

On Black Holes and Archangels

Dr. Terlizze too often hears from Christian leaders and laymen that film, philosophy, literature, music, mythology, etc. (arts and humanities), are polluted wells that Christians do better to avoid rather than risk contamination. Yet no such warning is ever given about science and technology, always readily accepted under the rubric of natural revelation, except for some strange birds like Jacques Ellul or Neal Postman. "On Black Holes and Archangels" attempts to bridge this hypocritical divide in knowledge through raising art to the status of science as a legitimate source of knowledge concerning God and the human condition. As professor Lewis Sperry Chafer once wrote, theology uses "any and every source."

Reversal of Theological Priorities

When theology students talk about general revelation they mean science. God shows himself through the natural world; the movement of the stars, the rhythms of biology, the complexity of chemical synthesis, the beauty of the Grand Canyon and the like. Invariably, they almost always neglect human nature as a prominent theological source in acute reversal of theological priorities.



Comparatively, the bible says very little about the nature of the cosmos and the animal kingdom; instead it focuses on Adam's Race (humanity), Adam's prominence as divine vice-regent, his fall from innocence, the pain and suffering ensuing from a ruptured relationship with the Maker; the creation of the Hebrew people and the sacrificial offering of his Son (the Second Adam [Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:45]) in the plan of redemption.

The Bible is mostly about Israel's reluctance to serve God. Their obstinate disobedience, their refusal to recognize absolute righteousness of the One God, the pleading of the prophets to return to the Truth; their judgment and horrifying dissolution, but final salvation thanks only to the divine mercy of their heavenly Father, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). Israel serves as paradigm for all people, as the new creation of humanity in the Second Adam that brings the renewal of God's creation, the natural world; "A shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse . . . the lion shall lay down with the lamb . . . they will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-9; 27:6).

The theological reversal of priorities places science and reason over religion and faith, which interprets human nature in light of the cosmos rather than the cosmos in light of human nature and salvific transformation; as Adam goes so goes nature; "Cursed is the ground because of you [Adam];" "the creation will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Genesis 3:17; Romans 8:19-22).

This reversal is reminiscent of C. P. Snow's critical paradigm called the *Two Cultures*.^{1} Snow elucidated the theory that modern epistemology splits between science and the humanities, or said simply, between religion and science, between subjective and objective knowledge, creating an imbalance that favors one way of knowing over the other. Any juxtaposition in knowledge will result in the denigration of religion or science that fails to recognize their inherent compatibility.

Evangelicals are quick to latch onto the split in knowledge, recognizing science's superiority as source of knowledge and engine for technological acceleration in a theological reversal of priorities that recognizes all things scientific and technological as gifts from God, even offering

metaphysical justification for technological acceleration under the theological rubric of general revelation, yet disparaging the humanities as a polluted well. However, science is not general revelation, it is only the philosophical lens used to interpret it—which is not incorrect, just incomplete. A consistent application of general revelation must include the humanities as a valid source of knowledge on human nature as equal to science: philosophy, religion, literature, art, film, etc., all present a valid interpretation of human nature that serves as sources for theology. L. Sperry Chafer's argued decades ago that theology uses "any and every source." [\[2\]](#)

What is General Revelation?

Most evangelical theology divides revelation or God's self-disclosure into two categories called general revelation and special revelation, a division of knowledge going back at least to Saint Thomas Aquinas, receiving its greatest expression in the early modern period with the theory of the *Two Books* by Francis Bacon. The first book of the knowledge of God comes from the natural world, discerned and interpreted by reason, open to all—hence general knowledge; modern science and philosophy grounded in rationalism develops from this theological base. The second book of knowledge of God was considered Holy Scripture, discerned and interpreted through faith supported by reason—hence it is not open to all, only the faithful.

General revelation refers to the knowledge of God outside of the Bible in nature, history, and personal experience; it is open to all people and anyone can understand it. Special revelation refers to the knowledge of God revealed in the Bible alone, such as the dual nature of Christ as the God/Man, the Trinity, the story of redemption and the knowledge of salvation. It is special because only those who accept the word of God by faith know these truths discerned by the Spirit

of God (1 Corinthians 2). The two forms of revelation always complement each other. However, special revelation has greater authority than general revelation as the exclusive source for knowledge of salvation. We are saved through special revelation and never through general revelation which largely teaches humanity's need for God, but offers no solution because that will only be found in special revelation.

God's presence is revealed in nature but in a very limited way. Humanity actually knows very little about God from general revelation. People talk about "the love of God" but that is not a concept drawn from the natural world. The poet Tennyson said "nature is red in tooth and claw," meaning nature is cruel and unforgiving. The reality of nature as hostile and uncaring does not reflect the character of God. We know God is love, only because the Bible, not nature, tells us He is love (John 3:16; 1 John). Seeing a grizzly bear mother eating her young on a nature documentary convinced me of the truth of Tennyson's statement.

General revelation means God reveals himself through the humanities as well as the sciences. The opening of the evangelical mind begins with a view of revelation that takes the arts and humanities as seriously as the sciences as a valid source of knowledge.

On Black Holes and Archangels

As the astronomer sees and reflects the divine glory of the cosmos, so the philosopher, musician, novelist and film artist reflects the inner light of soul—as complicated, profound and stunning as the swirl of galaxies, as explosive as a supernova and as deep and forbidding as a black hole! Artists explore remote and inhospitable depths of inner space. They transport the human spirit to destinies Magellan, Columbus and Verrazano never dreamt of; where Voyager will never encounter, where the telescope sees blindly . . . where angels fear to tread!

Art explores inner recesses of human nature and delivers subjective knowledge on topics such as anxiety, alienation, despair, boredom, hate, faith, love, fear, courage, lust, oppression and liberation, not quantifiable or objective, but just as real and valuable to Christian theology as the scientist's observations. Theologian of Culture Paul Tillich insightfully argued that art was the spiritual barometer of culture: "Art is religion."^{3} In order to understand culture and the ultimate questions it asks in relating the Gospel message, the theologian must turn to philosophy, literature, paintings, music, etc.

Science and art are not in competition. Just as reason and faith complement each other as sources of knowledge, so subjective and objective knowledge act as two halves of the same coin—the union of the left and right sides of the brain. "Historian of Evil" Jeffrey Burton Russell writes,

This question of how we know seems unfamiliar because we have been brought up to imagine that something is either "real" or "not real," as if there were only one valid world view, only one way to look at things, only one approach to truth. Given the overwhelming prestige of natural science during the past century, we usually go on to assume that the only approach to truth is through natural science . . . it seems to be "common sense" . . . there are multiple truth systems, multiple approaches to reality. Science is one such approach. But . . . science is . . . a construct of the human mind . . . based on undemonstrable assumptions of faith. There is no scientific proof of the bases of science. [There is] no real difference between the subject and objective approach to things . . . science has its limits, and beyond those limits there are, like other galaxies, other truth systems. These other systems are not without resemblances to science, but their modes of thought are quite different: among them are history, myth, poetry, theology, art, and analytical psychology. Other truth systems have existed in the past;

still more may exist in future; we can only guess what thought structures exist among other intelligent beings.[{4}](#)

Only novelists, film makers, poets and theologians can communicate the possible thought structures of angels, demons or ETI's. How does the thought process of an archangel differ from that of seraphim and cherubim? The *Star Trek* franchise may be our best introduction to alien civilizations in the absence of any hard evidence.

***Elysium*: The Acceleration of the Status Quo into Outer Space**

The recent (2013) science fiction movie *Elysium* depicts the human condition as it has existed throughout human history and extends it to the space station Elysium. In the year 2154, the class difference between the haves and the have not's appears in bold relief. Elysium is a haven for the wealthy and technologically powerful elite who rule the sub-proletariat peoples of earth living in squalor, misery and deprivation. Los Angeles is reminiscent of the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo today. The few control the many through the accumulation and withholding of wealth and technological power, especially medical machines "Med-Bays" that reverse cell damage and heals all sickness and disease, granting virtual immortality. A self-appointed champion of the people Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) with nothing left to lose—since his exposure to a fatal radiation dose has left him with five days to live—mounts an assault on Elysium and accomplishes the impossible, a revolution that gains control of the space station's computer system and the robot guardians, turning them against the establishment and bringing relief to the people of Earth.

Elysium serves as a great cinematic example of liberation theology and window into the human condition that never changes despite technological acceleration that empowers the

few to control the many. In any late stage of civilization, from Egypt and Rome to modernity, the same conditions prevail: the elite rule the many and technology makes no difference in alleviating social inequalities. Technological advance, as the movie portrays, only accelerates the status quo so that the struggle for freedom and equality of all people simply takes place off the earth on a space station.

The Enlightenment idea of progress envisions a global advance of humanity across all social lines. Any concentration of power and wealth in an elite group to the neglect of the rest of the planet, regardless of how technologically advanced or socially integrated, is not progress but regress. *Elysium* reflects contemporary global conditions—the status quo, the way things actually are, projecting them one generation or forty years into the future.

When technological acceleration grants the world equal social conditions, such as the elimination of poverty, hunger and disease in Africa and Latin America as in the Western world, or the ready accessibility of health care in the United States as in the Netherlands or Canada, then we do justice to the noble word “*Progress*.” In the absence of social equality, technological growth renders the same absolute social imbalances and universal disillusionment in the modern world as existed in the late Roman Empire, the concentration of power in an elite, ruling ruthlessly over the masses without hope of change, except on a global scale that moves rapidly towards dissolution, where robot guardians replace the Praetorian Guard.[\[5\]](#)

“Nein! Nein! Nein!”

There is no saving knowledge of God in history, science, economics, philosophy, math or whatever. NO! NO! NO! I am in complete agreement with Karl Barth on this point: “Nein! Nein! Nein!” No! Absolutely not! Never! The saving knowledge of Christ comes only through the word of God and centers on the

work of Jesus Christ for all mankind. The knowledge of God in general revelation is not saving knowledge of the Gospel. If one could know God through the means of general revelation then it would make special revelation and the coming of Christ superfluous and useless. General revelation only condemns and functions for Gentiles like the Law of Moses for Jews (Romans 1:18-32; Galatians 3).

General revelation prepares humanity for special revelation. Knowledge of God and the human condition in general revelation creates the need for special revelation. General revelation shows humanity its sinfulness and need for a savior; "How majestic is Your name in all the earth. Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens . . . What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:1-4). Job gave the only possible answer as a finite being when reminded of wonders of God's creation: "I know You can do all things . . . I declared that which I did not understand . . . I retract and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6). "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). General revelation demonstrates God's absence from humanity; it reveals the "UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23).

Special revelation meets that need for reconciliation with God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation cannot come from any other avenue than special revelation, a major theological premise the great theologian Karl Barth staunchly defended. According to Barth, all revelation is special revelation and all revelation imparts the saving knowledge of Christ.

General revelation brings the knowledge of God's absence, consciousness of alienation from the divine, much as the Mosaic Law brings the awareness of sin (Romans 1-3); but only to set us up for the knowledge of the Savior that comes from hearing the gospel of Christ preached (Romans 4-10). "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). [\[6\]](#)

Notes

1. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

2. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. One* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 5. Chafer defined systematic theology as "A science which follows a humanly devised scheme or order of doctrinal development and which purports to incorporate into its system all truth about God and His universe from any and every source."

3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7.

4. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 18, 19.

5. Carroll Quigley, *The Evolution of Civilizations: An Introduction to Historical Analysis* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979); Roderick Seidenberg, *Posthistoric Man: An Inquiry* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1950); Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1987, 1949); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005).

6. Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace* by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply *No!* by Dr. Karl Barth (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002, Reprint).

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Arguments Against Abortion

Kerby Anderson helps us understand that concerns about abortion are more than just a fundamentalist backlash. He reviews arguments from a Christian, biblical perspective and then introduces arguments from medical, legal and philosophical points of views as well. He concludes, "The Bible and logic are on the side of the Christian who wants to stand for the sanctity of human life."

Biblical Arguments Against Abortion

In this essay we will be discussing arguments against abortion. The first set of arguments we will consider are biblical arguments.

That being said, we must begin by acknowledging that the Bible doesn't say anything about abortion directly. Why the silence of the Bible on abortion? The answer is simple. Abortion was so unthinkable to an Israelite woman that there was no need to even mention it in the criminal code. Why was abortion an unthinkable act? First, children were viewed as a gift or heritage from the Lord. Second, the Scriptures state—and the Jews concurred—that God opens and closes the womb and is sovereign over conception. Third, childlessness was seen as a curse.

One of the key verses to understand in developing a biblical view of the sanctity of human life is Psalm 139. This psalm is the inspired record of David's praise for God's sovereignty in his life. He begins by acknowledging that God is omniscient and knows what David is doing at any given point in time. He goes on to acknowledge that God is aware of David's thoughts before he expresses them. David adds that wherever he might go, he cannot escape from God, whether he travels to heaven or ventures into Sheol. God is in the remotest part of the sea and even in the darkness. Finally David contemplates the

origin of his life and confesses that God was there forming him in the womb:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be (vv. 13-16).

Here David speaks of God's relationship with him while he was growing and developing before birth. Notice that the Bible doesn't speak of fetal life as mere biochemistry. The description here is not of a piece of protoplasm that becomes David: this is David already being cared for by God while in the womb.

In verse 13, we see that God is the Master Craftsman fashioning David into a living person. In verses 14 and 15, David reflects on the fact that he is a product of God's creative work within his mother's womb, and he praises God for how wonderfully God has woven him together.

David draws a parallel between his development in the womb and Adam's creation from the earth. Using figurative language in verse 15, he refers to his life before birth when "I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth." This poetic allusion harkens back to Genesis 2:7 which says that Adam was made from the dust of the earth.

David also notes that "Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance." This shows that God knew David even before he was known to others. The term translated *unformed substance* is a noun derivative of a verb meaning "to roll up." When David was just forming as a fetus, God's care and compassion already extended to him. The reference to "God's eyes" is an Old

Testament term used to connote divine oversight of God in the life of an individual or group of people.

Next, we will consider additional Old Testament passages that provide a biblical argument against abortion.

Additional Old Testament Arguments Against Abortion

Now that we've looked at Psalm 139, the most popular argument against abortion, let's look at two other Old Testament passages.

Another significant passage is Psalm 51. It was written by David after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and records his repentance. David confesses that his sinful act demonstrated the original sin that was within him, "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). David concludes that from his time of conception, he had a sin nature. This would imply that he carried the image of God from the moment of conception, including the marred image scarred from sin.

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6). Bearing the image of God is the essence of humanness. And though God's image in man was marred at the Fall, it was not erased (cf. 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). Thus, the unborn baby is made in the image of God and therefore fully human in God's sight.

This verse also provides support for what is called the traducian view of the origin of the soul. According to this perspective, human beings were potentially in Adam (Rom. 5:12, Heb. 7:9-10) and thus participated in his original sin. The "soulish" part of humans is transferred through conception. Therefore, an unborn baby is morally accountable and thus fully human.

Another argument against abortion can be found in the Old Testament legal code, specifically Exodus 21:22-25.

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

The verses appear to teach that if a woman gives birth prematurely, but the baby is not injured, then only a fine is appropriate. However, if the child dies then the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) should be applied. In other words, killing an unborn baby would carry the same penalty as killing a born baby. A baby inside the womb has the same legal status as a baby outside the womb.

Some commentators have come to a different conclusion because they believe the first verses only refer to a case of accidental miscarriage. Since only a fine is levied, they argue that an unborn baby is merely potential life and does not carry the same legal status as a baby that has been born.

There are at least two problems with this interpretation. First, the normal Hebrew word for *miscarry* is not used in this passage (cf. Gen. 31:38; Exod. 23:26; Job 2:10; Hos. 9:14). Most commentators now believe that the action described in verse 22 is a premature birth, not an accidental miscarriage. Second, even if the verses do describe a miscarriage, the passage cannot be used to justify abortion. The injury was accidental, not intentional (as abortion would be). Also, the action was a criminal offense and punishable by law.

Medical Arguments Against Abortion

Thus far in our discussion we have looked at biblical

arguments against abortion. But what if someone doesn't believe in the Bible? Are there other arguments we can use? Yes, there are: medical arguments, for example. Let's look, then, at some of the medical arguments against abortion.

The medical arguments against abortion are compelling. For example, *at conception the embryo is genetically distinct from the mother*. To say that the developing baby is no different from the mother's appendix is scientifically inaccurate. A developing embryo is genetically different from the mother. A developing embryo is also genetically different from the sperm and egg that created it. A human being has 46 chromosomes (sometimes 47 chromosomes). Sperm and egg have 23 chromosomes. A trained geneticist can distinguish between the DNA of an embryo and that of a sperm and egg. But that same geneticist could not distinguish between the DNA of a developing embryo and a full-grown human being.

Another set of medical arguments against abortion surround *the definition of life and death*. If one set of criteria have been used to define death, could they also be used to define life? Death used to be defined by the cessation of heartbeat. A stopped heart was a clear sign of death. If the cessation of heartbeat could define death, could the onset of a heartbeat define life? The heart is formed by the 18th day in the womb. If heartbeat was used to define life, then nearly all abortions would be outlawed.

Physicians now use a more rigorous criterion for death: brain wave activity. A flat EEG (electroencephalograph) is one of the most important criteria used to determine death. If the cessation of brain wave activity can define death, could the onset of brain wave activity define life? Individual brain waves are detected in the fetus in about 40-43 days. Using brain wave activity to define life would outlaw at least a majority of abortions.

Opponents to abortion also raise the controversial issue of

fetal pain. Does the fetus feel pain during abortion? The evidence seems fairly clear and consistent. Consider this statement made in a British medical journal: "Try sticking an infant with a pin and you know what happens. She opens her mouth to cry and also pulls away. Try sticking an 8-week-old human fetus in the palm of his hand. He opens his mouth and pulls his hand away. A more technical description would add that changes in heart rate and fetal movement also suggest that intrauterine manipulations are painful to the fetus."[\[1\]](#)

Obviously, other medical criteria could be used. For example, the developing fetus has a unique set of fingerprints as well as genetic patterns that make it unique. The development of sonography has provided us with a "window to the womb" showing us that a person is growing and developing in the mother's womb. We can discern eyes, ears, fingers, a nose, and a mouth. Our visual senses tell us this is a baby growing and maturing. This is not a piece of protoplasm; this is a baby inside the womb.

The point is simple. *Medical science leads to a pro-life perspective rather than a pro-choice perspective.* If medical science can be used at all to draw a line, the clearest line is at the moment of conception. Medical arguments provide a strong case against abortion and for life.

Legal Arguments Against Abortion

At this point in our discussion, we need to look at legal arguments against abortion.

The best legal argument against abortion can be seen in the case of *Roe v. Wade*. It violated standard legal reasoning. The Supreme Court decided not to decide when life begins and then turned around and overturned the laws of 50 different states.

Most of the Supreme Court's verdict rested upon two sentences. "We need not resolve the difficult question of when life

begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to an answer."

Although the sentences sounded both innocuous and unpretentious, they were neither. The Supreme Court's non-decision was not innocuous. It overturned state laws that protected the unborn and has resulted in over 30 million abortions (roughly the population of Canada) in the United States.

The decision also seems unpretentious by acknowledging that it did not know when life begins. But if the Court did not know, then it should have acted "as if" life was in the womb. A crucial role of government is to protect life. Government cannot remove a segment of the human population from its protection without adequate justification.

The burden of proof should lie with the life-taker, and the benefit of the doubt should be with the life-saver. Put another way: "when in doubt, don't." A hunter who hears rustling in the bushes shouldn't fire until he knows what is in the bushes. Likewise, a Court which doesn't know when life begins, should not declare open season on the unborn.

The burden of proof in law is on the prosecution. The benefit of doubt is with the defense. This is also known as a presumption of innocence. The defendant is assumed to be innocent unless proven guilty. Again the burden of proof is on the entity that would take away life or liberty. The benefit of the doubt lies with the defense.

The Supreme Court clearly stated that it does not know when life begins and then violated the very spirit of this legal principle by acting as if it just proved that no life existed in the womb. Even more curious was the fact that to do so, it

had to ignore the religious community and international community on the subject of the unborn.

Had the religious community really failed to reach a consensus? Although there were some intramural disagreements, certainly the weight of evidence indicated that a Western culture founded on Judeo-Christian values held abortion to be morally wrong. People with widely divergent theological perspectives (Jewish, Catholic, evangelical and fundamental Protestants) shared a common agreement about the humanity of the unborn.

The same could be said about the international legal community. Physicians around the world subscribed to the Hippocratic Oath ("I will not give a woman a pessary to produce abortion"). The unborn were protected by various international documents like the Declaration of Geneva and the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Just as there are solid medical arguments against abortion, so also there are legal arguments against abortion. *Roe vs. Wade* was a bad decision that needs to be overturned.

Philosophical Arguments Against Abortion

Finally, we will conclude our discussion by looking at philosophical arguments against abortion.

A third set of arguments against abortion would be philosophical arguments. A key philosophical question is where do you draw the line? Put another way, when does a human being become a person?

The Supreme Court's decision of *Roe v. Wade* separated personhood from humanity. In other words, the judges argued that a developing fetus was a human (i.e., a member of the species *Homo sapiens*) but not a person. Since only persons are given 14th Amendment protection under the Constitution, the Court argued that abortion could be legal at certain times.

This left to doctors, parents, or even other judges the responsibility of arbitrarily deciding when personhood should be awarded to human beings.

The Supreme Court's cleavage of personhood and humanity made the ethical slide down society's slippery slope inevitable. Once the Court allowed people to start drawing lines, some drew them in unexpected ways and effectively opened the door for infanticide and euthanasia.

The Court, in the tradition of previous line-drawers, opted for biological criteria in their definition of a "person" in *Roe v. Wade*. In the past, such criteria as implantation or quickening had been suggested. The Court chose the idea of viability and allowed for the possibility that states could outlaw abortions performed after a child was viable. But viability was an arbitrary criterion, and there was no biological reason why the line had to be drawn near the early stages of development. The line, for example, could be drawn much later.

Ethicist Paul Ramsey frequently warned that any argument for abortion could logically be also used as an argument for infanticide. As if to illustrate this, Dr. Francis Crick, of DNA fame, demonstrated that he was less concerned about the ethics of such logical extensions and proposed a more radical definition of personhood. He suggested in the British journal *Nature* that if "a child were considered to be legally born when two days old, it could be examined to see whether it was an 'acceptable member of human society.'" Obviously this is not only an argument for abortion; it's an argument for infanticide.

Other line-drawers have suggested a cultural criterion for personhood. Ashley Montagu, for example, stated, "A newborn baby is not truly human until he or she is molded by cultural influences later." Again, this is more than just an argument for abortion. It is also an argument for infanticide.

More recently some line-drawers have focused on a mental criterion for personhood. Dr. Joseph Fletcher argues in his book *Humanhood* that “Humans without some minimum of intelligence or mental capacity are not persons, no matter how many of these organs are active, no matter how spontaneous their living processes are.” This is not only an argument for abortion and infanticide; it’s adequate justification for euthanasia and the potential elimination of those who do not possess a certain IQ. In other writings, Joseph Fletcher suggested that an “individual” was not truly a “person” unless he has an IQ of at least 40.

In conclusion, we can see that there are many good arguments against abortion. Obviously there are a number of biblical arguments against abortion. But there are also medical, legal, and philosophical arguments against abortion. The Bible and logic are on the side of the Christian who wants to stand for the sanctity of human life.

Endnote

1. H.P. Valman and J. F. Pearson, What the Fetus Feels, *British Medical Journal* (26 January 1980): 233-234.

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Note from Kerby Anderson:

So many people ask for more information on abortion; I suggest you check out the Abortion Facts Web site at www.abortionfacts.com.

One Christian Perspective on

the Immigration Reform Debate

Steve Cable takes a look at the immigration issue from a biblical point of view. Setting aside all the political rhetoric, what does the Bible really have to say about this topic and how should the church respond with an authentic Christian perspective.

Introduction

Immigration issues have garnered a lot of headlines in recent weeks. Is there a clear biblical position on immigration laws and on how Christians should respond to immigrants?

A January 2006 Gallup poll indicated that “immigration reform” ranked at the bottom of seven national issues behind the war in Iraq, healthcare, and the economy.^{1} However, after the large rallies in April, it had moved up into the number two spot behind the war in Iraq. While more Americans are concerned about improving control of our borders than developing a comprehensive strategy for illegal immigrants, over seventy-five percent of those polled consider such a comprehensive strategy “extremely important” or “very important.” In part, this is due to a heightened awareness of the approximately twelve million illegal aliens in our country and to the intense interest in the Hispanic community. The concern also feeds on the conflicting desires for low cost labor on the one hand and protection from terrorist infiltration on the other.

At a time when the American public is becoming sensitized to the illegal immigrant issue, the evangelical community has not presented a unified front. As reported in the April 28 (2006) edition of the *Dallas Morning News*, “At a forum . . . , conservative and liberal religious leaders lobbed Bible verses, unable to agree on what Jesus would do about the nation’s nearly 12 million illegal immigrants.”^{2} Three

general positions have emerged among the evangelical community.

One position promotes honoring God through obeying the law, focusing on the responsibility of the government to provide for the security of its people.

A second position focuses on our responsibility to care for the needy, particularly the alien and the stranger.

The third position assumes this is an amoral political and economic issue that the church is wise to stay clear of.

The conundrum was aptly summarized by Dr. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission:

"We have a right to expect the government to fulfill its divinely ordained mandate to punish those who break the laws and reward those who do not. Romans 13. We also have a divine mandate to act redemptively and compassionately toward those who are in need." [\[3\]](#)

Since we are all created in the image of God, should nations place any restrictions upon our ability to move about and take up residence where we will? Certainly, if we were all Christians, Colossians 3:11 might apply, stating, "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all." From this verse and others like it, we might argue that we should not make any distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. Yet, the Bible clearly indicates that there will be distinct nations until Jesus returns.

Reasons for Restricted Immigration Policy

As noted above, a simple Christian perspective would welcome everyone to settle in our nation at any time. However, the Bible clearly supports the concept of national sovereignty as a means through which God works in this fallen world. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we are called to pray for government officials, not that they would cease to exist, but that they would facilitate a society where we can follow God and share Christ in a secure, peaceful environment. Three common reasons a government may choose to control traffic across its borders and limit citizenship opportunities are as follows:

*1. **National security**—A nation with enemies has a need to know that those enemies are not dwelling within their land. In Deut. 31:12-13, the foreigners dwelling among the people of Israel were required to enter into the covenant to obey God. Those that did not support God's leadership were not allowed to enter the land. Today, like never before, America must be concerned about enemies attacking from inside her border. The government has a responsibility to protect the security of her people by taking reasonable means to keep threats outside of our borders.*

*2. **Economic prosperity**—A perception of limited resources may cause a nation to curtail immigration in order to reserve a greater share of those resources for the existing citizens. They may say, "We have the sturdiest and most well stocked lifeboat, but if everyone abandons their inferior lifeboats and flocks to this one, we will go from prosperity and security to sinking and perishing." Under the same motivation, it is common for nations to import foreign workers to perform low paid, menial tasks. There is biblical support for property ownership and rewards for ones labor. It is balanced by the clear teaching to proactively minister to the needy and to beware of being motivated by greed. [\[4\]](#)*

*3. **Cultural integrity**—A people group may want restrictions on*

immigration to protect the integrity of their historic traditions and society. Certainly, God directed the nation of Israel to ensure that all members of society worshiped the God of Abraham and did not introduce other forms of worship into society. In Exodus 12:43-49, foreigners are prohibited from participating in the Passover unless their entire household is circumcised and they covenant to obey God. America has thrived with a cultural and religious diversity, while enforcing a uniform acceptance of the Constitution and the principles of democracy, freedom, and equality.

Although the Bible does not mandate that nations should have laws to control their borders and manage immigration, it is clear that there are biblically acceptable reasons for a national policy in this area. The two that are the clearest are national security from known enemies and protecting common cultural ideals. Greed often plays a role in establishing immigration policies, an attitude clearly prohibited by our Lord.

The Case for Law and Order

Conflicting positions on immigration policy stake their claim on respect for authority at one end and on compassion for the needy at the other. Let's consider the matter of law and order.

Romans 13 states:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God. . . . But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath,

but also for conscience' sake (vv. 1,2,4,5).{5}

Christians are to be in subjection to governing authorities not only to avoid punishment, but also to be able to minister with a clear conscience. Peter expands on the motivation in 1 Peter 2:13-15 where he writes, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Thus, for Christians, obeying the law is one way honor God. God ordains authority with the responsibility to punish "the one who practices evil." For those who take the law-and-order position, these verses are a clear biblical mandate for dealing with illegal immigration. Not only should we personally obey the law, we should support our governing authorities in enforcing it.

However, those who take a different position argue our imperative to follow Christ's example takes precedence over any laws. Certainly, Jesus and the apostles did not always obey the strict direction of the ruling authorities. One notable example is found in Acts 4:19-20. When commanded not "to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus," Peter replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Not only did they refuse to submit to the command, they encouraged others to follow their example. However, one should be careful about using these examples as a trump card to justify ignoring any laws that one believes are contrary to the teaching of Christ. Both Jesus and Paul direct us to pay our taxes, knowing full well that some of those tax dollars may be spent in ways that do not honor Christ.

As believers, we are called to obey laws that do not require us to directly disobey God.

The Case for Compassion

Another important consideration is whether Christ's directive to show compassion to the needy should be our primary concern in establishing and enforcing immigration policy. Those who promote this case point to two primary principles in the Scriptures:

- 1. Treat the alien in our midst with fairness, remembering that we too are aliens.*
- 2. Minister to the least of these as unto Jesus Himself.*

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 states, "He . . . shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Remembering their history as aliens dwelling in Egypt, the children of Israel were to show love for the aliens in their midst. We, too, should remember that most of us did nothing to deserve being born in America. We could just as easily be the person seeking a better life by becoming an alien in America.

Does this passage mean that we have a responsibility to care for any person who is able to cross our borders?

The Hebrew word most often translated as "alien" is *ger*. According to Vines, a *ger* "was not simply a foreigner or a stranger. He was a permanent resident, once a citizen of another land, who had moved into his new residence." [\[6\]](#) The Jewish law was clear that these aliens should be afforded equitable treatment under the law (e.g., Num. 15:16, Deut. 1:16). However, special provisions were also in place for the alien. Not being a member of one of the twelve tribes, the alien could not own land. Consequently, the alien was grouped

together with widows and orphans to receive a portion of the tithe (Deut. 14:28-29), access to the gleanings in the field (Deut. 24:19-22) and justice (Deut. 24:17-18). However, these provisions did not apply to the foreigner temporarily in the country for work or other purposes. These temporary visitors did not receive a food allotment and were not allowed to fully participate in society.

We know that God wants us to treat aliens fairly, but the biblical example shows a greater responsibility to those who meet the requirements to become residents.

Compassion is emphasized in Jesus' command to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in our observation in Matt 25:40, "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." We are called to demonstrate sacrificial love in meeting the needs of both friends and strangers. Each person we meet is created in the image of God, worthy of our love and our concern for their spiritual and physical needs. Whatever our position on immigration policy and enforcement, Christians should be at the forefront of ministering to people far from home.

Responding to Our Current Situation

Is it possible within our current immigration laws to be compassionate *and* to be subject to ruling authorities at the same time? One way to answer that question is to apply the biblical guidelines reviewed earlier to the different roles in the immigration debate.

First, let's consider a *potential immigrant*. Barring a direct threat upon your life, abide by the laws of your current country and America. If you have a desire to work in America, apply through appropriate channels and use all legal means to expedite the process. Desiring more opportunity for your

family is commendable. However, choosing to break the law to achieve that goal is telling God that He cannot be trusted to provide.

Now assume you were an *illegal immigrant*. Report yourself to the appropriate authorities to obtain a hearing and abide by the results. Some argue that it is cruel to separate families. Current laws do not normally force families to be separated. Separation is the result of family members choosing to stay in the U.S. when a person is required to leave the country.

What attitude should be taken by an *employer*? Obey the employment laws. Do not knowingly hire illegal aliens *and* take steps to prevent accidentally hiring illegal aliens.

Finally, consider a *Christian citizen*. Reach out in love to all people regardless of their immigration status. Help them find help in dealing with the process and caring for their family. Counsel those in your flock to come into compliance with any laws they are breaking. Ask your representatives to support legislation which balances security with generosity and compassion. Most Americans desire to protect or improve their standard of living. Doing this at the expense of others is clearly contrary to biblical teaching. At the same time, lowering our standard of living by being less productive is not good stewardship either. We should promote policies that reflect a willingness to reduce our consumption to benefit others while promoting improvements across the board. What might this look like?

- Increased legal immigration for a variety of skill and educational levels, believing that we have the ingenuity to utilize these additional resources productively.
- Fair pay for all jobs with strong penalties for employers who break the laws.
- Requiring immigrants to maintain a record of gainful employment.
- Rapid deportation for those who enter illegally.

- While there is a real terrorist threat, making it difficult to enter our country surreptitiously.
- Pressuring other countries not to exploit their labor force.

Although there is no simple scriptural prescription to “fix” the immigration issue, Christians can model how to reach out in compassion and submit to authority at the same time. Prayerfully consider how God wants you to respond in this area.

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Globalization and the Internet – A Christian Considers the Impact

Kerby Anderson looks at the growth and role of the Internet through a Christian worldview perspective. It is important that we continue to understand its capabilities and its

dangers.

Introduction

More than one billion people use the Internet and benefit from the vast amount of information that is available to anyone who connects. But any assessment of the Internet will show that it has provided both surprising virtues and unavoidable vices.

Contrary to the oft-repeated joke, Al Gore did not invent the Internet. It was the creation of the Department of Defense that built it in case of a nuclear attack, but its primary use has been during peace. The Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency created a primitive version of the Internet known as ARPAnet. It allowed researchers at various universities to collaborate on projects and conduct research without having to be in the same place.

The first area network was operational in the 1980s, and the Internet gained great popularity in the 1990s because of the availability of web browsers. Today, due to web browsers and search engines, Internet users in every country in the world have access to vast amounts of online information.

The Internet has certainly changed our lives. Thomas Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat*, talks about some of these changes.[\[1\]](#) For example, we used to go to the post office to send mail; now most of us also send digitized mail over the Internet known as e-mail. We used to go to bookstores to browse and buy books; now we also browse digitally. We used to buy a CD to listen to music; now many of us obtain our digitized music off the Internet and download it to an MP3 player.

Friedman also talks about how the Internet has been the great equalizer. A good example of that is Google. Whether you are a university professor with a high speed Internet connection or a poor kid in Asia with access to an Internet café, you have

the same basic access to research information. The Internet puts an enormous amount of information at our fingertips. Essentially, all of the information on the Internet is available to anyone, anywhere, at anytime.

The Internet (and the accompanying digital tools developed to use it) has even changed our language. In the past, if you left a message asking when your friend was going to arrive at the airport, usually you would receive a complete sentence. Today the message would be something like: AA 635 @ 7:42 PM DFW. Tell a joke in a chat room, and you will receive responses like LOL (“laughing out loud”) or ROFL (“rolling on the floor laughing”). As people leave the chat room, they may type BBL (“be back later”). Such abbreviations and computer language are a relatively new phenomenon and were spawned by the growth of the Internet.

I want to take a look at some of the challenges of the Internet as well as the attempt by government to control aspects of it. While the Internet has certainly provided information to anyone, anywhere, at any time, there are still limits to what the Internet can do in the global world.

The Challenge of the Internet

The Internet has provided an opportunity to build a global information infrastructure that would link together the world’s telecommunications and computer networks. But futurists and governmental leaders also believed that this interconnectedness would also bring friendship and cooperation, and that goal seems elusive.

In a speech given over a decade ago, Vice-President Al Gore said, “Let us build a global community in which the people of neighboring countries view each other not as potential enemies, but as potential partners, as members of the same family in the vast, increasingly interconnected human

family.”{2}

Maybe peace and harmony are just over the horizon because of the Internet, but I have my doubts. The information superhighway certainly has connected the world together into one large global network, but highways don't bring peace. Highways connected the various countries in Europe for centuries, yet war was common and peace was not. An information superhighway connects us with countries all over the world, but global cooperation hasn't been the result, at least not yet.

The information superhighway also has some dark back alleys. At the top of the list is pornography. The Internet has made the distribution of pornography much easier. It used to be that someone wanting to view this material had to leave their home and go to the other side of town. The Internet has become the ultimate brown wrapper. Hard core images that used to be difficult to obtain are now only a mouse click away.

Children see pornography at a much younger age than just a decade ago. The average age of first Internet exposure to pornography is eleven years old.{3} Sometimes this exposure is intentional, usually it is accidental. Schools, libraries, and homes using filters often are one step behind those trying to expose more and more people to pornography.

But the influence of the Internet on pornography is only one part of a larger story. In my writing on personal and social ethics, I have found that the Internet has made existing social problems worse. When I wrote my book *Moral Dilemmas* back in 1998, I dealt with such problems as drugs, gambling, and pornography. Seven years later when I was writing my new book, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, I noticed that every moral issue I discussed was made worse by the Internet. Now my chapter on pornography had a section on cyberporn. My chapter on gambling had a section dealing with online gambling. My chapter on adultery also dealt with online affairs.

Internet Regulation

All of these concerns lead to the obvious question: Who will regulate the Internet? In the early day of the Internet, proponents saw it as the cyber-frontier that would be self-regulating. The Internet was to liberate us forever from government, borders, and even our physical selves. One writer said we should “look without illusion upon the present possibilities for building, in the on-line spaces of this world, societies more decent and free than those mapped onto dirt and concrete and capital.”[{4}](#)

And for a time, the self-government of the Internet worked fairly well. Internet pioneers were even successful in fighting off the Communications Decency Act which punished the transmission of “indecent” sexual communications or images on the Internet.[{5}](#) But soon national governments began to exercise their authority.

Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, in their book, *Who Controls the Internet?*, describe the various ways foreign governments have exercised their authority.[{6}](#)

- France requires Yahoo to block Internet surfers from France so they cannot purchase Nazi memorabilia.[{7}](#)
- The People’s Republic of China requires Yahoo to filter materials that might be harmful or threatening to Party rule. Yahoo is essentially an Internet censor for the Communist party.[{8}](#)
- The Chinese version of Google is much slower than the American version because the company cooperates with the Chinese government by blocking search words the Party finds offensive (words like Tibet or democracy).

Even more disturbing is the revelation that Yahoo provided information to the Chinese government that led to the imprisonment of Chinese journalists and pro-democracy leaders.

Reporters Without Borders found that Yahoo has been implicated in the cases of most of the people they were defending.[{9}](#)

Columnist Clarence Page points out that “Microsoft cooperates in censoring or deleting blogs that offend the Chinese government’s sensibilities. Cisco provides the hardware that gives China the best Internet-blocking and user-tracking technology on the planet.”[{10}](#)

All of this censorship and cooperation with foreign governments is disturbing, but it also underscores an important point. For years, proponents of the Internet have argued that we can’t (or shouldn’t) block Internet pornography or that we can’t regulate what pedophiles do on the Internet. These recent revelations about Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft show that they can and do block information.

The book *Who Controls the Internet?* argues that the last decade has led to the quiet rediscovery of the functions and justification for territorial government. The Internet has not replaced the legitimate structure of government with a self-regulated cyber-frontier. The Internet may change the way some of these territorial states govern, but it will not diminish their important role in regulating free societies.

Government and Intermediaries

Governments have been able to exercise control over the Internet in various ways. This should not be too surprising. The book *Who Controls the Internet?* points out that while some stores in New York’s Chinatown sell counterfeit Gucci bags and Rolex watches, you don’t find these same products in local stores. That is because the “most important targets of the laws against counterfeits—trademark laws—are local retailers.”[{11}](#)

The U.S. government might not be able to go after manufacturers in China or Thailand that produce these

counterfeits, but they certainly can go after retail stores. That's why you won't find these counterfeit goods in a Wal-Mart store. And while it is true that by controlling Wal-Mart or Sears doesn't eliminate counterfeit goods, government still can adequately control the flow of these goods by focusing on these intermediaries.

Governments often control behavior through intermediaries. "Pharmacists and doctors are made into gatekeepers charged with preventing certain forms of drug abuse. Bartenders are responsible for preventing their customers from driving drunk."[{12}](#)

As the Internet has grown, there has also been an increase in new intermediaries. These would include Internet Service Providers (ISPs), search engines, browsers, etc. In a sense, the Internet has made the network itself the intermediary. And this has made it possible for governments to exert their control over the Internet. "Sometimes the government-controlled intermediary is Wal-Mart preventing consumer access to counterfeit products, sometimes it is the bartender enforcing drinking age laws, and sometimes it is an ISP blocking access to illegal information."[{13}](#)

More than a decade ago, the German government raided the Bavarian offices of Compuserve because they failed to prevent the distribution of child pornography even though it originated outside of Germany.[{14}](#) In 2001, the British government threatened certain sites with criminal prosecution for distributing illegal adoption sites. The British ISPs agreed to block the sites so that British citizens could not access them.[{15}](#)

Internet Service Providers, therefore, are the obvious target for governmental control. In a sense, they are the most important gatekeepers to the Internet.[{16}](#)

Governmental control over the Internet is not perfect nor is

it complete. But the control over intermediaries has allowed territorial governments to exercise much greater control and regulation of the Internet than many of the pioneers of cyberspace would have imagined.

Globalization and Government

In [previous articles](#) we have addressed the issue of globalization and have recognized that technology (including the Internet) has made it much easier to move information around the world. There is no doubt that the Internet has accelerated the speed of transmission and thus made the world smaller. It is much easier for people around the world to access information and share it with others in this global information infrastructure.

Those who address the issue of globalization also believe that it diminishes the relevance of borders, territorial governments, and geography. Thomas Friedman believes that the Internet and other technologies are [flattening the world](#) “without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language.”[\[17\]](#)

In one sense, this is true. The lower costs of moving information and the sheer amount of information exchanged on the Internet have made it more difficult for governments to suppress information they do not like. The explosive growth of blogs and web pages have provided a necessary outlet for opinion and information.

It is also true that there has been some self-governing behavior on the Internet. Friedman, for example, describes eBay as a “self-governing nation-state—the V.R.e., the Virtual Republic of eBay.” The CEO of eBay even says, “People will say that eBay restored my faith in humanity—contrary to a world where people are cheating and don’t give people the benefit of the doubt.”[\[18\]](#)

But it also true that territorial governments work with eBay to arrest and prosecute those who are cheaters or who use the website in illegal ways. And it also relies on a banking system and the potential of governmental prosecution of fraud.

We have also seen in this article that governments have also been able to exert their influence and authority over the Internet. They have been able to use the political process to alter or block information coming into their country and have been able to shape the Internet in ways that the early pioneers of the Internet did not foresee.

Goldsmith and Wu believe that those talking about the force of globalization often naively believe that countries will be powerless in the face of globalization and the Internet. "When globalization enthusiasts miss these points, it is usually because they are in the grips of a strange technological determinism that views the Internet as an unstoppable juggernaut that will overrun the old and outdated determinants of human organization."[{19}](#)

There is still a legitimate function for government (Romans 13:1-7) even in this new world of cyberspace. Contrary to the perceived assumption that the Internet will shape governments and move us quickly toward globalization, there is good evidence to suggest that governments will in many ways shape the Internet.

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Gambling – Is It Good for Society? A Christian Perspective

Kerby Anderson looks at the harmful effects of both legal and illegal gambling. He considers the negative impacts on society, government policy, and the economy when gambling is prevalent in a culture. From a Christian worldview perspective, he considers how gambling introduces problems such as covetousness, poor work ethics, and destroyed family units.



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

Gambling used to be what a few unscrupulous people did with the aid of organized crime. But gambling fever now seems to affect nearly everyone as more and more states are legalizing various forms of it.

Thirty years ago, gambling was a relatively rare phenomenon with casinos operating only in the distant Nevada desert and a few states with lotteries or pari-mutuel betting. Today, legalized gambling is permitted in forty-seven states and the District of Columbia. More Americans are gambling than ever before, and they are also gambling more money.[\[1\]](#)

The momentum seems to be on the side of those who want legalized gambling as a way to supplement state revenues. But these states and their citizens often ignore the costs that are associated with legalized gambling.

Types of Gambling

Gambling comes in many forms. Perhaps the most popular type of gambling is state-sponsored lotteries. This would include the weekly lottery games, as well as the daily lottery numbers and scratch-off ticket games.

A second type of gambling would be casinos. Gambling in this venue would include jackpot slot machines, video card game machines, various casino card games such as poker and blackjack, and other casino games such as roulette.

Sports betting is a third type of gambling. Someone can bet on the outcome of a sporting event or a particular part of a sporting event. Usually, bets are placed on a bookmaker's odds so that the actual bet is against the point spread. Sports betting would also include illegal office pools and even weekend golfers who bet dollars or cokes for each hole.

Pari-mutuel betting (horse racing, dog racing, and jai alai) is another form of sports gambling. Horse racing is legal in 43 states with over 150 racetracks in the United States.

Convenience gambling (also called retail gambling) includes stand-alone slot machines, video poker, video keno, and other games. These are usually found in bars, truck stops, and convenience stores.

Online gambling represents a new frontier in the spread of gambling. The availability and accessibility of Internet gambling appears to have greatly increased the number of people gambling on a regular basis.

Bad Social Policy

Legalized gambling is bad social policy. At a time when Gamblers Anonymous estimates that there are at least 12 million compulsive gamblers, it does not make a lot of sense

to have the state promoting gambling. State sponsorship of gambling makes it harder, not easier, for the compulsive gambler to reform. Since about 96 percent of those gamblers began gambling before the age of fourteen,[{2}](#) we should be especially concerned about the message such a policy sends to young people.

The economic costs that gamblers themselves incur are significant. The average compulsive gambler has debts exceeding \$80,000.[{3}](#) And this figure pales in comparison with other social costs that surface because of family neglect, embezzlement, theft, and involvement in organized crime. Compulsive gamblers affect the lives of family, friends, and business associates. Some of the consequences of gambling are marital disharmony, divorce, child abuse, substance abuse, and suicide attempts.

Proponents argue that state lotteries are an effective way to raise taxes painlessly. But the evidence shows that legalized gambling often hurts those who are poor and disadvantaged. A national task force on gambling found that those in the lowest income bracket lost more than three times as much money to gambling (as a percentage of income) as those at the wealthiest end of the spectrum.[{4}](#) One New York lottery agent reports that “seventy percent of those who buy my tickets are poor, black, or Hispanic.”[{5}](#) And a National Bureau of Economic Research “shows that the poor bet a much larger share of their income.”[{6}](#) The study also found that “the less education a person has, the more likely he is to play the lottery.”[{7}](#)

A major study on the effect of the California lottery came to the same conclusions. The Field Institute’s California poll found that 18 percent of the state’s adults bought 71 percent of the tickets. These heavy lottery players (who bought more than twenty tickets in the contest’s first forty-five days) are “more likely than others to be black, poorer and less educated than the average Californian.”[{8}](#)

Studies also indicate that gambling increases when economic times are uncertain and people are concerned about their future. Joseph Dunn, director of the National Council on Compulsive Gambling, says, "People who are worried about the factory closing take a chance on making it big. Once they win anything, they're hooked."[{9}](#)

The social impact of gambling is often hidden from the citizens who decide to legalize gambling. But later these costs show up in the shattered lives of individuals and their families. One study in *The Journal of Social Issues* found that as gambling increases, there is an increase in "(a) proportion of divorce and separation; (b) disagreement about money matters with one's spouse; (c) lack of understanding between marital partners; and (d) more reported problems among children of gamblers."[{10}](#)

Psychologist Julian Taber warns, "No one knows the social costs of gambling or how many players will become addicted . . . the states are experimenting with the minds of the people on a massive scale."[{11}](#) Families are torn apart by strife, divorce, and bankruptcy. Boydon Cole and Sidney Margolius in their book, *When You Gamble—You Risk More Than Your Money*, conclude, "There is no doubt of the destructive effect of gambling on the family life. The corrosive effects of gambling attack both the white-collar and blue-collar families with equal vigor."[{12}](#)

The impact on crime is also significant. The crime rate in gambling communities is nearly double the national average.[{13}](#) Researchers calculate that for every dollar the state received in gambling revenues, it costs the state at least three dollars in increased social costs (for criminal justice and social welfare).[{14}](#)

Bad Governmental Policy

Legalized gambling is also bad governmental policy. Government should promote public virtue, not seduce its citizens to gamble in state-sponsored vice. Government is supposed to be servant of God according to Romans 13, but its moral stance is compromised when it enters into a gambling enterprise.

Citizens would be outraged if their state government began enticing its citizens to engage in potentially destructive behavior (such as taking drugs). But those same citizens see no contradiction when government legalizes and even promotes gambling. Instead of being a positive moral force in society, government contributes to the corruption of society.

Ross Wilhelm, professor of business economics at the University of Michigan, says,

State lotteries and gambling games are essentially a “rip-off” and widespread legalization of gambling is one of the worst changes in public policy to have occurred in recent years. . . . The viciousness of the state-run games is compounded beyond belief by the fact that state governments actively advertise and promote the games and winners. [{15}](#)

The corrosive effect legalized gambling has on government itself is also a cause for concern. As one editorial in *New York Times* noted, “Gambling is a business so rich, so fast, so powerful and perhaps inevitably so unsavory that it cannot help but undermine government.” [{16}](#)

Legal and Illegal Gambling

One of the standard clichés used by proponents of legalized gambling is that by instituting legal gambling, illegal gambling will be driven out. This argument makes a number of faulty assumptions. First, it assumes that people are going to gamble anyway; and so the state might as well get a piece of

the action. Second, it assumes that given the choice, people would rather gamble in a state-sponsored program because it will be regulated. The state will make sure that the program is fair and that each participant has an equal chance of winning. Third, it assumes that if the state enters the gambling arena, it will drive out illegal gambling because it will be a more efficient competitor for gamblers' dollars.

While the arguments seem sound, they are not. Although some people do gamble illegally, most citizens do not. Legalized gambling entices people to gamble who normally would not gamble at all. Duke University researchers have found that the lottery is a "powerful recruiting device" because one-fourth of those who otherwise would not gamble at all do bet on lotteries. [{17}](#)

Second, legal gambling does not drive out illegal gambling. If anything, just the opposite is true. As legalized gambling comes into a state, it provides additional momentum for illegal gambling. The Organized Crime Section of the Department of Justice found that "the rate of illegal gambling in those states which have some legalized form of gambling was three times as high as those states where there was not a legalized form of gambling." [{18}](#) And one national review found that

In states with different numbers of games, participation rates increase steadily and sharply as the number of legal types of gambling increases. Social betting more than doubles from 35 percent in states with no legal games to 72 percent in states with three legal types; the illegal gambling rate more than doubles from nine percent to 22 percent; and commercial gambling increases by 43 percent, from 24 to 67 percent. [{19}](#)

Legalized gambling in various states has been a stimulator of illegal gambling, not a competitor to it.

The reasons for the growth of illegal gambling in areas where legalized gambling exists are simple. First, organized crime syndicates often use the free publicity of state lotteries and pari-mutuel betting to run their own numbers games. The state actually saves them money by providing publicity for events involving gambling. Second, many gamblers would rather bet illegally than legally. When they work with a bookie, they can bet on credit and do not have to report their winnings to the government, two things they cannot do if they bet on state-sponsored games. This explains why illegal gambling thrives in states with legalized gambling.

Another important issue is the corrupting influence legalized gambling can have on society. First, legalized gambling can have a very corrupting influence on state government. In the last few years there have been numerous news reports of corruption and fraud in state lotteries. Second, there is the corrupting influence on the citizens themselves. Gambling breeds greed. Research has shown that the number of compulsive gamblers increases between 100 and 550 percent when legalized gambling is brought into an area.^{20} Every day, otherwise sane people bet large amounts of money in state lotteries because they hope they will win the jackpot. Moreover, states and various gambling establishments produce glitzy ads that appeal to people's greed in order to entice them to risk even more than they can afford.

Government should be promoting positive social values such as thrift and integrity rather than negative ones such as greed and avarice. They should be promoting the public welfare rather than seducing citizens to engage in state-sponsored vice.

Economic Costs

Legalized forms of gambling (state lotteries, pari-mutuel betting, and casinos) are often promoted as good economic

policy. Proponents say they are painless ways of increasing billions of dollars in state revenue. But there is another economic side to legalized gambling.

First, the gross income statistics for legalized gambling are much higher than the net income. State lotteries are one example. Although about half the states have lotteries and the figures vary from state to state, we can work with some average figures. Generally, the cost of management, advertising, and promotion is approximately sixty cents of each dollar. In other words, for every dollar raised in a lottery, only forty cents goes to the state budget. By contrast, direct taxation of the citizens costs only about one cent on the dollar, so that for every dollar raised by taxes, ninety-nine cents goes to the state.

Second, gambling adversely affects a state economy. Legalized gambling depresses businesses because it diverts money that could have been spent in the capital economy into gambling that does not stimulate the economy. Boarded-up businesses surrounding casinos are a visible reminder of this, but the effect on the entire economy is even more devastating than may be at first apparent. Money that could be invested, loaned, and recycled through the economy is instead risked in a legalized gambling scheme.

Legalized gambling siphons off a lot of money from the economy. More money is wagered on gambling than is spent on elementary and secondary education (\$286 billion versus \$213 billion in 1990).[\[21\]](#) Historian John Ezel concludes in his book, *Fortune's Merry Wheel*, "If history teaches us anything, a study of over 1,300 legal lotteries held in the United States proves . . . they cost more than they brought in if their total impact on society is reckoned."[\[22\]](#)

Biblical Perspective

Even though the Bible does not directly address gambling, a number of principles can be derived from Scripture. First, the Bible emphasizes a number of truths that conflict with gambling. The Bible, for example, emphasizes the sovereignty of God (Matt. 10:29–30). Gambling, however, is based on chance. The Bible admonishes people to work creatively and for the benefit of others (Eph. 4:28), while gambling fosters a something-for-nothing attitude. The Bible condemns materialism (Matt. 6:24–25) while gambling promotes it.

Gambling breeds a form of covetousness, whereas the tenth commandment (Exod. 20:17) admonishes people not to covet. Coveting, greed, and selfishness are the base emotions that entice individuals to gamble. Christians should be concerned about gambling if for no other reason than the effect it has on the “weaker brother” and how it will affect the compulsive gambler. State-sponsored gambling makes it more difficult for compulsive gamblers to reform. Legalized gambling becomes an institutionalized form of greed.

Second, gambling destroys the work ethic. Two key biblical passages deal with the work ethic. In Colossians 3:23–24 the apostle Paul wrote, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” And in 2 Thessalonians 3:7,10, he stated, “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. . . . For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

The Twentieth Century Fund research group commented, “Gambling’s get-rich-quick appeal appears to mock capitalism’s core values: disciplined work habits, thrift, prudence, adherence to routine, and the relationship between effort and reward.”[\[23\]](#) These core values of the work ethic are all part

of the free enterprise system and are part of the Christian life. Gambling corrupts these values, and replaces them with greed and selfishness. Rather than depending on hard work, gamblers depend on luck and chance.

Third, gambling destroys families. Gambling is a major cause of family neglect. Many of the social costs associated with gambling come from a get-rich-quick mindset. As people get caught up in a gambling frenzy, they begin to neglect their families. Money spent on lottery tickets or at racetracks is frequently not risk capital but is income that should be spent on family needs. According to 1 Timothy 5:8, a person who refuses to care for his family is worse than an unbeliever. Parents must provide for their children (2 Cor. 12:14) and eat the bread of their labors (2 Thess. 3:12). When gambling is legalized, it causes people to neglect their God-mandated responsibility to care for their families, and many of those families then often end up on welfare.

Fourth, gambling is a form of state-sponsored greed. Romans 13:4 teaches that government is to be a servant of God, providing order in society and promoting public virtue. Legalized gambling undercuts government's role and subverts the moral fabric of society through greed and selfishness promoted by a state-sponsored vice.

Since gambling undermines the moral foundations of society and invites corruption in government, Christians must stand against attempts to legalize gambling.

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Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths – Evangelical Views Declining

National Study of Youth and Religion

The National Study of Youth and Religion (Wave 3) contains the detailed data from which Christian Smith presented a summary of the results in his book, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. My prior article, ["Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America,"](#) summarized some of the important results reported in his book. One of his results showed that the number of young adults who identify themselves as not religious or as a religious liberal has grown from one in three young adults in 1976 to almost two out of three young adults in 2008. This huge difference in beliefs reflects that the dominant culture has changed from supporting Christian beliefs to now being basically counter to them. Today's emerging adults are immersed in a postmodern culture that "stressed difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason." [\[1\]](#)

This culture has produced a set of young Americans who may still claim to be associated with Protestant or Catholic beliefs but in reality have accepted the view that God and Christ are potentially helpful upon death, but are of little value until then. As these young adults moved from teenagers into emerging adults, Smith found that over four out of ten of them became less religious over a five year span. However, he did find that about one in three would identify themselves as evangelical and probably continue to identify themselves that way for the foreseeable future.

However, to look at the data more closely, we can access this study of 18- to 23-year-olds online at the Association of Religious Data Archives.[{2}](#) Using this data, we can look at the association between questions in ways that we could not see in Christian Smith's book. As we studied this data, we found an even bleaker view of the future of the evangelical church than that presented by his book.

Along with general demographic information, the questions asked by the survey can be generally divided into four segments: Religious Beliefs, Religious Practices, Cultural Beliefs, and Cultural Practices. When we analyze the data in these four segments, we find a significant disconnect between each of these four segments. One might expect that we would find a small but significant subset that shared an *evangelical* belief and practice *and* that applied those beliefs consistently to their *cultural* beliefs and practices. Instead, what we find is that of 881 evangelicals, a grand total of zero (that is zilch, nada, none) share a common set of beliefs across all four categories. In other words, there is no set of common beliefs amongst these 18- to 23-year-olds who belong to an evangelical church.

It is worth noting here that the 881 evangelicals discussed here are down from the 1064 evangelicals in the study of this same group as teenagers. The 881 includes 728 who were among the 1064 plus 155 new evangelicals. The new evangelicals were

about one-third from mainline protestant, one-third from catholic, and one-third from not religious or non-Christian religions. Of the 336 who left evangelical Christianity about half went to other Christian religions and the other half went to nonreligious or indeterminate religious beliefs. Almost undoubtedly, if we were to include these original evangelicals in our evangelical statistics we would get even worse data. We should also note here that this group was 18 to 23 in 2008 so now they are 20 to 25. However, we will refer to them as 18 to 23 in this article.

Religious Beliefs

Let us begin by first considering the data on religious beliefs. By itself, this is very interesting. First, we find that four out of five of those associated with an evangelical church believe in God as a personal being and Jesus as His Son who was raised from the dead. Unfortunately, it also means we are starting with one-fifth of those still associated with an evangelical church who either don't believe in God or in Jesus as His Son. It is interesting to note that one-third of mainline Protestants and nearly half of Catholics have this same attitude of unbelief. However, the number of evangelicals who believe in God and Christ is still a significant number and is 28% of the total population of 18- to 23-year-olds in America. When we add in the mainline and Catholic believers, we find approximately half of all young adults have a correct view of God and Jesus at this very basic level. Although half is not what we would like, it is probably more than we would expect to find with active Christians.

But when we add in the concepts that only people whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ go to heaven and that there is only one true religion, the number of evangelicals in this age group who agree drops to 38%. Thus, only one in three ascribe to the most basic beliefs of evangelical Christianity. When we add in mainline Protestants

and Catholics, the percentage of young Americans who believe in salvation only through Jesus Christ drops to less than one in five.

When one adds in the concepts that faith is important, that demons are real beings, and that there are some actions that are always right or wrong, and combine those with attending a worship service at least two times a month, the number among evangelicals drops to less than one in five. That is, four out of five young evangelicals do not agree with these basic concepts. For mainline Protestants and Catholics, the percentages are 9% and 2%, indicating that almost none of them have a basic set of Christian beliefs. Combining these together shows that only 7% of all young adults hold to these basic beliefs.

Clearly, we have a major disconnect of belief for this age group, even among those who are associated with an evangelical church. As we probe beyond God and Jesus, we find that most of them do not have a set of beliefs consistent with the basic truths of the Bible.

In his book, Smith points out that for emerging adults “evidence and proof trump blind faith.”^{3} By this he means that most emerging adults view scientific views as based on evidence and truth while religious beliefs are simply blind faith. As one young person put it, “I mean there is proven fact and then there is what’s written in the Bible—and they don’t match up.”^{4} Or as another young person put it, “You have to take the Bible as symbolic sometimes. If you take it as literal there’s definitely a problem. There’s scientific proof [that contradicts it]. So you have to take it piece by piece and choose what you want to believe.”^{5}

The interesting result of this belief is that it does not primarily apply to the extremely small segment of the Bible which some might consider at odds with scientific theories (e.g., creation of the universe). Rather, they apply it to

things like teachings on sexuality, the uniqueness of Jesus, and the beginning of life. So they use the excuse of science to modify any beliefs taught by the Bible that are inconsistent with current cultural beliefs.

Religious Practices

Perhaps we have now found the truly religious 18- to 23-year-olds among the one-out-of-four evangelicals that express a set of core religious beliefs. Even if we add another seven questions on belief in things like life after death, heaven, judgment day, and miracles, we still have almost 15% of evangelical young adults who answer correctly. However, if this 15% is the core group of believers, then their religious behaviors will match their beliefs.

If this group of young adults is the core group, we would expect them to pray on a daily basis and to read the Bible at least once per week. When asked those questions, less than one in ten evangelical emerging adults hold the religious beliefs and engage in the religious practices. In fact, nearly half of those with the core beliefs do not read their Bibles or pray. When we add on questions about whether they are interested in learning more about their faith and have shared their faith with someone else, the number drops to less than one in twenty of the evangelical young adults. So, over 95 out of 100 young people affiliated with evangelical churches do not believe and practice their belief. Sadly, if we look at those who do these things and attend Sunday School or some weekday group and have read a devotional book in the last year, the number drops to 3% of evangelicals.

This data clearly shows that, for 18- to 23-year-old evangelicals, beyond a belief in God and Jesus there is no common set of beliefs and practices. Virtually every evangelical young adult will depart from the faith on one or more basic core beliefs and practices. It appears that there is *no common core group* of dedicated faithful believers among

this age group.

As Christian Smith points out, emerging adults view religious ideas as a cafeteria line where you take the ones you like and leave the rest behind. As he says, "People should take and use what is helpful in it, . . . and they can leave the rest. . . . At least some parts of religions are 'outdated.' Emerging adults are the authorities for themselves on what in religion is good or useful or relevant for them."[\[6\]](#) As one of the emerging adults put it, "Instead of fighting various religions, I just kinda combined religious ideas that were similar or sounded good."[\[7\]](#) So, since the emerging adult is the authority on what religious beliefs to accept rather than the Scriptures, their culture determines their religious beliefs rather than the other way around.

Cultural Beliefs

The data from this survey indicates that there is not a set of doctrinally pure religious believers in the 18 to 23 age range. But perhaps they are clearer on cultural beliefs that should be informed by their faith. To make the analysis easier we will consider two different sets of beliefs. The first set looks at their beliefs about creation, waiting on sex until marriage, and respect for religion in America. The second set considers living meaningful but not guilty lives, caring about the poor, and being against unmarried sex and divorce.

When asked about the creation of the world, approximately half of the evangelical emerging adults said that God created the world without using evolution over a long period of time to create new species. Only one in four young evangelicals believe they should wait to have sex and don't need to try out sex with their partner before they get married. Interestingly, only 16% of mainline Protestants and less than one in ten Catholic young adults believe the same way. As Smith points out, this belief is odd given the numerous studies which show that couples who do not live together before marriage have a

significantly greater chance of success than those who do. Forty-eight percent of evangelicals have respect for organized religion in this country and believe it is ok for religious people to try to convert other people to their faith. However when we combine these three beliefs together, i.e. about creation, sex, and evangelism, we find that only one in ten evangelicals, one in twenty mainline Protestants, and only one in a hundred Catholics agree with all three of these areas. Then when we look to see how many have the religious beliefs and practices *and* believe these cultural topics, we find that only 8 evangelicals (< 1%) and no mainline Protestants or Catholics qualify. Thus, we have only 8 people out of over 2500 who have a consistent set of evangelical religious beliefs, religious practices, and cultural beliefs.

Of course that is only a small subset of the cultural beliefs that should be impacted by our religious beliefs. Let's look at few more. Let's consider those who have not felt guilty about things in their life over the last year, who believe their life is meaningful and that they can change important things in their life as needed. We find that approximately one-third of each of the major groups agree with these statements. If we look at how many don't need to buy more and who care about the needs of the poor, we find that about one in four of all young adults agree with these objectives. However, when we combine these two areas, we find that only about one in ten young adults agree. Now add in the idea that unmarried sex and divorce are not okay, a statement with which 28% of evangelicals and 14% of all emerging adults agree. When we combine all three of these belief areas, we discover that only 2% of evangelicals agree with all three areas. If we combine these areas with religious beliefs and practices, we find that only four evangelicals (or less than one in two hundred) agreed.

When we combine both sets of cultural beliefs with the religious beliefs and practices, we find that there is one

emerging adult out of over 2500 who agrees with those beliefs.

In both sets of data above, we considered questions dealing with sexual activity. In the first, we saw that the idea of waiting to have sex until marriage was rejected by three out of four of the evangelical, emerging adults. In the second set of data, we saw that a similar number believe that unmarried sex and divorce are okay. These beliefs are clearly counter to the teaching of Christianity, but they are dominant beliefs among evangelical, emerging adults. As Christian Smith put it, “[M]ost emerging adults reduce a certain cognitive dissonance they feel—arising from the conflict of religious teachings against partying and sex before marriage versus their wanting to engage in those behaviors—by mentally discounting the religious teachings and socially distancing themselves from the source of those teachings.” In other words, they discount any religious teachings that would discourage them from doing what the culture promotes as acceptable, contrasted with the Bible which says, “Love not the world neither the things of the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, are not of the Father but are of the world.”[\[8\]](#)

Cultural Practices

Perhaps the disturbing cultural beliefs are belied by the cultural practices. Let’s look at some of the relevant cultural practices addressed in the National Study on Youth and Religion. Let’s begin with the number of people who have not smoked pot or engaged in binge drinking in the two weeks before the survey. Among evangelical, emerging adults over half (54%) have not engaged in these two activities. Of course this also means that almost half of them have engaged in one of both of these activities. Amongst Catholic emerging adults, two out of three have engaged in these behaviors.

How many have not engaged in viewing X-rated videos in the last year or unmarried sex (including oral sex)? This number

begins at approximately one third of evangelicals not engaging in unmarried sex but drops to only one fifth when X-rated videos are added. So, 4 out of 5 evangelical, emerging adults are engaged in sexual sin, most of them on a regular basis.

On another venue of behavior, how many emerging adults have given money for charitable purposes, volunteered, and don't admire people based on how much money they have? We find that approximately 15% of evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics have done so. So, over 8 out of 10 have not given of themselves to help others.

Certainly Christians are called to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18) and to "set their minds on heavenly things" (Col. 3:2). So let's consider those who are grateful for the present and sometimes think about the future. This includes about half of all emerging adults. Thus, over half of emerging adults seldom give thanks and rarely think about the future.

Now let's combine these thoughts and actions together and we find that only about 2% of all emerging adults hold to a biblical set of practices. So even though over half hold to a belief in abstaining from drugs and binge drinking, one-fifth affirm abstaining from illicit sexual activity, half hold to an attitude of gratitude for the present and the future, and 15% have given in some way of their time or money, when you combine them together only 2% have done all four items.

If we combine the four categories, Religious Beliefs, Religious Practices, Cultural Beliefs, and Cultural Practices, we find that no one holds to the set of beliefs which are most consistent with Scripture.

Conclusions

There are many conclusions that could be drawn from the data above. Two of the most important conclusions are as follows.

First, the basic religious beliefs of emerging adults largely depart from the Bible, and when you add in religious practices and cultural beliefs and practices we find that no one maintains a distinctly biblical worldview. Second, there does not appear to be uniformity in the beliefs of emerging adults. Rather than having a subset of evangelicals, say 15%, holding to a distinctly biblical worldview, you end up with none because they trip up in different areas.

As Christian Smith pointed out, “emerging adults felt entirely comfortable describing various religious beliefs that they affirmed but that appeared to have no connection whatsoever to the living of their lives.”^{9} This is because religious teachings are not the authority on this world. Rather, it is what you choose to believe that is your authority for the “truth” in your life. As one emerging adult put it, “I think that what you believe depends on you. I don’t think I could say that Hinduism is wrong or Catholicism is wrong . . . I think it just depends on what you believe.”^{10} This concept results in a set of evangelical, emerging adults who don’t hold to a set of common beliefs about God, Jesus, religion, and cultural practices, but instead hold to a wide variety of beliefs which are counter to the Bible. We must not say because they go to church that they believe the truth of the Bible. This survey shows that almost certainly they do not.

At Probe, we are committed to making a difference in this emerging generation. Over the next decade, we are committed to freeing the minds of 50 million Christians and converting them into confident ambassadors for Christ. If we and others like us are not successful, the children of these emerging adults may have no Christian example to follow.

Notes

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See Also:

[Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America](#)

[Emerging Adults A Closer Look](#)

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

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

Prometheus, God and Film: 10

Science Fiction Movies with a Theological Theme

Dr. Terlizzese looks to see if we can find a Christian worldview perspective or, at least, questions which need theological answers in a number of popular science fiction movies. He finds some good themes and bad themes and offers advice on how to view movies of all types.

Sci-fi films have never been more popular than they are today. Witness this summer's offerings: *Prometheus* (see below), *Chronicle*, *The Hunger Games* even the comic book-inspired *Avengers* and the romantic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* feature elements of science fiction. And like most arts and literature, they contain elements of theology. This genre borrows a basic aspect of the Christian worldview concerning the value and meaning of individuals in a world of technological conformity.

Sci-fi combines a somewhat biblical understanding of mankind with an almost religious belief in technological progress. This fuels the popular fear that technology will rob people of their souls or individuality. The modern technological worldview is rooted in *materialism*: it affirms that people are basically machines who can be objectified, categorized and manipulated as any other object in nature. One film scholar notes this connection:

Scientism opened the doors for a mechanical view of mankind. . . . We are no longer special, no longer sacred – neither the form (body) nor the mind. “Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that there is only one substance, differently modified, in the whole world. What will all the weak reeds of divinity, metaphysic, and nonsense of the schools avail against this firm and solid oak?” [Le Mettrie]. [Sci-fi] arises out of the tension between this kind of

“rude” scientism and the Christian cosmology. Scientism “robs” humans of their very humanity and makes them out to be biological machines, much like the alien children in Village of the Damned. [\[1\]](#)

Reaching a Popular Audience

The sci-fi genre asks, What is human nature?[\[2\]](#) In light of technological advance, how we define humanity becomes more crucial as technology changes not just the natural world, but humanity itself. It has become imperative not only for philosophers, but for everyone to ask, how is technological advance transforming human nature? The failure to perceive change caused by new technology creates a serious problem for an age so enormously influenced by it. Sci-fi movies serve as a philosophical treatise for average people who are not professionally trained, raising questions and issues that would otherwise be lost on the common person because of their intolerable abstraction.

The movies speak the common language of our times. When teachers want to make an idea concrete or illustrate a point, they grope for an example from a popular movie. Most people love movies and to be able to relate abstract concepts through such a relevant medium will certainly create a profound effect.

We normally think of sci-fi as promoting innovative technology that holds out optimistic promise for the future of mankind. This is generally true of print media produced by popular writers like Jules Verne, H. G. Wells or Isaac Asimov. However sci-fi film has taken another tack by appealing to commonly held suspicions of technological progress. An optimistic view of progress views new technology as a liberating force destined to lift the burdens of work, cure disease, improve communication and free humanity from natural limits. A pessimistic view takes the opposite direction; instead of

liberation it fears that new technology will create a new form of enslavement and dehumanization that will rob people of their individuality or their very souls.

Given the popularity of movies and the latent theological premise of many sci-fi films, the following list presents an incomplete, but important sample of theology in sci-fi movies. It is intended to help Christians read the movies from more than a literalist perspective by paying attention to the metaphors and symbols that constitute their meaning. These movies may contain objectionable material, but more importantly, resonate with redemptive themes worth analyzing.

Movies are cultural day dreams, serving as modern folklore and morality tales. They signify a shared message of hope or fear not always transparent without analysis. So let's get started!

Prometheus, 2012

Humanoid aliens seed earth with their DNA that creates humanity. They leave clues behind on how to find them in a distant galaxy. When earthlings discover their origins they uncover a plan for human extinction, revealing that the gods are hostile towards their own children. The movie raises classic theological and philosophical questions such as, Where did we come from? Why are we here? And, where are we going? Though never distinguishing between wishful thinking or religious truth claims, it presents faith as a choice for meaning, even in the face of the most hostile conditions. The cross remains a prominent and enduring symbol of hope and human redemption. Humans are worth saving and are not genetic mistakes that deserve extinction.

The Terminator, 1984

Robots represent both hope and fear of technological aspirations. They symbolize the incredible potential of technological capability and human replacement. Robots are mechanical people that embody the fears of extreme

rationalization. Cartesian philosophy identified reason as the definition of human nature, which takes its final form in the computer. Robots are nothing more than embodied computers. Sometimes the movies picture them as our slaves and protectors. Robots enable people to live work-free lives as with Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) who undoubtedly depicts the most iconic and loveable of all movie robots. However, most robots represent something evil and ominous as in *The Terminator*.

The premise states that computer intelligence Sky Net became self-aware and immediately perceived humanity as a threat and initiated a nuclear strike. Some people survived to fight back and achieved ultimate victory led by the messianic figure John Conner sent to rescue humanity from techno-enslavement and termination. Human victory over the machines necessitated that Sky Net send a robot agent back in time to eliminate the mother of the rebel leader. Commentators read the plot as loosely based on the story of the Birth of Christ. *The Terminator* encapsulates the abiding fear that mankind will one day destroy itself through the use of its own technology. That which was meant to enhance human life will one day annihilate it. The need for salvation remains paramount as the last installment *Terminator Salvation* (2009) indicates.

The Matrix, 1999

In the not too distant future Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes self-aware and identifies humanity as a threat and initiates a war, a common theme in science fiction. Humanity burns the atmosphere to create perpetual darkness in order to block the sun and deny the machines a power source. The machines respond by turning people into batteries and growing them in a huge incubator, kept alive in a vegetative state through feeding them the blood of the previous generation and by sending false impressions to the brain that simulate a normal existence. Billions of people are given fabricated lives in a huge computer-simulated world called the Matrix.

Zion, the only surviving human city, awaits deep underground for their savior Neo, rescued from the Matrix and believed to possess the power to fight the machines within the Matrix and free mankind.

In addition to the obvious messianic overtones the series presents a complicated patchwork of different religious ideas from Christianity and Buddhism to Greek mythology as a counterpoint to the Cartesian philosophy that reason alone ultimately defines human nature. The computer best embodies the logical conclusion of rational thought and the loss of human freedom that results from the universal acceptance of rationalism. *The Matrix* demonstrates an acute historical irony in rejecting rationalism and looking to premodern religious ideas to define human nature and provide meaning to life, even though these ideas are considered anachronistic in a secular and technological age.

The Book of Eli, 2010

The Book of Eli presents an explicitly Christian message of obedience to the voice of God in describing the spiritual journey and act of faith by the blind nomad Eli. Set in a post-apocalyptic world of the near future, a drifter finds his purpose in life through committing to memory the *King James Bible*, then spending thirty years traveling across the wasteland to an unknown destination. Along the way Eli encounters a ruthless mayor seeking the power of the book for his own political ends. In addition to the spiritual journey the movie depicts the dark side of faith when used to control and manipulate others.

The Invasion, 2007

The Invasion is an excellent remake of the original science fiction masterpiece *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1979) in which spores from outer space take over human bodies by emptying them of free will and any unique qualities as individuals, making everyone soulless and identical. The

message is clear: that a world without free will may be more peaceful and happy, but would be horribly inhuman. What price are we willing to pay for peace, security and harmony? If these qualities are not derived from love then we do not have a world worth living in. In the absence of freedom, a nightmarish world of automatons pretending to be humans assumes control. They are bodies without souls. In the chilling words of the original movie, "Love, desire, ambition, faith—without them life's so simple." [\[3\]](#) This may be life in unison, but it is more like the life of a grove of trees all getting along rather nicely. This movie franchise argues for the idea that love and choice are essential aspects of our humanity without which life loses its purpose.

Planet of the Apes, 1968

This 1960's protest film decries the potential genocide of nuclear war. Astronauts find themselves stranded on a strange planet where apes rule humans. The movie has several themes including the debate between evolution and creation, science and religion, church and state relations as well as racism and offers an accurate commentary on humanity as a creature that wages war on all those around it including himself. It is rare to find any movie that weaves so many themes into its message, while not revealing its main point until its climactic surprise ending.

The Day the Earth Stood Still, 1951

We do not need to see films based on the Gospels in order to find Christ at the movies. The presence of a Christ-like figure is usually signified when a heroic character with extraordinary powers dies and comes back to life, such as in the case of Klatuu, the representative of a galactic alliance who visits earth during the Cold War and warns that we must turn our efforts to peace or face annihilation because earth poses a threat to the rest of the galaxy. Humanity's technical abilities now exceed its self-control, which will end in

disaster if it does not turn to peaceful ends.

Star Wars, 1977

Science fiction generally focuses on the power of reason and technology. *Star Wars* follows a different tack, making faith and religion central. The movie sets the action in the familiar device of good vs. evil, but adds the dimension of faith being more powerful than technical ability in the promotion of both good and evil. The *Star Wars* franchise contrasts with that other perennially popular space melodrama *Star Trek*, which often belittles notions of God, faith and religion. Based on the secular humanism of its creator Gene Roddenberry, technology or human potential trumps faith and religion. In contrast, *Star Wars* derives from the ecumenical ideas of George Lucas, where faith represented by “the force”—for better or worse—is more powerful than raw technological ability.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1977

Everyman Roy Neary experiences a close encounter with a UFO that sends him on a journey to discover its meaning. In the process he acts erratically, causing his wife Ronnie to leave him with their three children. The further he delves into the mystery, the more he discovers the truth behind his encounter: that extraterrestrials have visited earth and are seeking him out along with a select group of others. The movie vaguely resembles John Bunyan’s famous allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Aliens often represent transcendence in the movies, either as angelic messengers or demonic powers. *Close Encounters* may be interpreted as a spiritual journey that seeks out a higher purpose in life beyond mundane existence.

2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

2001 lives up to its reputation as the greatest science fiction movie ever made. The movie begins with a tribe of

hominids on the brink of starvation. An extraterrestrial force endows them with the gift of technology in the form of animal bones used to hunt for food and murder their opponents. The action then moves to outer space when the murder weapon is flung into the air and transforms into a space ship, suggesting continuity between the earliest technology and the most advanced.

Mankind finds itself on the brink of encountering extraterrestrial (ET) life near Jupiter. A small crew travels to the location of a beacon with the assistance of an onboard supercomputer, the HAL 9000, who (he is strangely human) becomes threatened by the crew who want to turn off his higher cognitive ability. HAL murders the crew except for one member who escapes and finishes the mission. After his encounter with the ET, Commander Bowman converts into an angelic figure, or star child who returns to earth. Director Stanley Kubrick comments on the meaning of this scene when he says of Bowman, "He is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to earth prepared for the next leap forward in man's evolutionary destiny." {4}

The star child is the first of a new race representing a spiritual rather than technological change. "Kubrick's vision reveals technology as a competitive force that must be defeated in order for humans to evolve." {5} The message of *2001* is that, though technology assists humanity in survival, it also threatens human existence.

A Final Word

Humanity now needs a spiritual transformation, not more technology, in order to survive. Although we find this theological message in an unusual source, it still represents an important warning we have yet to heed.

Notes

1. Per Schelde, *Androids, Humanoids and Other Science Fiction*

Monsters (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 125.

2. Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "What is it to be human? *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*" in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed., Steven M. Sanders (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 26.

3. M. Keith Booker, *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), 63.

4. Stanley Kubrick quoted in Thomas A. Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 133.

5. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 99.

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Redeeming The Hunger Games: From a Christian Worldview Perspective

Although not explicitly anti-Christian, The Hunger Games presents a very disturbing future world where children are forced to fight one another to the death. Sue Bohlin presents solid, biblically based concepts on how we are to consider movies in general and redeeming questions we should ask of this movie if one chooses to see it. Viewing movies with the intent of understanding the worldview behind the movie can help us present our Christian worldview in a way that communicates with the people around us.

Should Christians read (or see) *The Hunger Games*? Some people make strong arguments for avoiding any contact with the books or movie. No one will lie on their deathbed and say, “Oh, how I regret missing *Hunger Games*.” But this is the latest “big thing” to hit our culture; is there a way for Christ-followers to redeem it and not simply consume it as entertainment?

This separatist (and unrealistic) position confirms an unhealthy false dichotomy between “things of the world” and “things of the spirit realm.” We need to see the world as one reality where Christ rules over all and has something to say about everything. It would be better to ask, “How does the Bible relate to *Hunger Games*?” It would be better to compare biblical truths and biblical values to any body of work people are reading or viewing or listening to, the way that we can better judge the crookedness of a stick by laying it next to a straightedge.

Developing our critical thinking skills protects us from absorbing and internalizing ungodly ideas, creating yet more “cultural captives” who are more conformed to the surrounding cultures than the Word and character of God.

“It’s just a story. . .”

Many people dismiss concern over blockbuster novels and movies by saying, “Come on, it’s just a story, it’s *fiction!*” But we need to be *more* careful about how we process ideas and images that come through story, since most people’s defenses are down with this genre, and they just absorb the story without thinking or analyzing. That’s a major contributing factor to cultural captivity in the church—people have been absorbing the ideas and values of the culture through music, TV, movies, books, and even just personal conversation, without comparing them to what God says.

When people take in and digest *Hunger Games* as mere entertainment, their unthinking discernment puts them in the same category as the Capitol spectators who have no concept of the atrocity of human beings being sacrificed for their diversion. But if you are deeply troubled by its depiction of the broken reality of life in a fallen world, if you are able to think about the implications of the story, then you are interacting with the books and movie with wisdom.

I think the best way to build wisdom and develop critical thinking is by asking questions that help us evaluate what we read or see.

For example, something is terribly wrong in the world that author Suzanne Collins paints in *Hunger Games*. Our souls rebel against the evil, the sense of “not right-ness” in it. We need to ask ourselves (and others), *What is the “terribly wrong”?* *And where did that sense of right and wrong come from?* I suggest that the visceral reaction comes from the imprint of God, the *imago Dei*, on our souls. The rightness of the image of God on our souls contrasts painfully with the crookedness of the dystopian world of *Hunger Games*.

The presence of evil and sin in the books is not bad in and of itself; as in the Bible, they are never glorified or promoted. The result is that most readers/viewers react along moral lines: murder and betrayal are bad, sacrifice and loyalty are good. This is a legitimate and edifying use of literature and film.

Questions to Ask

My colleague Todd Kappelman, an accomplished literature and film critic, suggests several thoughtful questions to ask about films and books:

- *How important is life to the director/writers etc.? Are the tough issues dealt with or avoided?*

- *Is there a discernible philosophical position in the film? If so, what is it, and can a case be made for your interpretation?*
- *Is the subject matter of the film portrayed truthfully? Here the goal is to determine if the subject matter is being dealt with in a way that is in agreement with or contrary to the experiences of daily reality.*
- *Is there a discernible hostility toward particular values and beliefs? Does the film seek to be offensive for the sake of sensationalism alone?*
- *Is the film technically well made, written, produced and acted?*[{1}](#)

Christian thinker Leland Ryken proposes three more questions that the Christian ask when interpreting a work of art:

- *Does the interpretation of reality in this work conform or fail to conform to Christian doctrine or ethics? (The answer may be mixed for a given work.)*
- *If some of the ideas and values are Christian, are they inclusively or exclusively Christian? That is, do these ideas encompass Christianity and other religions or philosophic viewpoints, or do they exclude Christianity from other viewpoints?*
- *If some of the ideas and values in a work are Christian, are they a relatively complete version of the Christian view, or are they a relatively rudimentary version of Christian belief on a given topic?*[{2}](#)

Our good friend Dan Panetti from Prestonwood Christian Academy has assembled a deeply insightful white paper for parents to use in talking about *Hunger Games* with their children, to help them build a biblical worldview analysis of something students

are intent on reading or seeing anyway. (And it's not just older students, either. One of my friends' eight-year-old son insisted on going to see the movie. His mother told me, "He was attracted by the movie trailers and he knew people reading the book. He was enticed by the action, but kids killing kids did bother him [but not that much].")

I am grateful for Dan's generosity in allowing us to share his questions in this article, and to make his entire PDF document available for you on our website [here](#). Below are three of the nine major themes he highlights for discussion. I invite you to read through his paper to sharpen your own critical thinking skills!

And that's how we redeem *The Hunger Games*.

The Hunger Games Trilogy Parent Book Discussion

by Dan Panetti, Prestonwood Christian Academy – Plano, Texas

Substitutionary Atonement

The most important theme of this book, in my opinion, is the concept of substitutionary atonement (or penal substitution).

God made him who had no sin to be sin [or be a sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. – 2 Corinthians 5:21

Katniss voluntarily takes the place of her sister Primrose as the "tribute" from District 12—essentially Katniss took the place of Primrose replacing her sister's life with her own. Compare this story to the story of the sacrifice of Jesus in our place. While Katniss is willing to give her own life to protect her younger sister, Jesus was willing to give His life as a ransom for ours...while we were yet sinners—still IN rebellion against His Father! While Prim was young, "innocent" and weak and Katniss was far more skilled and able to defend

herself; it was Jesus who was perfect and sinless dying for us!

Violence

The primary complaint aired about *The Hunger Games* (both the books and the movie) related primarily to the violence; and, yes, the books and movie do have a violent theme and depictions. The first question is whether the violence is appropriate or simply gruesome for effect. Both Collins (the author) and those responsible for the movie do a remarkable job of actually restraining the emphasis on the violence. This does not mean that the books and movie are appropriate for all ages—quite to the contrary. But in discussing this concept with your own children you can point out the fact that there are times in human history when people have had to stand up and fight for what they believe in. Engraved into the wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial is the statement, “Freedom is not free.” Katniss lives under an oppressive government and is forced to fight not only to protect herself and those she loves, but in the second and third book she fights for an ideal of something that is greater than just herself. Later we will discuss the ideals of the Founding Fathers of our nation and their decision to throw off an oppressive government agreeing to pledge their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. Unlike previous generations, this generation is not as familiar with the cost of freedom born by those who give their lives in service to our nation. *The Hunger Games* reminds us that there are some things that are worth fighting for—and even dying for – meaning there will be a certain level of violence along the way.

Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. Those who have known freedom, and then lost it, have never known it again. ~ Ronald Reagan

Ethical Dilemmas

One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Hunger Games* is the presentation of numerous ethical dilemmas – questions where you could ask yourself, “What would I do if I were in that situation?”

Examples of ethical dilemmas for conversation purposes:

Is lying wrong? Is lying always wrong? Would you be willing to lie to protect the life of another person? Would you be willing to lie to save your own life?

Obviously Katniss finds herself faced with these fascinating ethical dilemmas and she has choices to make. Whether she is inside the arena fighting for her life or leading a rebellion against President Snow and the oppressive government, Katniss is often faced with the choice of either having to lie or someone (including herself) having to pay the ultimate price of their lives!

Is killing wrong? Is killing another person always wrong? Would you be able to kill another person to save the life of someone you loved? Would you be able to take the life of another person to save your own life?

Again Katniss finds herself faced with these difficult situations. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta decide that they would rather die than kill one another—and although Katniss hopes that those in control would rather have two victors than none, the reality is that both Katniss and Peeta take the poisonous berries with the intent of killing themselves.

Katniss struggles with this dilemma when she makes an alliance with Rue and when she remembers that Thresh let her live when he could have killed her. Why is it so difficult for Katniss to take the life of another while others in the arena appear to be so cavalier and nonchalant about it?

If you want to discuss more about ethical dilemmas, I suggest you read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom. Corrie and her family were Dutch Christians who helped hide numerous Jews during WWII. Eventually Corrie and her family were arrested and sent away to concentration camps – her father and sister both died in a concentration camp.

As Christians we should look to God's Word for guidance in making decisions about life. Psalm 119:105 reminds us that God's Word "is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path." Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Wise counsel is also strongly encouraged in Scripture. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

Notes

1. www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Movies/Movies2.htm
2. www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Movies/Movies3.htm

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See Also:

[The Hunger Games: A hunger, a game or a calculated viewing option for Christians?](#)

The Hunger Games: A Hunger, a Game, or a Calculated Viewing Option for Christians?

Have you seen the film *The Hunger Games* (HG)? Read the trilogy? What is your view of its legitimacy as entertainment fare? Its literary value or concerns regarding its brutal theme? As the movie with the third-best cinematic opening weekend in history and a universal buzz to match, this surprising piece of popular culture demands a response. I want to discuss two somewhat opposed responses Christians may take. I believe you can make a case for either one. What matters is *why* you choose and what to do with the story.

The film has been called *American Idol* meets *Lord of the Flies* for its unholy melding of pseudo-gladiatorial games with live reality TV—complete with elimination, only this type of competitive elimination is indeed Roman-styled: it's permanent. What's more, these are not hardened, adult warriors battling it out. Young teenage "tributes" from each district fight to the death within a mountainous domed "arena" while a viewing public ogles. Producers create real-time obstacles using godlike technology to up the ante and provide deadly tension. The whole thing is designed as a reminder of the rebellion that preceded the oppressive, dystopian government's stranglehold on its citizen subjects. Yet, the film (and reportedly the books) contains inherent appeal to some moral high ground and redemption. Are there compelling reasons for Christians to seek common ground with movie-goers who share faith as well as those who don't?

I think so, but first, some cautions, observations about audiences and points that require discernment.

A Brief Case for Critique and Avoidance

Kid-on-kid violence is just plain evil:

My initial concerns about the *HG* film centered on two things: its barbarous plot line of child-on-child executions together with its allure to children younger than the intended teen audience. I asked a group of high school seniors in a worldview-based Christian school discussion if they could, for the moment, suspend defense of their film viewing rights and agree that there was something deeply disturbing *in and of itself* about that theme: kids killing kids. They showed a dogged commitment to preserve the story along with their right to view it (methinks they protest too much); however, they admitted a bit grudgingly that something averse to human dignity and the *Imago Dei* (image of God) is built into the storyline. Eventually, we established together that kids killing kids is absolutely evil.

A too-young audience:

Understandably, the young worldview-trained movie critics quickly went back to their arguments for its permissibility as literature for appropriately mature youth. Which brings up another point: when I took my own 16-year-old kids to see *HG*, taking quite seriously the admonition that “parental guidance” may be needed, I was struck deeply by the average age of viewers. It’s a teen film and book series, but most of the kids—who made up a good chunk of the audience—were either pre-teen or younger. This may well be indicative of nationwide audiences. The senior class agreed here too: that kind of negligence is the parents’ fault. They seemed bothered by that, wondering how such young kids could even process the “violent thematic material and disturbing images” that assigned it a PG-13 rating. Indeed, Probe Ministries’ research through The Barna Group shows that, though born-again parents still hold by far the biggest sway on their child’s views, most (at least those surveyed up to 40 years old) don’t do

well either possessing or passing on a cohesive *biblical* worldview of their own. And that doesn't even speak of unbelieving parents who might show up for some engaging entertainment unaware of the (further) desensitization, dehumanization and modeling this film risks.

Violent mimicry:

A recent, very poignant, *Twitter* post (tweet) belies the notion that such violence doesn't really have an effect on young movie-goers. It said something like: "Overhearing two 12-year-olds arguing about how they'd have killed Foxface [a *HG* character] better." The relationship of real-life violence correlated with viewing violence among children is well-documented, but is easily dismissed in the case of "my kids." When a Christian school classmate of my daughter said she wished that the violence in *Hunger Games* had been less muted by camera jiggles and off-screen implications, the connection to her love of horror films wasn't lost on us. The question we need to help young people constantly ask is, "Am I willing to be so in tune with the Lord and His desire for my holiness that I am willing to give up my popular media and entertainment at any given time?" If killing people is cool, something is wrong.

Are we jaded, voyeuristic hypocrites?

One of *Hunger Games* author Suzanne Collins' stated intentions in writing the books was reportedly to forcefully critique so-called reality TV. She derides "the voyeuristic thrill-watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There's also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn't have the impact it should.[\[1\]](#) As I left the theater, I wondered, "Are we just one abstraction away from the curious and jaded crowds who drank in the macabre theater of the hunger games spectacle? After all, we're watching them

watching the killings for sport. No, I didn't watch in order to cheer on the "careers," the professionally trained assassins who hunted fellow teens in a pack. Nor do I condone any such thing. But I did buy a ticket for a movie, knowing the objectionable device by which Collins made her point. A *World* magazine review by Emily Whitten says it well: "...For all the beauty and moral high ground this story contains, it's just as true that the world Collins has created is terribly evil... For some viewers at least—especially younger or more impressionable teens—*The Hunger Games* may produce the same deadening effect on the conscience that Collins seeks to warn us against." [\[2\]](#)

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes:

Then there's what I call "the stumble factor." When a moral decision is under consideration—like whether to watch *The Hunger Games* or pass on it (or, perhaps to watch it privately)—we need to take into account the law of liberty that the Apostle Paul set forth in I Corinthians 8: 4-13. The essence of this ethic for the Christian believer is to consider the relative strength of an onlooker's faith when engaging in something you feel free before God to do and, to default to that course of action which avoids making the weaker brother or sister violate their conscience. This is the well-known passage in which Paul deals with the disputable matter of meat offered to idols in a day of rampant paganism. To some weaker-minded Christian believers, imbibing such remnants of idolatry was unthinkable. However, to those who knew that idols are powerless and that all things are sanctified if one's conscience is not being violated, eating temple-sold meat was perfectly fine.

The bottom line of the above and a similar passage, Romans 14: 13-23, seems to be: live according to your own convictions without putting them legalistically onto others, but defer to others' convictions if you sense they have a weakness of conscience or simply a different conviction on a matter not

explicitly dealt with by Scripture. As Titus 1:15 states, “To the pure, all things [like the meat from pagan worship rituals] are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.” We need to care about those who don’t yet believe, those believers who aren’t free to act as we do or aren’t for some reason able to expose themselves to things related to evil in any way without being compromised by it. Deference is godliness in this case.

A Brief Case for Engagement

The conversation with the Christian school seniors was instructive for everyone, including me. My original misgivings about *The Hunger Games*, written in an email to their administration, had been passed on to them. That memo referenced points of agreement with a very negative film review at an ultra-conservative Web site.^{3} So, I knew going into the class discussion that I represented to at least some the legalistic, nay-saying, conservative older guy from that worldview ministry. The instructor had cleverly challenged the class with an extra credit assignment to write about the film and many students had passionately jumped at the opportunity. Now, these thinking kids were ready to stretch their rhetorical wings—or watch their classmates argue, at least.

Engagement does just that—it engages:

First, I polled the class. How many have seen *Hunger Games*?” All but four of the students’ hands shot up. “How many haven’t had a chance to, but intend to watch it?” Three of the remaining four hands went up. “How many of you stayed up late to catch the midnight premier?” A majority. “Did you enjoy it?” Lots of heads bobbing up and down.”Okay, it seems we have a consensus. Next, I put a little syllogism on the board. It went something like this:

Premise #1: Romans 12:9b says, “...Abhor what is evil, cling to

what is good.” (Phil. 4:8, Psalm 101:3, 2 Cor. 8:21, etc.).
Premise #2: We’ve established that a central theme of The Hunger Games is evil (kids killing kids).
Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong or very unwise for a believer to attend the film or read the books.

As you might expect, the reaction was immediate and, though subdued, passionate. “That misses the point!” “Not necessarily!” So we broke down the argument and concluded that the main point of contention was premise #2: that violence against children is absolutely wrong to do. The issue here, they insisted, was the *portrayal* of violence, not the doing or condoning of it. Sharp young minds caught this crucial distinction, best illustrated by the fact that...

...Even God does it:

As a device, we agreed that violence and even worse elements are sometimes used by God Himself in Scripture. I mean, one would have to slice out entire passages like the story of Lot’s daughters or the mass murders of Abimelech to avoid representation of rank evil in order to decry that evil. Thus, it’s not necessarily morally wrong to depict even heinous evil for a moral purpose. Let your conscience be your guide (but be sure to develop a biblically tutored conscience): The students and I discussed similar themes in great literature from time immemorial. The ethic of a greater good coming from portrayals of evil in order to call it evil and contrast it with what is good came up. Together, we landed on a more nuanced, workable position. That’s when I let my hair down about being a little subversive in my approach. Pointing to the internally logical but flawed argument on the board, I said, “Guys, this is what’s wrong with so much in the Church today (and, I may add, why so many walk away from it)—*if* it’s foisted on us without recognition of its subjectivity in application (remember the law of liberty of conscience in Romans 14?) and the need to reach our own conclusions outside

of legalism's tyranny." The room relaxed palpably.

Wrestling with the implications is necessary:

This is huge! Youth and emerging adults in churches and Christian schools and the homes of believing parents report a near-universal feeling of never measuring up, and of an us-vs-them, separatist ethos among older Christians regarding culture. As a colleague said dolefully, "Heaven forbid that we would actually teach them to navigate the culture through using a biblical worldview!" But parents and spiritual shepherds can't pass on what they don't have. Given the stress caused by social detachment and holing-up against the culture with its attendant fear-based Christian lifestyle so prevalent today, no wonder youths feel rebellious—such disengaged cloistering *should* be rebelled against. As their teachers do daily, I was attempting to model a reasoned, biblically centered discussion of disputable matters of conscience while calling mature students to a higher ethic focused on holiness, eternal perspective and loving one another—unmarred by life-robbing, one-conviction-fits-all legalism. If we cannot see the difference between primary theological doctrines and disputable social and cultural outworkings like which movie to watch, the fault lies within.

Seeking redeeming elements in secular art:

I believe all art, including film and literature like *The Hunger Games*, that resonates so resoundingly with its audience does so primarily by tapping into something redemptive—after all, the audience members are human, made in God's image, and thus long for the way the world was meant to be. This deep-seated connection to the hearts of people with the redemptive themes of books and movies and other forms of art is short-circuited by whitewashed, disingenuous portrayals of reality often found in "Christian" art. One Christian blogger reviewing *The Hunger Games* stated unequivocally that it "does a better job of depicting Biblical truth than much that passes

for 'Christian' literature or film. It is not a shiny, neat, tidy story. It is full of violence, treachery, pride, oppression, greed, indifference, tyranny, and the misuse of power. It kind of looks like parts of the Bible that way." *The Hunger Games* avoids the unrealistic, passionless, half-hour TV show resolutions nearly universal in popular level Christian fare. "Basically, it [HG] is a picture of a world without any good news, without any gospel. It is exactly the world that we would be living in, and that some do live in, if Jesus had not come." {4} Contrasting the realistic depiction of a fallen world and mankind with the gospel of hope, creative works like *The Hunger Games* can be used constructively.

I offered the class several redemptive elements I saw in the film's heroine Katniss Everdeen (again, I've not read the books). The most glaring depiction is as a Christ-figure, when she offers herself up in place of her young sister, who was randomly chosen as the district's tribute, presumably a death sentence for her. In fact, Katniss's character bears an uncanny resemblance to the ideals Romans 12:14-21, at least in a one-dimensional way (warning, this section contains movie spoilers):

"Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." Katniss's reaction to the game, the professional "tributes" and to the arbitrariness of "fate" foisted on her by the show's producers didn't include literal blessing, but her dignity and restraint were apparent.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Katniss seemed to be a beacon of heartfelt servanthood in the raising of her sister and caretaking of her mother, excruciating as it was. In a very moving scene, Katniss sings a lullaby as Rue, her adopted little sister of sorts, dies in her arms from a game-inflicted injury. Katniss wept bitterly for her loss, a humanizing scene in an otherwise nihilistic story. She nursed a girlhood acquaintance and fellow tribute back to health from serious injury. Katniss entered into the

lives of others in a vital way.

“Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.”— Katniss displays a disarming unselfconscious manner. She was told she was good with a bow and arrow by her love interest back home and those on her team during the games—but she didn’t come off as cocky. She originated from the poor coal-mining district but that didn’t seem to denigrate her as a person in her own mind. She only wondered at the excesses and snootiness of the Capital residents rather than resent them, and she chose to buddy up to the weakest of the contestants.

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” All the other tributes came up out of their elevator tubes onto the playing field swinging swords and throwing knives. Katniss ran away perhaps for survival’s sake, but she did seem to act in defiance of the Darwinian kill-or-be-killed ethic. In this, too, she was only one of a few.

“...Never avenge yourselves...on the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him...” Katniss didn’t set herself up to avenge her persecutors but rather to get in their way by blowing up the food and equipment; she didn’t fire on them from a superior position high in the trees. Rue, a cute little girl who helped turn deadly wasps into weapons against ambushing careers was technically her enemy—one who might’ve been luring her in for the kill. In the spirit of the hunger games, Katniss would have been wise to execute her just in case. But she ended up feeding her and making an alliance that went beyond the pragmatic.

“Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.” What did the dignified treatment of Rue’s remains say about Katniss’s character? The film’s moral climax was embodied in a hand sign of respect toward the cameras following the death of Rue. This universally understood ode to the dignity of the

dead caused a brief but unsuccessful rebellion among viewers. Katniss had risen above the crass cheapness assigned to human lives, overcoming evil with truth and goodness. What does that say about human nature?

Again, redemptive themes like this work because we all share deep knowledge of the incalculable value of a human life. What a wonderful jumping-off place for witnessing of the One who assigns and eternally redeems that value.

The Hunger Games is a force of popular culture that raises critical questions in a risky way. I firmly believe that it's not a simple issue of right or wrong whether to view or read this powerful story. Believers need to decide discerningly, in good conscience and with a view toward their decision's affect on their own mind and hearts as well as others whether to pursue it for entertainment or cultural engagement.

Endnotes

1. "Conscience Killer?" *World*, April 7, 2012, Emily Whitten. <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/19312>.
2. Ibid.
3. "How Hungry is America for The Hunger Games," David Outten with Tom Snyder, posted March 22, 2012, MovieGuide.com. <http://bit.ly/I6ey52>.
4. How "The Hunger Games" Reflects Biblical Truth, posted March 31, 2012, www.DownshoreDrift.com. <http://bit.ly/I1Y0xl>.

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See Also:

[Redeeming The Hunger Games](#)

Welcome to the Machine: The Transhumanist God

Authorized Dreams Only Please!

Have you ever wondered if scientists could build a giant machine to solve all the world's problems? Or better yet, why not just become machines and get rid of people all together? Imagine it: no more worries, sickness, war, drug addiction, or poverty. We can solve the world's problems by simply getting rid of people. This sounds fantastic but is actually the goal of the new religion of Transhumanism, which wants to replace the human race with machines.

✘ The wisest man once said there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc. 1:9). Despite all our modern innovation and progress, the age-old desire of mankind to become God remains the same. This new religion is steadily gaining ground, perfectly fit for our hyper technological twenty-first century. Transhumanism's beliefs are simple, but their implications will be revolutionary. They want to transcend our mortal bodies and create a super intelligent godlike human and machine hybrid, called a cyborg, or something like the Borg from *Star Trek*. This super machine will solve all our material and spiritual problems by curing disease, extending life expectancy indefinitely, and providing for a meaningful existence through creating a continual sense of euphoria in the brain. There will be no limits to what this super man/machine will be able to do. *All we need to do* is surrender our wills to achieve universal peace and happiness.[\[1\]](#)

Pink Floyd used to sing, "Welcome to the machine. What did you

dream? It's alright we told you what to dream." {2} In the brave new world ruled by the cyborg, dreams will all be programmed and peaceful so as not to upset the inhabitants of utopia. With this hybrid technology, someone will make our decisions for us.

All technology expresses its creator's values and represents a certain view of the world, and how things should be. It is anything but value-free. The question for us is, who will decide what the future will be like in a technologically determined age?

You are What You Worship

Technology shapes the human conception of itself and its relation to the world, including our view of God. In a mechanical age, it is not surprising that people conceive of themselves and others as machines. {3} Human relationships are reduced to efficiency and usefulness or to convenient arrangements. For example, marriage is already largely viewed as an economic contract between two people who may not have anything else in common, rather than as a sacrificial commitment.

Transhumanist philosophy takes the modern mechanistic view to its ultimate level of altering humanity to become a machine. The idea that we become the thing we worship finds greatest expression in the twenty-first century. Those who worship idols become like them (Ps. 115). Those who worship money become greedy. Those who worship drugs become addicted, and those who worship the machine will become a machine. In the past, philosophers and poets often used the machine as a metaphor of dehumanization and alienation from modern life; modern society was thought to function like a machine. {4} This means in a machine culture, people feel like numbers or spare parts and therefore entirely expendable. Individual meaninglessness in a mechanistic society will be realized in

the very near future, so that individuals will be spare parts and completely assimilated. The future super computer will offer humanity everything, except the freedom not to choose assimilation.

The machine represents the ideal existence, even the ideal being. The idea of “salvation in the machine” derives from modern thought in a deistic and Unitarian God who created a clockwork universe.[{5}](#) Transhumanism has simply transposed that deity into the machine itself and removed the Clock Maker. Now it’s the clock they worship.

Transhumanism affirms artificial selection instead of natural selection. They believe that through science and technology, humanity can direct the cause of evolution. Humanity controls its own evolutionary process to reach a perfectible state. Instead of millions of years to evolve a new species, it will be done in decades, maybe even in one generation.

The Singularity Is Near

Transhumanists expect the merger of humanity and machine around 2045 in an event they call the Singularity. This means artificial intelligence (AI) will equal or exceed human intelligence and there will no longer be any discernible difference. Humanity will lose all distinct consciousness and consider itself as one being.[{6}](#)

Humanity then must change itself genetically to keep pace with AI. This will create a giant planetary super organism that knows no distinctions. Humanity will merge with the rest of nature through genetic engineering, and nature will become indistinguishable from the machine. We will no longer know the difference between organic and inorganic, or natural and artificial, something already prevalent today in cities, weather patterns, and food production.

A super organism looks something like a beehive, anthill, or

termite mound; various individual cells work together as one. So by mid-century Transhumanism envisions total global unity, not at the political level between states, but ontologically and biologically. We will have evolved into one massive planet—truly Spaceship Earth, completely interrelated and interdependent, like an anthill. This will be the technological version of the kingdom of God or the Transhumanist version of the millennium.

Ray Kurzweil and the Singularitarians believe people will eventually be able to upload their consciousness into a computer and live forever. [Note: for an intriguing Christian perspective on this idea in a compelling novel, Probe recommends [The Last Christian](#) by David Gregory.] The religious nature of this movement is obvious in its millennialism or belief in the coming perfect society, and also in its belief in progress and immortality. Critics call the Singularity “the rapture of the nerds,” indicating its close connection with religious belief and millennial expectations. The Singularity represents religious belief for computer geeks. The acceptance of progress and human perfection makes Transhumanism the heir of modernity, with its ideal of technological utopianism and its mechanistic view of the body. It’s modernism with a vengeance.

The Artilect War

The future may not bring the perfection of the Singularity, but the disaster of the Artilect War. An Artilect is an artificial intelligence or super computer. AI researcher Hugo de Garis predicts that the Transhumanist vision will be disastrous and will result in gigadeath (the death of billions of people). He hypothesizes that by the end of the century, Cosmists, or technically modified people, will want to build Artilects to join with humanity, but that Terrans, or unmodified people, will oppose their construction because it has no benefit to them. A nuclear war will ensue, probably

initiated by Terrans as their only way to stop Cosmists.{7}

Jacques Ellul once remarked that “the technical society must perfect the ‘man-machine’ complex or risk total collapse.”{8} There is no other place to go but up. If the current human enhancement project fails it may prove to have devastating effects for the future of the human race, and if it succeeds the human race faces techno-enslavement or pseudo-extinction by being transformed into another species.

Will the Singularity really happen? It is very possible. Or maybe the Artilect War will happen instead. Perhaps technology will bring the apocalypse instead of utopia. It is all science fiction right now, but science fiction is often correct in the broadest terms. Recall Jules Verne’s vision of space travel to the moon in the nineteenth century when people thought it was pure fantasy and laughed because there was no way to break earth’s gravitational pull. But his work inspired a generation of rocket scientists to find a way to do it, and within a century man was walking on the moon. Something considered impossible was achieved.{9}

A basic principle of futurism states that anything is possible to achieve within twenty years given the resources to do it. And the Bible states that nothing is impossible for humanity in a unified technological society. Gen. 11:6 says “Now nothing that they imagined will be impossible for them.” This of course is talking about Babel, but I think it demonstrates the fact that the discussion of a transhuman transformation should be taken as a credible threat and should be addressed by the church.

Ethic of Limits

The essence of Transhumanist philosophy revolves around the idea that there are no natural or divine limits to what technology can accomplish. It serves the basic technological

imperative that says what can be done should be done! This view unleashes all restraint and frees us from all limits, and is one of the greatest examples of the church's cultural captivity since we do not present a different view of technology from the rest of society.

This maxim is obviously dangerous because any limitless action leads to self-destruction as a natural corrective. Humanity cannot presume to be greater than the natural limits arrayed against it, such as death or the scarcity of resources. Humanity must learn to live within boundaries.

Christians are called to respect limits and the right balance in its use of technology, between its misuse and its non-use. In an age of limitless technology the church must present an ethic of limitation. This means finding limits to technology, such as limiting computer use, limiting driving, electricity, or even not upgrading. This may seem small, but in trying to discover a workable ethic of technology, it represents something we can do right now. The widow's mite (Mark 12:41-43) will not solve the church's budget deficit, but should be given anyway because it was something she could do, so an ethic of limitation remains a course of action open.

An ethic of limitation only becomes obvious when the situation appears desperate, such as with nuclear weapons, where not even one mishap can be afforded. Other examples consist of over-eating, drug addiction, over-fishing or hunting, or any activity that exhausts natural resources. Because people did not practice limits to begin with, they are now faced with a real possibility of collapse or catastrophe. We must discover the limits to any technology, if we are to use technology correctly and benefit from it. The history of the Tower of Babel teaches that if mankind does not practice self control, God will impose limits Himself in judgment (Gen 11:1-9).

Notes

1. Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York:Penguin, 1999); Gregory Stock, *Metaman:The Merging of Humans and Machines into a Global Superorganism* (New York:Simon and Schuster, 1993); Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man* (New York:Collier, 1956); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (New York:Vintage, 1964), 428-436. It was techno critics like Ellul and Mumford that saw the techno future more clearly and soberly than the previously noted Transhumanists. Ellul argued that information would eventually pass from the machine straight to the human brain electronically without being processed through consciousness and that breeding will all be done through artificial means, and natural procreation will be forbidden (432, 433). Whatever problems and disturbances the technology of the future will create will be solved through “a world-wide totalitarian dictatorship” (434). This is exactly what Transhumanist philosophy will bring. Mumford argued that modern technical society will eventually produce a machine replacement for man (100, 117-132).

2. Pink Floyd, “Welcome to the Machine” in *Wish You Were Here*, Capitol, 1975.

3. Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears:Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill, NC:The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 16; David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology:The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York; Knopf, 1997), 143-171.

4. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (New York:Anchor Books, 1951); Nicols Fox, *Against the Machine:The Hidden Luddite Tradition in Literature, Art and Individual Lives* (Washington DC:Island Press, 2002).

5. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine:The Pentagon of Power* (New York:Harvest, 1970), 33; Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, 146; Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation:A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (New York:Routledge, 1992).

6. Lev Grossman, “2045:The Year Man Becomes Immortal”, *Time* (February 21, 2011), 43-49.

7. Hugo De Garis, *The Artilect War:Cosmists vs. Terrans:A*

Bitter Controversy Concerning Whether Humanity Should Build Godlike Massively Intelligent Machines (Palm Springs, CA:Etc Publications, 2005).

8. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 414.

9. Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Washington DC:Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997), 9-27.

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