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 backgroundmost 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 indwelled 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.

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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 (