

The Psychology of Prisoner Abuse

Those Awful Pictures

Do you remember how you felt as the Iraq prisoner abuse scandal began to unfold in spring 2004? Maybe you saw the disturbing pictures when they were first aired on CBS television's *60 Minutes II*. Soon they were transmitted around the globe. They greeted you on the front page of your morning newspaper and on the evening news. The stream seemed endless.

You saw naked Iraqi prisoners in various stages of humiliation: hooded, naked men stacked in a pyramid; others lying on the floor or secured to a bed; one in a smock standing on a box with his arms outstretched and wires attached to him. In some of the photos, male and female American soldiers grinned and pointed. In one picture, a female soldier stood holding a leash around the neck of a naked male prisoner. In others, soldiers grinned over what appeared to be a corpse packed in ice.

What feelings did you experience? Shock? Anger? Rage? Disgust? Maybe you felt embarrassed or ashamed. "How could they do such degrading things to other human beings?" you might have wondered. Perhaps you feared how the growing storm might affect the life of your friend or family member serving in Iraq. Or wrestled with how to explain the abuse to your children.

Finger pointing began almost as soon as the story broke. High-ranking military and government officials announced that these were aberrations carried out by a few unprincipled prison guards. Accused military police claimed they were merely following orders of military intelligence officials to soften prisoners up for interrogation. Others insisted soldiers had a

moral obligation to disobey orders to do wrong. The accused countered that the harsh techniques were in place before they arrived for duty at the prison. Ethical arguments surfaced that the war on terror demanded tough methods to help prevent another 9/11.

What factors prompt people to abuse others in such degrading ways? What goes on inside the minds of the abusers? Are there special social forces at work? While this article won't attempt to analyze specific cases in the Iraq prison scandal, it will consider some fascinating psychological experiments that reveal clues to the roots of such behavior. The results - - and their implications -- may disturb you. A biblical perspective will also offer some insight.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

CBS News correspondent Andy Rooney said the Iraq prisoner abuse is "a black mark that will be in the history books in a hundred languages for as long as there are history books."[\[1\]](#)

Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo was not surprised by the Abu Ghraib prison abuse. He had observed similar behavior in his famous 1971 experiment involving a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building.[\[2\]](#) The experiment showed that otherwise normal people can behave in surprisingly outrageous ways.

Zimbardo and his colleagues selected twenty-four young men considered from interviews and psychological tests to be normal and healthy. Volunteers were randomly assigned to be either "prisoners" or "guards." Guards wore uniforms and were told to maintain control of the prison and not to use violence.

On the second day, prisoners rebelled, asserting their independence with barricades, taunting and cursing. Guards suppressed the rebellion. Zimbardo reports that the guards

then “steadily increased their coercive aggression tactics, humiliation and dehumanization of the prisoners.”[{3}](#) He says the worst abuse came at night when guards thought no psychology staff were observing.[{4}](#) Zimbardo remembers that the guards “began to use the prisoners as playthings for their amusement... They would get them to simulate sodomy. They also stripped prisoners naked for various offenses and put them in solitary for excessive periods.”[{5}](#) They dressed them in smocks, chained them together at the ankles, blindfolded them with paper bags on their heads, and herded them along in a group.[{6}](#) Sound familiar?

It was Berkeley professor Christina Maslach, Zimbardo’s then romantic interest whom he later married, who jolted him back to reality. On Day Five, she entered the prison to preview the experiment in preparation for some subject interviews she had agreed to conduct the next day. Shocked by what she saw, she challenged Zimbardo’s ethics later that evening – screaming and yelling in quite a fight, she recalls. That night, Zimbardo decided to halt the experiment.[{7}](#)

Zimbardo feels that prisons are ripe for abuse without firm measures to check guards’ lower impulses.[{8}](#) He recommends “clear rules, a staff that is well trained in those rules and tight management that includes punishment for violations.”[{9}](#)

An old Jewish proverb says, “Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people.”[{10}](#) Unfettered prison officials -- or most anyone -- can yield to their baser natures when tempted by power inequalities.

The Perils of Obedience

What about those who say they were only obeying authority? How far will people go to inflict harm under orders? In the 1960s, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted classic experiments on obedience.[{11}](#) (Ironically, Milgram and Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo were high school

classmates.{12})

At Yale, Milgram set up a series of experiments “to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist.” He writes, “Stark authority was pitted against the subjects’ strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects’ ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not.”{13}

Milgram’s basic design involved a volunteer “teacher” and a “learner.” The learner was actually an actor who was in on the deception. The learner was strapped to “a kind of miniature electric chair” with an electrode on his wrist. The teacher sat before an impressive-looking “shock generator ” with switches indicating voltages from 15-450 volts.{14}

The teacher asked test questions of the learner and was instructed to administer increasingly large shocks for each incorrect answer. (You say you’ve known some teachers like that?) The machine here was a fake -- no learner received shocks -- but the teacher thought it was real.

In the initial experiment, over 60 percent of teachers obeyed the experimenter’s orders to the end and punished the victim with the maximum 450 volts. Milgram found similarly disturbing levels of obedience across various socioeconomic levels. His conclusions after hundreds of experiments were chilling:

...Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.{15}

Why did they obey? Milgram offers several possibilities. Fears

of appearing rude, desires to please an authority, aspirations to do one's best, and lack of direct accountability can all cloud judgment. But could there be something deeper, something in human nature that influences abuse? A famous novel illustrates how the dark side of human nature can affect group behavior.

Lord of the Flies

Prisoner abuse shows what can happen when power inequalities and inappropriate devotion to authority distort one's moral compass. Nobel laureate William Golding's short novel, *Lord of the Flies*,[{16}](#) illustrates through a fictional story how similar flaws can manifest in society. A film version of the book helped inspire the popular television series *Survivor*.[{17}](#)

Lord of the Flies opens on a remote, uninhabited island on which some British schoolboys, ages six to twelve, find themselves after an airplane crash. An atomic war has begun, and apparently the plane was evacuating the boys when it was shot down. The island has fresh water, fruit, and other food. The setting seems idyllic. Best of all, the boys discover, there are no grownups (the plane and its crew presumably have washed into the sea).

Four central characters soon emerge. Ralph is elected leader. Piggy, an overweight asthmatic and champion of reason, becomes Ralph's friend. Simon is a quiet lad with keen discernment. Jack becomes a hunter.

At first, the boys get along without much conflict. Soon, though, fears envelop them, and they debate whether an evil beast might inhabit the island. Jack and his followers kill a wild pig and, in frenzied blood lust, dance to chants of "*Kill the pig! Cut her throat! Bash her in!*"[{18}](#) When Ralph criticizes Jack for breaking some tribal rules, Jack replies, "Who cares?" His hunting prowess will rule.[{19}](#)

One night, some boys see a dead parachutist, which they mistake for the “evil beast” and flee. Jack posts a pig’s head onto a stick in the ground as a gift for the beast. The decaying, fly- covered pig’s head soon becomes for Simon the “Lord of the Flies,” a sort of personification of evil.[{20}](#) Later, Simon discovers that the feared “beast” is only a human corpse. Running to tell the group this good news, he encounters their mock pig-killing ritual. The crazed boys attack Simon and kill him. Nearly all the boys follow Jack and, acting like savages with painted bodies and spears, kill Piggy and hunt down Ralph. Only the surprise appearance of a British naval officer, drawn by the smoke from a fire, halts the mad pursuit. Ralph and the boys dissolve in tears. Ralph weeps, as Golding writes, “for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart....”[{21}](#)

Lord of the Flies is filled with symbolism, both biblical and from Greek tragedy. But Golding’s stated purpose was “to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature.”[{22}](#) Could his point that darkness lurks in the human heart help explain the prisoner abuse?

Animal House Meets Lord of the Flies

Prisoner abuse is a sad reality in the U.S. and abroad.[{23}](#) The Iraq prisoner abuse scandal smacks of fraternity hazing on steroids, *Animal House* meets *Lord of the Flies*. Consider from this sad episode some lessons for both prison reform and society in general:

- *Establish clear rules for prison staff; train them well and punish them for violations*, as Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo recommends.
- *Educate against blind conformity*. Some of Milgram’s experimental subjects found the strength to resist abusive authority.[{24}](#) Some psychologists feel that strong moral values and experience with conformity can

strengthen moral courage. {25}

- *Involve external observers and critics.* Often outsiders, not emotionally swept up in a project or event, can through their psychological distance more clearly assess ethical issues. For example, Christina Maslach, Philip Zimbardo's friend and colleague who challenged the ethics of his prison experiment, credits her late arrival on the scene with facilitating her concern. The experimenters who had planned and had been conducting the experiment for five days were less likely to be startled by the developing misconduct, she maintained. {26}
- *Realistically appraise human nature's dark side.* Again, Golding said *Lord of the Flies* was "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." {27} Jesus of Nazareth was, of course, quite clear on this point. He said, "From within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within..." {28}

Some dismiss as simplistic any analyses of human suffering that begin with alleged defects in human nature. They would rather focus on changing social structures and political systems. While many structures and political systems need changing, may I suggest that a careful analysis of the human heart is not simplistic? Rather it is fundamental.

Perhaps that's why Paul, a leader who agreed with Jesus' assessment of human nature, {29} focused on changing hearts. Paul was a former persecutor of Jesus' followers who zealously imprisoned them {30} but later joined them and became a prisoner himself. {31} Paul eventually claimed that when people place their faith in Jesus as he had, they "become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is

gone. A new life has begun!"^{32} Could this diagnosis and prescription have something to say to us amidst today's prisoner abuse scandals?

Notes

1. Andy Rooney, "Our Darkest Days are Here," CBS 60 Minutes, May 23, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/20/60minutes/rooney/main618783.shtml>.

2. Kathleen O'Toole, "The Stanford Prison Experiment: Still powerful after all these years," Stanford University News Service, January 8, 1997, <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/97/970108prisonexp.html>.

A slideshow presentation of the experiment is at www.prisonexp.org. See also W. Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Third Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 447; Claudia Wallis, "Why Did They Do It?" TIME.com, posted May 9, 2004 (from *TIME* magazine, cover date May 17, 2004), <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101040517/wtorturers.html>; John Schwartz, "Simulated Prison in '71 Showed a Fine Line Between 'Normal' and 'Monster'," *New York Times*, May 6, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/06/international/middleeast/06PSYC.html?pagewanted=print&position=>.

3. O'Toole, loc. cit.

4. Ibid.

5. Wallis, loc. cit.

6. O'Toole, loc. cit.

7. Ibid.

8. Schwartz, loc. cit.

9. Wallis, loc. cit. The words are Wallis'.

10. Proverbs 28:15 NIV.

11. Stanley Milgram, "The Perils of Obedience," *Harper's*, December 1973, 62-66, 75-77. (The article is adapted from Milgram's book, *Obedience to Authority* [Harper and Row, 1974]). See also Neuman, loc. cit.; O'Toole, loc. cit.; Schwartz, loc. cit.; Wallis, loc. cit.; Anahad O'Connor, "Pressure to Go Along With Abuse Is Strong, but Some Soldiers Find Strength to Refuse," *New York Times*, May 14, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/14/international/14RESI.html?ei=5059&en=854c94250243f62d&ex=1084593600&partner=AOL&pagewanted=print&position=>.

12. O'Toole, loc. cit.

13. Milgram 1973, op. cit., 62.

14. Ibid., 62-63.

15. Ibid., 75- 76.

16. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York: Perigee, 1988). This "Casebook Edition" includes the 1954 novel plus notes and criticism edited by James R. Baker and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr.

17.

<http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor8/show/episode14/s8story3.shtml>.

18. Golding, op. cit., 69; emphasis Golding's.

19. Ibid., 84.

20. Many have noted that the phrase "lord of the flies" translates the word "Beelzebub." See, for instance, E.L. Epstein, "Notes on Lord of the Flies," in Golding, op. cit., 279: "'The lord of the flies' is, of course, a translation of the Hebrew Ba'alzevuv (Beelzebub in Greek) which means

literally 'lord of insects.'" Theologian Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., commenting on Matthew 10:24 ff. says, "Beelzebub (the Gr. has Beezeboul) was a name for Satan, the prince of the demons, perhaps derived from Baal-Zebub, god of the Philistine city of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2). 'Beelzebub' means 'lord of the flies,' and 'Beezeboul' or 'Beelzeboul' means 'lord of the high place.'" (In "Matthew," John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985], Logos Research Systems digital version.) Biblical references to Beelzebub include Matthew 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 18, 19. In a 1962 interview, Golding himself referred to "the pig's head on the stick" as "Beelzebub, or Satan, the devil, whatever you'd like to call it..." (James Keating, "Interview with William Golding," in Golding, op. cit., 192.)

21. Golding, op. cit., 186-187.

22. Epstein, op. cit., 277-278. The words are Golding's.

23. For example, see "Missouri 'Rain' Leads to Toilet Duty," *Inside Journal: The Hometown Newspaper of America's Prisoners*, 14:7, November/December 2003, 5. Inside Journal publisher Prison Fellowship, www.pfm.org, and its affiliates seek to help rehabilitate prisoners and promote restorative justice.

24. Milgram 1973, op. cit., 63-64.

25. O'Connor, loc. cit.

26. O'Toole, loc. cit.

27. Epstein, loc. cit.

28. Mark 7:21-23 NLT.

29. For detailed information on Jesus and evidence to support His claims, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

30. Acts 8:3; 22:3-5 ff.

31. E.g., Acts 16:19-40.

32. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

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Feminism: A Christian Perspective

Sue Bohlin provides a Christian view on feminism. How does this prevalent view of women measure up from a biblical perspective?

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

The worldview of feminism has permeated just about every aspect of American life, education and culture. We see it in the way men are portrayed as lovable but stupid buffoons on TV sitcoms. We see it in the way boys are punished and marginalized in school for not being enough like girls. We see it in politically correct speech that attempts to change the way people think by harassing them for their choice of words.

The anger and frustration that drove feminism's history is legitimate; women have been devalued and dishonored ever since the fall of man. Very real, harmful inequities needed to be addressed, and it's important to honor some of the success of feminist activists. But at the same time, we need to examine and expose the worldview that fuels much of feminist thought.

Modern-day feminism got its major start when Betty Friedan wrote her landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she coined the phrase "The Housewife Blahs" to describe millions of unfulfilled women. There are many reasons that women can

feel unfulfilled and dishonored, but from a Christian perspective I would suggest that this is what life feels like when we are disconnected from God and disconnected from living out *His* purpose for our lives. As Augustine said, "We are restless, O God, until we find our rest in Thee."

Betty Friedan looked at unhappy, unfulfilled women and diagnosed the problem as *patriarchy*, which means a male-dominated society. If women are unhappy, the reason is that men are in charge.

The early feminists decided that women are oppressed because bearing and raising children is a severe limitation and liability. What makes women *different* from men equals *weakness*. The next step, then, was to overcome that difference so that women could be just like men. The invention of the birth control pill helped fuel that illusion.

Out of the consciousness-raising groups in the '70s came a shift in the view of women's differences. Instead of seeing those differences as weakness, they now saw those differences as a source of pride and confidence. It was now a good thing to be a woman.

The next step in feminist thought was that women were not just *equal* to men, they were *better* than men. This spawned famous quotes like Gloria Steinem's comment that "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle."[\[1\]](#) Male-bashing became the sport of the '90s.

Feminism says, "The problem is patriarchy—male dominated society." The problem is actually the sin of people within a God-ordained hierarchy. In a fallen world, there are going to be problems between men and women, and especially abuses of power. We must not confuse the abuses of the structure with the structure itself.[\[2\]](#)

Feminism and the Church

Feminism has so permeated our culture that we should not be surprised that it has impacted the church as well. Religious feminists uncovered the “Church Women Blahs.” People became aware that for the most part, women were relegated to service positions like making coffee and rocking babies. If a woman had gifts in teaching, shepherding, administration or evangelism, she was out of luck.

The *Magna Carta* for Christian feminists is Galatians 3:28: “In Christ there is no male or female.” However, the context of this verse is not about equal rights, but that all believers have the same position of humility at the foot of the Cross. The issue is not capability, but God-ordained positions within a God-ordained authority structure of male leadership. Other biblical passages that go into detail about gender-dependent roles show that Galatians 3:28 cannot mean the obliteration of those roles.

There are two main areas where religious feminists seek to change gender roles: the role of women in the church, and the role of women in marriage. The discussion has produced two camps: egalitarians and complementarians.

Egalitarians are the feminist camp, with an emphasis on equality of *roles*, not just *value*. They believe that hierarchy produces inequality, and that different means unequal. The solution, therefore, is to get rid of the differences between men’s and women’s roles. Women should be ordained, allowed to occupy the office of pastor and elder, and exercise authority over others in the church. Instead of differences in the roles of husband and wife, both spouses are called to mutual submission.

Egalitarians are reacting against a very real problem in the church. But the problem of authoritarian men, and women relegated to minor serving positions, is due to an abuse and

distortion of the hierarchy God designed. Egalitarians reject the male authority structure along with the abuse of that structure.

Complementarians believe that God has ordained a hierarchy of authority in the church and within the family that reflects the hierarchy of authority within the Trinity. And just as there is equality in the Trinity, there is equality in the church and in marriage because we are all made in the image of God. Women are just as gifted as men, but there are biblical restrictions on the exercise of some of those gifts, such as not teaching men from a position of authority, and not occupying the office of pastor or elder. In marriage, wives are called to submit to their husbands. Mutual submission in marriage is no more appropriate than submission of parents to children.

Christian feminists did not evaluate whether the structures or hierarchies of leadership were there because God designed them that way. They just demanded wholesale change. But some things are worth keeping!

Feminism on Campus

As with the family and the church, feminism has had an impact on our college campuses. Abraham Lincoln once warned, "The philosophy of the school room in one generation will become the philosophy of government in the next." What happens on college campuses eventually affects the rest of the culture, and nowhere is feminism's pervasiveness more evident than in our colleges.

A new discipline of Women's Studies has arisen in many universities. These courses usually stress women's literature, treating with contempt anything written by "dead white European males." They often incorporate women's religions in the curricula, especially the Goddess worship of Wicca on campus. The main tenet of this pagan religion is that the

worshipper is in harmony with Mother Earth and with all life. They worship the Goddess, which is described as “the immanent life force, . . . Mother Nature, the Earth, the Cosmos, the interconnectedness of all life.”^{3} Many witches (followers of Wicca, not Satanists) and pagans are involved in women’s studies programs because, as one Wiccan Web site put it, “Many feminists have turned to Wicca and the role of priestess for healing and strength after the patriarchal oppression and lack of voice for women in the major world religions.”^{4}

Christianity is often portrayed on college campuses, and especially within Women’s Studies, as an abusive religion. There are several reasons. First, because Christianity is hierarchical, teaching differentiation of roles and that some are to submit to and follow others. Second, their skewed view of the Bible is that Christianity teaches that women are inferior to men. Third, Christ was male, so he is insufficient as a role model for women and can’t possibly understand what it means to be a woman. And fourth, since the language of the Bible is male-oriented and patriarchal (both of which are evil), it must be dismissed or changed.

Feminism impacts dating relationships on campus. Heterosexual dating is often colored by an attempt to persuade women that all men are potential rapists and cannot be trusted. Even a remark meant to compliment a woman is taken as sexist and unacceptable. One woman, wearing a short skirt on campus, heard someone whistle appreciatively. She strode into the women’s study center complaining, “I’ve just been raped!”

Angry feminists convey a hatred and fear of men as part of the feminist ideology. When it comes to dating, for a number of feminists, lesbianism is considered the only appropriate option. If men are brutes and idiots, why would anyone want to have an intimate relationship with one? In fact, there’s a new acronym on campus, GUG: “Gay until graduation.” But the fact is, most women really like men; that’s always been a problem for feminists. Let’s consider more problems that result from

feminism.

The Problematic Legacy of Feminism

Feminists started from a reasonable point in recognizing a most unhappy aspect of life in a fallen world: women tend to be dishonored, disrespected, and devalued by many men. This is as true in religious systems as it is in society and political systems. Feminists started out trying to rectify this problem first by trying to prove that women were as good as men. Then they decided that women were better than men. They ended up trying to erase the lines of distinction between men and women altogether. This has resulted in tremendous confusion about what it means to be a woman, as well as what it means to be a man. And naturally, it has produced a lot of confusion in relationships as well. This confusion ranges from men who are afraid to open doors for women for fear of receiving a rude tongue-lashing, to women who are baffled in the workplace because the men they compete against at work won't ask them out on a date.

Radical feminist thought despised much of what it means to be a woman—to be receptive and responsive and relational, to treasure marriage and family. Only masculine traits and behaviors and jobs were deemed valuable. Nonetheless, many young women are confused by the messages they are getting from the culture: that an education and a job are the only worthwhile pursuits, and the social capital of marriage and family is no longer valued. However, these same women feel guilty and confused for finding themselves still longing for marriage and family when they're supposed to be content without them. One college student said, "I've taken all the women's studies courses—I know that marriage and motherhood are traps—but I still want to do both."[\[5\]](#)

The legacy of feminism is the refusal of the God-given role of men to be initiator, protector and provider. And the God-given role of women to be responder, nurturer and helper is equally

disdained. The consequence of this rebellion is relational confusion, especially in the home. Dads aren't communicating to their sons why it's a blessing to be male, because frankly, they're not sure that it is. The message of feminism is that being male is a joke or a curse. Moms aren't teaching their daughters the basic skill sets that homemakers need because they're too busy at their jobs and besides, haven't we been taught that being a homemaker is demeaning? As a mentoring Mom to mothers of preschoolers, I see how many young women are totally clueless about how to be a wife and mother because those essential skills just weren't considered important by their mothers. Radical feminism hates family and families, and we all suffer as a result.

Feminism says, "The problem is patriarchy—male dominated society." The problem is actually the sin of people within a God-ordained hierarchy. The heart of feminism is a rebellion against the abuses of this God-ordained hierarchy, but it's also a rebellion against God's plan itself. This is a perfect example of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Feminists believe they have the right to reinvent reality and to change the rules to suit them. This rebellious belief system has had some disastrous effects on our culture and society.

For example, one of feminism's biggest achievements was the legalization of abortion. *Keeping* it legal is one of feminism's biggest goals: see, if women are to be truly free, then they must be free to decide whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. A woman's ability to conceive, give birth, and nurture babies is seen as weakness and vulnerability, because women can be forced to be impregnated and to bear unwanted babies. Removing the consequence of sexual activity, and getting rid of unwanted pregnancy to cancel out a woman's so-called "weakness," is important to many feminists. So, since 1973, there have been over 40 million abortions in the U.S. [\[6\]](#). But that only tells part of the story; "while some women report relatively little trauma following abortion, for

many, the experience is devastating, causing severe and long-lasting emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma.”[\[7\]](#) I have the privilege of helping post-abortifacient women grieve the loss of their babies and receive God’s forgiveness for their sin. They know that feminism’s insistence that abortion is every woman’s right is a lie.

Another impact of feminism is seen in the feminization of American schools. Feminism’s disrespect for men and boys has shaped schools and educational policy around values and methods that favor girls over boys. Competition, a natural state of being for many boys, is considered harmful and evil, to be replaced with girl-friendly cooperative, relational activities. “Schools are denying the very behavior that makes little boys boys. In Southern California, a mother was stunned to find out that her son was disciplined for running and jumping over a bench at recess.”[\[8\]](#) My colleague Don Closson wrote, “Gender crusaders believe that if they can influence little boys early enough, they can make them more like little girls.”[\[9\]](#)

To despise the glory of masculinity is to reject the very image of God. To despise the treasure of femininity is to reject what the Bible calls the glory of man.[\[10\]](#) That’s the problem with feminism: it is a rejection of what God has called good. It has gone too far in addressing the inequities of living in a fallen world. It’s a rebellion against God’s right to be God and our responsibility to submit joyfully to Him.

Notes

1. Actually, I have discovered, it wasn’t original with Ms. Steinem. She had this to say in a letter she wrote to *Time* magazine in autumn 2000: “In your note on my new and happy marital partnership with David Bale, you credit me with the witticism ‘A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.’”

In fact, Irina Dunn, a distinguished Australian educator, journalist and politician, coined the phrase back in 1970 when she was a student at the University of Sydney.” Irina Dunn has confirmed this story, in an e-mail of January 28, 2002: “Yes, indeed, I am the one Gloria referred to. I was paraphrasing from a phrase I read in a philosophical text I was reading for my Honours year in English Literature and Language in 1970. It was “A man needs God like a fish needs a bicycle.” My inspiration arose from being involved in the nascent women’s movement at the time, and from being a bit of a smart-arse. I scribbled the phrase on the backs of two toilet doors, would you believe, one at Sydney University where I was a student, and the other at Soren’s Wine Bar at Woolloomooloo, a seedy suburb in south Sydney. The doors, I have to add, were already favoured graffiti sites.”

www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/414150.html

2. I am indebted to the wisdom and insight of Mary Kassian as expressed in her excellent book *The Feminist Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

3. www.cog.org/wicca/about.html

4. Ibid.

5. Quoted by Barbara DeFoe Whitehead, *Mars Hill Audio Journal* No. 61, Mar./Apr. 2003.

6. www.nrlc.org/abortion/aboramt.html

7. www.hopeafterabortion.com/aftermath/

8. William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998),

94. The entire quote is from Don Closson, “[The Feminization of American Schools](#)”.

9. Ibid.

10. 1 Cor. 11:7

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When Nations Die

*One of the more popular Probe radio programs has been "[Decline of a Nation](#)." Kerby Anderson returns to this important theme by summarizing the significant work by Jim Nelson Black in his book *When Nations Die*. When we look at three thousand years of history, we observe that civilizations rise but eventually fall and die. The history of the world is the history of nations that are conquered by other nations or collapse into anarchy.*



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

Jim Nelson Black sees ominous parallels to our own country. He says,

As I have looked back across the ruins and landmarks of antiquity, I have been stunned by the parallels between those societies and our own. For most of us the destruction of Carthage, the rise of the Greek city-states, and the Fall of Rome are mere ghosts of the past, history lessons long forgotten. And such things as the capture of Constantinople, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the collapse of the kingdoms of France and Spain, and the slow withering decline of the British Empire are much less clear and less memorable. Most of us do not remember much from our history lessons about the French Enlightenment or, for that matter, the issues that led to the American Revolution. But this is the legitimate background of our own place in history, it is vital that we reconsider the nature of life in those earlier times. For within those eras and movements are the seeds of the troubles we face today. [\[1\]](#)

There are many reasons for the decline and fall of a nation, but an important (and often overlooked) reason is its abandonment of religion. Russell Kirk has said that the roots of "culture" come from the "cult." In other words, culture

(cult-ure) is based upon some form of religious or spiritual worldview. Egypt was a religious society founded on the worship of nature gods and goddesses. Greece and Rome had their pantheon of pagan deities. And the list of nations in India, China, and other parts of the globe all demonstrate the principle that civilization arises from religion.

And the opposite is also true. When the traditional beliefs of a nation erode, the nation dies. Religion provides the set of standards that govern a nation. Historian Will Durant said, "There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion."[2](#)

Unfortunately, this nation has embarked on a journey to maintain a society without a religious code. The Ten Commandments are pulled from the walls, and religious values are stripped from the public square.

Christian principles are no longer taught in the public schools and often ridiculed in the arenas of education and media. One has to wonder what the fate of this country will be in the future.

Social Decay

In his book *When Nations Die*, Jim Nelson Black lists three aspects of decay: social decay, cultural decay, and moral decay. Three important trends demonstrate social decay. They are "the crisis of lawlessness," the "loss of economic discipline," and "rising bureaucracy."

History provides ample illustrations of the disastrous consequences of the collapse of law and order. "In ancient Greece, the first symptoms of disorder were a general loss of respect for tradition and the degradation of the young. Among the early symptoms was the decline of art and entertainment. The philosophers and pundits distorted the medium of

communication. Rhetoric became combative and intolerant; intellectuals began to deride and attack all the traditional institutions of Hellenic society.”{3}

New thinkers in the society argued for “fundamental change” and called for giving the youth a “voice in society.” Without traditional guidelines, the young men grew wild and undisciplined destroying the old order. Slowly Greece devolved into a disreputable and lawless nation. The Romans conquered Greece in 146 B.C. By placing everything under military authority, they were able to restore order and bring back the rule of law.

In a study of the French Revolution, José Ortega y Gasset noted that “Order is not pressure which is imposed on society from without, but an equilibrium which is set up from within.”{4} The Roman Empire (as well as other great civilizations) understood that discipline and custom were essential to stability.

A similar story can be found in ancient Egypt during the fourth century B.C. Lawlessness and violence crippled the economy, and the nation was in chaos. When Alexander the Great invaded the country in 333 B.C., his first task was to restore order and institute martial law (which he did in a ruthless manner). With the death of Alexander, Egypt returned to its old ways until the Roman Empire brought peace to the region through conquest and martial law.

Carthage was once called “the eternal rival of Rome” but its preeminence and impact waned as it “sank into debauchery and dissipation as a result of great wealth and luxury.” Law and order were destroyed from within. Moreover, the rich young men of Carthage no longer wanted to serve in the military so they hired mercenaries to do their fighting. But when the army came into fierce conflict with Rome and other adversaries, the mercenaries ran and left the nation defenseless. Carthage fell to Rome in 146 B.C., and the first act of the Roman legions

was to restore law and order.

In these and many other examples, social decay led to the decline and fall of a great civilization. If we are to prevent a repeat of history, then we must learn from these lessons of history.

Cultural Decay

Four important trends demonstrate cultural decay. They are the “decline of education,” the “weakening of cultural foundations,” the “loss of respect for tradition,” and the “increase in materialism.”

In his study *The Civilization of Rome*, Donald Dudley says that no single cause, by itself, would have brought the empire to its knees. Instead, the fall came through “a number of weaknesses in Roman society; their effects may be variously estimated, but in combination they must have been largely responsible for the collapse.”[\[5\]](#)

The cultural decay of a nation leads inexorably to social and cultural decline. And the patterns are similar from one civilization to another. Samuel Eisenstadt wondered if the similarities were apparent or if they were historical and legitimate. After studying the work of a half dozen historians, he concluded that the similarities were actual. He concluded that “despite the great difference in cultural background most of these empires have shown similar characteristics, and that these characteristics provide the key to an understanding of the processes of their decline.”[\[6\]](#)

The Roman poet Livy wrote that greed and self-indulgence led Romans to dangerous excesses. He said, “For it is true that when men had fewer possessions, they were also modest in their desires. Lately riches have brought avarice and abundant pleasures, and the desire to carry luxury and lust to the point of ruin and universal perdition.”[\[7\]](#)

In describing the decadence of the Roman Republic, historian Polybius wrote that this preoccupation with luxury led to carnal indulgences. "For some young men indulged in affairs with boys, others in affairs with courtesans." They paid a talent (roughly a thousand dollars) for a boy bought for sexual pleasure and three hundred drachmas for a jar of caviar. "Marcus Cato was outraged by this and, in a speech to the people, complained that one might be quite convinced of the decline of the republic, when pretty boys cost more than fields and jars of caviar cost more than plowman." {8}

As we look at our society today, we too find ourselves in a world where values have been inverted and where citizens pursue hedonistic pleasures without counting the cost. Our nation would be wise to learn the lessons of the past.

Moral Decay

Three important trends demonstrate moral decay. They are the "rise in immorality," the "decay of religious belief," and the "devaluing of human life."

The classic study of Roman civilization, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written by English historian Edward Gibbon was published in that famous year of 1776. He "observed that the leaders of the empire gave into the vices of strangers, morals collapsed, laws became oppressive, and the abuse of power made the nation vulnerable to the barbarian hordes." {9}

British historian Catherine Edwards demonstrated that our current examples of immorality are not a modern phenomenon. In her study of the "politics of immorality" in ancient Rome, she says that contraception, abortion, and exposure were common ways to prevent childbirth in Rome. Husbands refused to recognize any child they did not believe to be their own. "Until accepted by its father, a Roman baby did not, legally speaking, exist." {10}

Life became cheap in the latter days of the Roman Empire. Burdensome regulation and taxes made manufacturing and trade unprofitable. Families were locked into hereditary trades and vocations allowing little if any vocational choice. Eventually, children were seen as a needless burden and abortion and infanticide became commonplace. In some cases, children were sold into slavery.

Manners and social life fell into debauchery. Under Justinian, entertainment grew bawdier and more bizarre. Orgies and love feasts were common. Homosexuality and bestiality were openly practiced. Under Nero, Christians were blamed for the great fire in Rome and horribly persecuted.

Similar patterns can be found in other civilizations. In Greece, the music of the young people became wild and coarse. Popular entertainment was brutal and vulgar. Promiscuity, homosexuality, and drunkenness became a daily part of life. And all moral and social restraints were lost leading to greater decadence.

In Carthage, worship turned from Baal to the earth goddess Tanit. "Sacrifices to the goddess of fertility were supposed to ensure productivity, long life, and even greater profits."[\[11\]](#) Ornately carved funeral monuments depicting infant sacrifice can be seen today along with thousands of tiny stone coffins to infants sacrificed to the pagan goddess.

The parallels to our own nation are striking. No, we don't sacrifice infants to a pagan goddess, but we have aborted nearly 40 million babies on the altar of convenience. And various sexual practices are openly accepted as part of an alternative lifestyle. It's no wonder that many believe our country is a nation in decline.

Are We A Nation in Decline?

Throughout this article we have been describing the patterns

of decline in a nation. Do these patterns apply to our own nation? Many people looking at the patterns of social, cultural, and moral decay in other countries and civilizations have concluded that we are headed down the same path.

Russell Kirk put it this way:

It appears to me that our culture labors in an advanced state of decadence; that what many people mistake for the triumph of our civilization actually consists of powers that are disintegrating our culture; that the vaunted 'democratic freedom' of liberal society in reality is servitude to appetites and illusions which attack religious belief; which destroy community through excessive centralization and urbanization; which efface life-giving tradition and custom. [{12}](#)

When we understand the factors that led to the decline of great civilizations, we can easily see that this country can succumb to similar temptations and decadence. What happened in Greece, Rome, Egypt, Carthage, and many other civilizations can happen to us.

Professor Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, said, "This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of the philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before." [{13}](#)

We as a nation and a people must rise to the occasion or suffer a fate similar to that which has befallen civilizations in the past. The task is not easy since the patterns of decay found in other nations strike ours as well. Nations were subverted by false and foreign ideologies. We too find hostile ideas in the public arenas of media, politics, and education. Sexual promiscuity led to the downfall of these nations. So

too we find similar patterns of sexual promiscuity and debauchery.

As nations fell into decline, life became cheap. Infants were strangled, exposed to the elements, or sold into slavery. Others were sacrificed to pagan goddesses in order to ensure productivity or a long life. Today life has become cheap. At one end of the spectrum, unborn babies are aborted. At the other end, physician-assisted suicide is becoming acceptable for the aged.

In his study of history, Arnold Toynbee describes the predictable pattern of "challenge and response." We as a nation are challenged in fundamental ways, and our response will either pull us back from the brink or push us over it. Will we follow the path to renewal and reformation or will we follow the path to destruction? The choice is ours.

Notes

1. Jim Nelson Black, *When Nations Die* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1994), 3.
2. Ibid., 9.
3. Ibid., 35-36.
4. Jos Ortega y Gasset, *Mirabeau: An Essay on the Nature of Statesmanship* (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1975).
5. Donald Dudley, *The Civilization of Rome* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 238.
6. Samuel Noah Eisenstadt, *The Decline of Empires* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 2-3.
7. Livy, preface to bk. I, *The History of Rome from Its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967).

8. Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W.R. Paton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930).
9. Black, *When Nations Die*, 187.
10. Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.
11. Black, *When Nations Die*, 165.
12. Russell Kirk, "Can Our Civilization Survive?" address to Heritage Foundation, 24 July 1992.
13. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 382.

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Why Dr. Laura is (Usually) Right

Why Dr. Laura Is Popular

Dr. Laura Schlessinger's call-in radio show is wildly popular in North America. According to her web site, Dr.Laura.com, the purpose of her program is to dispense morals, values, principles and ethics. Her refusal to coddle people's self-centered behavior and immoral or stupid choices is either highly entertaining or absolutely infuriating, depending on your worldview. She's opinionated and not afraid to fly in the face of the culture. Most of the time I agree with her, but sometimes she misses the boat. In this essay I'll be looking at why Dr. Laura is usually right—not because she agrees with

me (I mean, how arrogant is that?), but because her positions are consistent with what God has revealed in the Bible.

Dr. Laura rejects the victim mentality. She says, "Victimization status is the modern promised land of absolution from personal responsibility. Nobody is acknowledged to have free will or responsibility anymore." {1} Instead of coddling people because of past difficult experiences, she calls her audience to make right choices. In her book *How Could You Do That?*, she writes, "I don't believe for a minute that everything that happens to you is your doing or your fault. But I do believe the ultimate quality of your life, and your happiness, is determined by your courageous and ethical choices, and your overall attitude." {2} This call to assume responsibility for our choices and our behaviors resonates with us because it is consistent with the dignity God endowed us with when He gave us the ability to make significant choices and not be His puppets. Joshua encouraged the Israelites, "Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). It was a real choice with real consequences. That's because we live in a cause-and-effect universe where "God is not mocked: a man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7).

There is a most interesting postscript in Dr. Laura's book *How Could You Do That?* She quotes from the Genesis 4 passage where God confronts Cain for his bad attitude after He would not accept Cain's offering. God tells Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:7) She makes the point that God seems to be teaching that there is joy in doing right, and "God also reassures us that we do have the capacity to rise above circumstance and attain mastery over our weaker selves." {3} It's a good observation, and this passage makes a strong statement about what God expects of every person, as a moral creature made in His image. He wants us to do what is

right and resist the pull of sin's temptation.

In a culture that gets increasingly secular every day, where we have lost our moral compass, listeners are relieved to hear someone who has a strong commitment to God-given absolutes. Dr. Laura acts like an anchor of common sense for many who find life's choices too confusing and overwhelming in today's postmodern world.

Much of Dr. Laura's "preaching, teaching and nagging" (her words) is directed at helping people decide to make good moral choices. Even if they don't know God, their lives will work better simply because they will be more in line with how God created us to live. (Of course, from a Christian perspective, this has no value in light of eternity if a life that "works better" is lived separated from the life of God through Jesus Christ.)

Dr. Laura's emphasis on honor, integrity and ethics strikes a nerve in eighteen million listeners.[\[4\]](#) No surprise, really: that nerve is common to all of us—the nerve called morality—because we are made in the image of a moral God.

Self-Esteem

One reason why Dr. Laura's values and beliefs attract millions of listeners to her daily radio program is her common-sense approach to the whole issue of self-esteem. When a caller complains, "I don't feel very good about myself," Dr. Laura will fire back a great question: "Why *should* you feel good about yourself? What have you done that gives you a reason to feel good about yourself?" In a culture where people want to believe they're wonderful and worthwhile without any basis for such an assessment, Dr. Laura has a completely different approach: self-esteem is earned.

In her books and radio show, she suggests several means of earning the right to enjoy self-respect, and all of them are

good ideas from a pragmatic perspective.

Dr. Laura points out that we derive pleasure from having character. We need to choose high moral values and then honor them during times of temptation. She writes, "There is no fast lane to self-esteem. It's won on . . . battlegrounds where immediate gratification comes up against character. When character triumphs, self-esteem heightens."[{5}](#)

She also says that choosing personal and professional integrity over moral compromise will make us feel good about ourselves in the long run. So will valuing and honoring our responsibilities, which she calls "the express route" to self-esteem.[{6}](#) We build self-respect by choosing loyalty, sacrifice, and self-reliance over short-term self-indulgence.[{7}](#)

In her book *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives*, Dr. Laura astutely demonstrates one of the differences between the sexes: "Women tend to make a relationship their life, their identity, while men make it a part of their lives."[{8}](#) She's absolutely right. The reason a relationship cannot provide true self-esteem for a woman is the same reason a man's job or accomplishments can't do it: it is idolatry to look to relationships or accomplishments for meaning and purpose. God will never honor our false gods.

But self-esteem is only part of the equation for a healthy view of ourselves. Self-esteem is how we *feel* about ourselves; it needs to be built on the foundation of how we *think* about ourselves, which is our sense of self-worth. How valuable am I? What makes me significant? It doesn't matter how good we feel about ourselves if on a purely human level, we're in actuality worthless.

Pastor Don Matzat tells of a woman who came to him complaining, "I feel like I am completely worthless." He blew her away with his response. Gently and slowly, he said, "Maybe

you are completely worthless.”[{9}](#) Are you shocked? This lady was. But it’s true. We are only valuable because God made us, not because of anything within ourselves. We are infinitely precious because He made us in His image, able to be indwelt by God Himself. And He proved our value by paying an unimaginable price for us: the lifeblood of His very Son. Apart from God, we are completely worthless.

C. S. Lewis put it so well:

Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.[{10}](#)

Dr. Laura’s right: we earn our self-respect. But our sense of worth is one of God’s great gifts to us, because He’s the one who determines our value.

Man as a Moral Creature

If you call Dr. Laura’s radio program, the screener will ask, “What is your moral dilemma? What is the issue of right and wrong that you want to discuss?” Zeroing in on moral problems and not psychological ones sets her call-in talk show apart from most others. Dr. Laura sees man as a moral creature, capable of choosing good and evil. This is what she wrote in her book, *How Could You Do That?*:

Why do people do good things?

In contrast to all other creatures on earth, only humans measure themselves against ideals of motivation and action. We are elevated above all other creatures because we have a moral sense: a notion of right and wrong and a determination to bring significance to our lives beyond mere existence and survival, by actions that are selfless and generous.[{11}](#)

It's true, we are indeed elevated above all other creatures by our moral sense. We are far, far more than animals. But where does that morality come from?

Human beings are moral creatures because God created us in His image. That means we can choose between good and evil because God chooses between good and evil. We can think on a higher level, contemplating abstracts and ideals like goodness and nobility, because our minds are a reflection of God's unimaginably complex mind. We can choose to love others by serving them sacrificially because that's what God is like, and He made us like Himself. Dr. Laura thinks it's because we're lapsing into our animal natures.[{12}](#) But we are not the product of evolution. We were never animals. People do bad things because we are born as fallen image-bearers. I love the way Larry Crabb described it: "When Adam sinned, he disfigured both himself and all his descendants so severely that we now function far beneath the level at which we were intended. We're something like an airplane with cracked wings rolling awkwardly down a highway rather than flying through the air. The image has been reduced to something grotesque. It has not been lost, just badly marred."[{13}](#) But our airplanes keep wanting to wander off the runway and go our own way because we let our flesh rule us. That's why we do bad things.

Why do people do bad things?

But although Dr. Laura is right about man being a moral creature, she misses the boat on what it means to be human:

When Adam and Eve were in the Garden they were not fully human because they made no choices between right and wrong, no value judgments, no issues of ethics or morality. Leaving Eden, though, meant becoming fully human.[{14}](#)

They certainly did make a moral choice in the Garden. They chose wrong over right and chose disobedience over fellowship with God. Actually, when Adam and Eve were still living in the

Garden, they were more fully human than we've ever been since, because God created man sinless, perfect and beautiful. When we look at the Lord Jesus, the Second Adam, we see just how sinless, perfect and beautiful "fully human" is.

Dr. Laura is right to insist that we see ourselves as moral creatures, because a moral God has made us in His image.

Dr. Laura's Wisdom

Dr. Laura's strong positions on certain topics has made some people stand up and applaud her while others fume in frustration at her bluntness.

She makes no bones about the sanctity of marriage and that sex belongs only within a committed relationship sealed with a sacred vow. People living together and having sex without marriage are "shacking up." She's right because God ordained sex to be contained only in the safe and committed relationship of marriage.

Another of her well-known positions is that abortion is wrong because it's killing a baby. The much better alternative is adoption. She gets particularly frustrated with women who say, "Oh, I could never do that. I could never give up my baby once it was born." Her answer to that is, "You can kill it but you can't wave goodbye?" Here again, she's right because abortion is the deliberate taking of a human life. God's Word clearly commands us not to murder (Ex. 20:13).

Her strong views on abortion continue in her commitment to children, and her disdain for the way so many parents indulge their own whims and agendas at the expense of their kids. In a day when divorce is so prevalent, she makes an impassioned case for doing what's best for the children, with parents remaining active and involved in the raising of their kids. She believes that the family is the cornerstone of civilization, and this is consistent with the biblical view

starting right in the first chapter of Genesis.(Gen. 1:28)

Part of the way parents should take care of their children is to make sure they raise them in a religious faith shared by both parents. Dr. Laura warns people not to enter into interfaith marriages because usually the kids end up with no religion at all. Both the Old and New Testaments warn against being unequally yoked; God knows it's a recipe for heartbreak at best and disaster at worst.

She shows practical wisdom in many ways. She makes a distinction between those who are evil and those who are merely weak. In the same way, the book of Proverbs goes into great detail about the difference between the wicked and the fool.

Another evidence of her wisdom is her response to the fact that some people are uncomfortable keeping secrets, believing it's dishonest to not tell everything you know. Dr. Laura says there is a difference between maintaining privacy and withholding truth. The question to ask is, "Will this benefit the person I tell?" If not, don't tell. The reason this works is that this is how God operates. Everything He tells us in His Word is truth, but it's not exhaustive truth. Plus, God doesn't owe it to us to tell us everything He knows, and He's not being dishonest when He keeps information from us, like the "whys" of our trials and sufferings, or the exact details of how the endtimes will play out.

Finally, Dr. Laura exhorts people to choose "as if" behavior. "What a radical idea: choosing how to behave regardless of how you feel—and discovering that behaving differently seems to change how you feel."[\[15\]](#) In 2 Corinthians 5:7 we are told to "walk by faith, not our senses" (a paraphrase), which is another way of urging us to act *as if* something were already true instead of being limited by our feelings. I do love Dr. Laura's practical wisdom.

Where Dr. Laura's Wrong

Most of the time, Dr. Laura's views are right on the mark because they are consistent with the laws and values of Scripture. A fairly recent convert to conservative Judaism, she is still developing her own belief system, yet she can be fair and open-minded in considering other viewpoints. But there are some areas where she departs from the Bible's teachings.

For example, Dr. Laura believes that all religions are equally effective for establishing morality. If a young mother calls, looking for a religion in which to raise her children, Dr. Laura doesn't care if it's Hinduism or Islam or Presbyterianism, just as long as there is a *religion*. To her the issue is what works, or what *seems* to work, and most religions are the same to her in the area of shaping behavior. On the other hand, the truthfulness of religious claims is apparently not as important to her. Yet only one religion offers a personal relationship with God on His terms, by His own definition. Only one religion is God reaching down to man: Christianity, with its roots in Judaism.

Dr. Laura misunderstands biblical Christianity. She rejects the notion that Jews can believe in Christ. Many rabbis teach that to be Jewish is to reject Jesus as Messiah; they teach that Jesus is the God of the Gentiles. Two thousand years of unjust persecution feeds a heartbreaking "anti-Jesus" mentality. But Jesus Christ was a Jew, and almost all of the first believers were Jewish. As one messianic rabbi put it, to believe in the Jewish Messiah is the most Jewish thing someone can do![\[16\]](#) Dr. Laura is mistaken in her belief here. When a Jew trusts Christ as Savior, he does not stop being Jewish. What he discovers, in an intensely personal way, is that Judaism is the root, and Christianity is the fruit. He feels "completed" in ways many Gentiles never can.

What is the purpose of life? Dr. Laura has told many people

who are floundering without personal meaning that they need to find their niche in life to do their job, which is to perfect the world. This sounds noble . . . but there is nothing in Scripture that calls us to perfect an unperfectable world. In fact, God plans on scrapping the whole thing and starting over (Rev. 21:1). Perfecting the world is not our purpose in life: the reason we are here is to bring glory to God (Eph. 1:6,12,14).

One other area where Dr. Laura misses the boat is in dealing with guilt. I remember one caller who was filled with remorse and regret over her abortion, and she asked what to do with her guilt. But since Dr. Laura's belief system doesn't offer a way of handling it, she advised the woman to just carry the guilt. This is her usual advice in such circumstances because she believes the person will learn a deep life lesson from the continual pain. I grieve that she has no understanding of the cleansing that comes with Christ's forgiveness. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross, and when we come to Him in belief and trust, He not only forgives the sin but cleanses us of the guilt. We don't have to carry guilt that He washed away!

There are a few subjects where Dr. Laura departs from the Scriptures, most notably about Jesus and salvation, and we can't agree with her. But for the most part, as far as her positions and beliefs, Dr. Laura is usually right, and I think she honors God as she proclaims His laws and ways. I just pray she will respond to the light of the WHOLE truth.

[Addendum on why I left out Dr. Laura's views on homosexuality](#)

Notes

1. Laura Schlessinger, *How Could You Do That?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 8.

2. Ibid., p. 134.
3. www.drLaura.com/about/
4. "No Whining!," *U.S. News and World Report*, 14 July 1997.
5. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 152.
6. Laura Schlessinger, *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 171.
7. Ibid., p. 157.
8. Ibid., p. 189.
9. Don Matzat, *Christ Esteem* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House), p. 173.
10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.
11. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 26.
12. Ibid., p. 187.
13. Larry Crabb, *Understanding People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), p. 87.
14. *How Could You Do That?*, p. 93.
15. Ibid., p. 257.
16. Personal conversation with the staff of Baruch Ha Shem, a messianic congregation in Dallas, Texas.

The Value of the Internet for Christians

Sue Bohlin's article, originally written in 1995, asks, How should Christians deal with this new culture force? There are many worthwhile places on the Internet for believers, and this essay is heavily documented with the electronic addresses. The dangers of pornography and unwise intimacy with computer-mediated relationships are also discussed.

An Exciting Technology

The internet is a cultural force that is changing the way we live and communicate, but many people don't understand it. In this essay we'll examine the Internet as a tool for Christians to use to the glory of God while at the same time employing discernment to be wise in our use of a most exciting technology.

The internet is like our highway system, only it includes both the destinations as well as the roadways. Just as you can travel in a car over a series of connected interstates, state highways, city streets, farm-to-market roads, and gravel paths, the internet lets you travel electronically through a network of computers that lets you get just about anywhere in no time flat. The internet also includes the destinations in your electronic travels, much like different kinds of malls, where the stores are right next to each other. There are entertainment malls, where you can see pictures ranging from fine art in the Louvre (www.louvre.fr) to breaking news stories, [{1}](#) watch video clips of live performances, and listen to speeches, [{2}](#) music, [{3}](#) and radio stations on the other side of the globe (www.radio.com or www.christianradio.com). There are information malls where you can do research and gather information on everything from Caribbean vacations to the Crusades to castles. [{4}](#) There are library malls where,

instead of books, you can get files of everything from games to computer software to historical documents.[{5}](#) And there are conversation malls where you can talk to people across town or around the world.[{6}](#)

The internet also provides almost instantaneous electronic mail, or e-mail, which allows people to communicate so quickly, easily, and cheaply that e-mails now outnumber physical mail aptly nicknamed "snail mail." You don't have to track down paper and pen, handwrite the note or letter (and these days, legible handwriting is becoming all too rare), find a stamp and then walk it to a mailbox. Instead, those who can type find that it's a lot faster to zip off a letter at a keyboard, type in an e-mail address, hit the "send" button, and bam! Your letter is in the other person's mailbox waiting for them to log on and read it.

You can also subscribe to electronic, automated mailing lists, which are a blend of newsletter and discussion group devoted to a single, specialized topic. My friend Bill, whose 8-year-old daughter Cheska lost a courageous battle with cancer, was grateful for the Brain Tumor list.[{7}](#) Subscribers to this list are people with brain tumors, those whose families or friends have brain tumors, and health-care professionals who treat these patients or do research into the disease. Bill gleaned exceedingly valuable information and leads on research and therapies. He also gave and received support and encouragement from this virtual community of people bound by a common tragic bond.

The instant, easy communication of e-mail also made it possible for Cheska to receive prayer support from literally around the world. By sending prayer updates to a little more than 200 people, her father discovered that by word of mouth and computer, thousands of people all over the globe prayed for her. I discovered that same wonderful phenomenon when sending out requests for prayers and cards to the Barbershop (singing) community for my father during his battle with

cancer, and he was delighted to receive encouragement from all sorts of people he didn't know. The internet is one of the most exciting developments that the world has ever seen. Many Christians are both fearful and ignorant of it, though we don't have to be. Like any other kind of technology, the internet is morally neutral. It's how we use it or abuse it that makes the difference.

Home-Schoolers and Missionaries

The technology of the internet has been a tremendous boon to families. Many of them have discovered that the internet's rich informational resources have provided a way to share common interests. One father and his son like to surf the World Wide Web to explore their passions for the Civil War and astronomy.[{8}](#) Another father-son duo used the internet to decide what historical places they would visit while planning a battlefield tour. Many families have enjoyed researching their vacation destinations before leaving home. In our family, we used the internet to learn as much as we could about Costa Rica before our son headed there on a missions trip. Our other son, researching a paper for school on the artist M.C. Escher, found biographical information and examples of his artwork on the World Wide Web. It yielded excellent information and saved us a trip to the library, making both of us happy campers!

Many home-school families have discovered the benefits of the internet. There is a great deal of information online that can supplement lessons and provide resources for the parent teacher. Online encyclopedias,[{9}](#) newspapers and libraries[{10}](#) offer more information to home-schoolers than has ever been available before. But for many families, the best part of the internet (as well as forums on the online services like CompuServe and America Online) is the support and interaction they can enjoy with other home-schoolers. Families in the most remote corners of Canada can enjoy an electronic camaraderie

with those in suburban Atlanta and even military families in Germany. They share insights and experiences with each other as well as brainstorming together on problems and challenges such as finding a different way to teach a child having trouble grasping a concept, or what to do with a special needs child. "Plugged-in" home-school families report that the encouragement of their online home-school communities is often what keeps them going.

As video capabilities become cheaper and more accessible, home-school families look forward to networking with others in some learning exercises. A family's geographical location won't make any difference in a virtual (electronic) classroom.

For missionaries and mission organizations, the internet has become a huge blessing. Radio and satellite links give missionaries in even the most remote outposts access to instant, inexpensive, reliable communication with their organizations and families via e-mail. The internet has shrunk the world, and missionaries no longer have to feel so isolated. One missionary in the former Soviet Union told me via e-mail that she was very grateful for almost instant access to loved ones as well as mature, wise believers who can encourage and guide her as she deals with the challenges of missions work. But the best thing, she said, was that she can ask people to pray specifically and immediately for needs and problems, and start seeing answers within hours instead of weeks or months. A missionary battling discouragement, homesickness and weakness, not to mention the intensity of spiritual warfare, can summon real-time prayer assistance from the other side of the world and experience very real support and a sense of being truly connected to the larger Body of Christ.

Whether a parent is saying goodbye to a child headed for the mission field, a foreign military post, or even to college in another part of the state, the internet has made it easier to separate knowing they can stay in close contact with their

loved ones, in a world that has grown considerably smaller as the internet has grown larger.

Dangers on the Internet

The internet provides a wealth of information, but not all the information is edifying or wise. Much of it is downright silly, but some of it is actually dangerous. Fortunately, you don't have to worry that you'll turn on your computer and a pornographic picture will fall out of your monitor into your home; however, porn pushers are getting increasingly aggressive in finding ways to send their pictures to unsuspecting people, often children.

The key to protecting our children from online pornography is the same way we protect them from printed pornography: parental vigilance. Parents need to know what their children are doing at the computer, which is why it's wise to keep the family computer in a public place. And it's also wise to become computer and internet literate ourselves. But there are some powerful tools to help parents and schools keep adult-oriented material away from children: software programs that filter out objectionable sites and prevent access to them. There are several filtered internet service providers (ISP), where the filter resides on a remote computer. This is the safest and most effective system, much harder for technically savvy kids and teens to circumvent than a filtering program that you install on your own computer.

Just having a filtering program isn't enough. Some programs work so poorly that they're actually worse than nothing at all because they give a false sense of security. Not all filtering software is created equal! Nothing will ever take the place of parental involvement and vigilance, and that will always need to be our first line of defense. But what about when our kids are at school? Administrators are very much aware of the dangers of the internet, while desiring students to have access to the incredible resources it offers. Many school

districts are in the process of developing Acceptable Use Policies that will provide stringent parameters for student internet access. It's essential that parents check on the policies of both their children's schools and the local public libraries, which often provide unfiltered access to both adults and children out of a misguided (in my opinion) allegiance to the concept of no censorship.

Another danger of a very different kind also requires our vigilance. There are a lot of computer viruses floating around on the internet, which are transmitted when you transfer a file from a remote computer to your own (downloading), or from an infected diskette to a clean one.

A virus is an invisible program, written by programmers ranging from mischievous to mean-spirited, that attaches itself to a file and wreaks some degree of havoc on an unsuspecting person's computer. It's important to use software that scans your hard disk and diskettes for viruses and then destroys them. I used to neglect to keep checking my computer for viruses, and when I turned it on the day of Michelangelo's birthday, March 6, the virus of the same name wiped out all my data—mine and a few other thousand people's! A little caution goes a long way. Be sure to use, and update, virus protection software by good companies such as Norton or McAfee.

Online Communication

Both Ann Landers and Dear Abby have run an increasing number of letters in their advice columns about spouses who emotionally or physically abandoned their families after meeting people through the computer. Those who have never developed a relationship with someone who lives on the other side of a screen and a telephone line have a hard time understanding how such a thing could happen, but there is an electric thrill in the immediacy of computer communication, as if a radio personality suddenly started conversing with you through your radio.

The dynamics of computer conversation are vastly different from face-to-face discussion. There is no non-verbal element, which comprises 93% of our communication. When body language and tone of voice are missing, and words are all you have to work with, words become much more important. And words, especially those of a direct and personal nature, are very powerful. But words on a screen are enough to allow friendships to sprout up quickly and mature under the right circumstances. Many people count their online friends, some of whom they've never met, as among their most cherished relationships. And many Christians are grateful for the depth of fellowship with other believers they have found through the computer.

However, it's important to understand how online relationships differ from those in the "real world." Because we have very limited information about the people we communicate with, we project our preconceptions and fantasies onto them, quite unconsciously. Real life can be ordinary and drab compared to the idealized image we relate to on the screen. One person finally realized that the reason she preferred her online friends to her real-life ones was that, as she put it, she "had imbued them with magic."

That's why there are emotional potholes in cyberspace. A false sense of emotional intimacy is easily achieved when all you have to work with is words and thoughts and feelings. What is missing is the fullness of another person's whole personality and the context of his or her three-dimensional life. Therefore, what people experience is generally not true intimacy, although a relationship can indeed be extremely intense and most people are unprepared for the level of intensity that can characterize online communication. Sometimes, though, that experience of emotional intimacy can come at the cost of intimacy in one's "real life" relationships. Many husbands and wives feel shut out of their spouse's heart and mind because they spend hours a day at the

computer, communing with unseen people with whom they readily share their deepest selves.

Women are especially vulnerable in online communication for two reasons: first, because God made us verbal creatures, and we respond deeply to words. And words are everything in cyberspace. Secondly, women are vulnerable because of the pervasive loneliness in our culture. Even those in marriages and families experience unmet needs for attention, warmth, and interaction. Many women are starving for romance, and any attention from a man can feel like the romance they're starving for. When a woman receives focused attention from a man who is listening to her heart as well as her words, it can feel like the romance God designed her to receive, and that's why a frightening number of women become infatuated with men they've never even laid eyes on, although this happens to men as well. The word of God tells us to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23), and this is wise advice for all online communications and relationships.

Christian Resources

Never before has it been so easy to access so many Christian ministries and their material. It's now possible for us at Probe to make our radio transcripts available to anyone in the world with internet access, without printing or mailing costs. And internet surfers can stumble across biblically-based, Christian perspectives without even meaning to by using search engines, [{11}](#) programs that scour the net for anything they can find on a given subject. For example, someone looking for information on angels will find Probe's essay [{12}](#) right alongside articles from a typically New Age perspective.

If you have a computer, a modem, and an internet provider, you have access to literature and reference works beyond the scope of many libraries. One favorite internet site is the Institute for Christian Leadership's amazing "Guide to Christian Literature on the Net." [{13}](#) Here you can browse various

Bibles, articles, classic essays, creeds and confessions, sermons, and reference works. They also offer the "Guide to Early Church Documents on the Net,"^{14} a real find for church history buffs. Wheaton College sponsors the "Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org), offering writings by great saints such as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. Their collection of reference works is thrilling to Bible students. Here you can find a concordance, Bible dictionary, a topical Bible, and Matthew Henry's commentary. One of the best Christian resource is the Bible Gateway (