of my speaking tours to Nigeria, a local doctor told me

how businesses had adapted to the common custom of using bribes. Seems they started budgeting bribe money for their traveling representatives to use. The budget item was called public relations. But a problem arose when employees began to pocket the public relations money instead of using it for bribes.

Financial aid givers—nations, businesses and individuals—would be wise to focus on strict accountability measures and perhaps character education programs for government and business leaders and students in such situations.

In fairness, I should note that this corruption caveat has its critics. Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs, who also heads an ambitious United Nations anti-poverty effort, feels the corruption charge is too often a simplistic explanation for poverty's root problems. While I feel that corruption is indeed a major concern, I agree with Sachs that poverty is complex and situations differ. Disease plays a significant role. If people are sick with malaria or AIDS, its hard for them to help themselves. Sachs also advocates international commitments to economic assistance, scientific advancement, and justice.[{11}](#)

What Can You Do?

Would you believe that by losing weight, you could help the poor overseas? Consider how some upscale U.S. secondary school students made a difference in Zambia.[{12}](#)

Student leaders at Wheaton Academy in suburban Chicago had a burden to raise \$53,000 from their fellow students for a schoolhouse in Zambia. They found little enthusiasm at first, but then they began to pray regularly. Things took off and they exceeded their goal. Over a three-year stretch, the Christian students raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for HIV/AIDS relief in Africa. Students encourage each other to forgo movies, Starbucks runs, and even Christmas

presents and prom dresses.{13} The campus chaplain estimates that ninety percent of students have participated financially to build the schoolhouse and a medical clinic and to feed a villages children for a year. Students feel a personal connection with their Zambian peers. Some have visited the village they support.

Even adults joined the effort. Now, what they did is great. I bet you're going to like this! It was a weight-loss fundraising campaign, the Zambia Meltdown. Fourteen teachers and administrators lost 460 pounds over 100 days. That brought in \$19,000 in pledges for lost weight. And get this: The headmaster and principal each lost 70 pounds.{14}

What can you do to help alleviate poverty? Consider some suggestions:

First, pray. God's concern for the poor far exceeds our own. Those Wheaton Academy students saw answers to their prayers. (Probably some faculty spouses did, too!)

Second, give. An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{15} Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively fight poverty. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof says, "Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like [World Vision](#) and [Samaritan's Purse](#) save lives at bargain-basement prices."{16} I would add [World Relief](#), the [Salvation Army](#) and your local church to the list.

Third, go. Maybe you can volunteer with [Habitat for Humanity](#) or an international mission group. CNN highlighted Campus Crusade for Christ college students spending Spring Break helping to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. You even may want to devote your life or career to relief and development. It is a worthy cause. I like what Jesus' mother Mary advised: "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."{17}

And another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, "Blessed are those who help the poor."[{18}](#)

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A Little Kramer in All of Us?

Comedian Michael Richards—"Kramer" on TV's *Seinfeld*—saw his racist tirade at African-American hecklers ignite a firestorm. Mel Gibson, whose earlier anti-Semitic rant made headlines, said he felt compassion for Richards.[{1}](#)

Lots of people have dark sides. Maybe everyone. Maybe you.

I do.

Remember Susan Hawk? Her infamous diatribe against [another CBS Survivor contestant](#) declared if she found her "laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you."[{2}](#)

Richards—like Gibson—apologized profusely. Prominent African-American comic Paul Mooney says [Richards told him privately](#), "He didn't know he had that ugliness in him."[{3}](#)

I can identify with Richards' surprise at his darker inner impulses. My own failing was private rather than public, differing in degree but not in kind. It taught me valuable lessons.

Growing up in the US South, I learned from my parents and educators to be tolerant and accepting in a culture that often was not. Racism still makes my blood boil. I've [sought to promote racial sensitivity](#).

One summer during university, I joined several hundred students—most of us Caucasian—for a South Central Los Angeles outreach project. We spent a weekend living in local residents' homes, attending their churches, and meeting people in the community.

A friend and I enjoyed wonderful hospitality from a lovely couple. Sunday morning, their breakfast table displayed a mountain of delicious food. Our gracious hostess wanted to make sure our appetites were completely satisfied. It was then, eying that bountiful spread, that it hit me.

I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in Black persons' home, sitting at "their" table, eating "their" food, using "their" utensils. Something inside me reacted negatively. The strange feeling was not anger or hatred, more like mild aversion. Not powerful, not dramatic, certainly not expressed. But neither was it rational or pleasant or honorable or at all appropriate. It horrified and shamed me, especially since I had recently become a follower of Jesus.

The feeling only lasted a few moments. But it taught me important lessons about prejudice. Much as I might wish to deny it, I had inner emotions that, if expressed, could cause terrible pain. I who prided myself on racial openness had to deal with inner bigotry. How intense must such impulses be in those who are less accepting? Maybe similar inner battles—large or small—go on inside many people. I became deeply impressed that efforts at social harmony should not neglect the importance of changing human hearts.

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur testified during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader responsible for killing millions of Jews. When he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, he sobbed and collapsed to the floor. Dinur later explained, "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . . Exactly like he. . . . Eichmann is in all of us." [\[4\]](#)

Jeremiah, an ancient Jewish sage, wrote, "The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"^{5} A prescription from one of Jesus' friends helped me overcome my inner struggles that morning in South Central: "If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."^{6}

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