# Giving Can Improve Your Health; Science Says So

Want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

It really is good to be good, claims Stephen Post, Ph.D., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Science says it is so.

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their recent book, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*.{1} As head of an institute supported by philanthropist Sir John Templeton{2}, Post has funded over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities. He's convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in a fragmented society.

Post says research has produced remarkable findings: Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease. If pharmaceutical companies could charge for giving, we might see ads for Give Back instead of Prozac, he speculates. One program, Rx: Volunteer, has some California HMO physicians giving volunteerism prescriptions to their Medicare patients.

## All You Need is Love?

Post and Neimark say around 500 scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied University of California Berkeley data that followed about two hundred people every decade since the 1920s. Giving during high school correlated with good mental and physical health across life spans. Givers experienced these benefits regardless of the warmth of their families, he found.

Other research says that giving correlates with lower teen depression and suicide risk and with lower depression among the elderly. Studies at Stanford and elsewhere found links between frequent volunteering and delaying death. Post says giving even trumps receiving when it comes to reducing mortality.

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."{3}

Illustrations abound of givings personal benefits. Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller's goal was to eliminate poverty housing from the face of the earth. Get rid of shacks!

Today Habitat volunteers have constructed over 225,000 houses, helping over a million people in over 3,000 communities worldwide. Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings.

## From Playmate to Orphan Care

Post and Neimark relate an intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher's childhood helped her connect with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the Playboy mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's

poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for 2,300 children. “I work long hours,” Krabacher notes, “put up with unbelievable sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world.”

Post would agree. Do you desire happiness, love, safety, security, loyal friends, true connection, or a benevolent and hopeful world? He has one answer: Give. Youll be happier, healthier, and live longer. Love cures, wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.

**Notes**

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# China, The Olympics and Christians

When the 2008 Olympics were awarded to China back in 2001, there was a naive hope that this decision would change China and also lead to an improvement in human rights. It turns out

that instead of changing China, it may have changed us.

One example of this can be seen in our country. When the Olympic torch was carried through various cities in the world, it was protected not only by the local authorities but also by the Chinese secret police. So when the torch came to San Francisco, once again the Chinese secret police showed up. Now to be fair, the news reports actually said that they were volunteers from the Special Forces academy of the Peoples Armed Police. But a better description for them would be Chinas secret police.

This organization has been used to protect embassies in Beijing. But it has also been called upon put down protests in Tibet and suppress protests and other forms of expression in China. They were described by the chairman of the 2012 London Olympic committee as thugs. Others described their tactics as aggressive.

It is amazing to me that we allowed these secret police in our country, but it illustrates my point. We thought that these trade overtures and the Olympics would change China. In the long run, they may have a positive impact. But so far it seems like we are the ones who have changed.

There was also the naive hope that bringing the Olympics to China would usher in an era of improved human rights in this communist country. It appears that in some ways the situation is worse. China has invested time and money in preparing for the Olympics. It appears they have also done all they can to rid the nation of anyone who could be seen as a dissident.

For decades, China has been rounding up Christians and other dissidents. They have been beaten and thrown in jail. Some have been killed. Lord David Alton estimates that each year 8,000 executions take place in China. Those who escape this persecution must live in a society where political and religious opinion is repressed, where journalists are jailed,

and where the Internet and overseas broadcasts are censored.

The Chinese constitution promises its citizens that they have freedom of religious belief. But we know better. While there is an official state church, most of the growth (and the perceived potential threat to the government) takes place in the underground churches. As we get closer to the Olympics, the government seems bent on doing more to smash the growing home church movement.

As Christians we should be in prayer about what is taking place in China. But a growing debate has centered on what the U.S. government should do. Some have called for President Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies. They believe this would be a strong statement of our repudiation of the practices of the Chinese government. Others have suggested that President Bush go and use the Olympics as a platform to speak out against the Chinese government.

I see merit in either action. What is unacceptable is the current policy of silence. The president, his administration, and even corporate sponsors have been silent about what has been going on for decades. Now even the secular world is calling for action because of Chinas policy toward Tibet. It is time for all of us (Christians included) to break our silence and speak out.

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# Myanmar Cyclone Response:

# Power-Lust and Lost Lives

*As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.*

## Corrupted Power

### Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives "without enough to eat" on a normal basis.{1} The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. "Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests."{2}

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems.

However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

## Failure to Allow Rendered Aid

“The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar’s cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food,” reports the Associated Press.

It’s understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

> *Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.*
>
> *Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.*
>
> *Government demands of businesses in the capital to “donate” aid for victims to be distributed through the central government.{3} So much for central “planning.” Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.*

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in needthe very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling partys priorities.

## Global Chorus of Criticism

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.{4}

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.{5}

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country very quickly, we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he said.{6}

The UN has learned lessons from past dicatorships' abuse of

privilege.The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

## Some Worldview Implications

The heartlessness of Myanmars leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldviewneo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for examplewould only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or "smart enough" to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dali Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaining. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For Burmese monks and adherants alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, "According to Buddhist belief, man is worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist

while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God" {7}. While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan's Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism's doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, "Why? From where does this universal reality spring?"

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. "The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand."{8} Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

## Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity

"A Christian view of government should…be concerned with human rights…based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but instead acknowledges these rights as always existing."{9}

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America's reaction to Myanmar's languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world's stance: the ideals of

democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I'm sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. Americas Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

## Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power

"While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil…. {10} Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this traditioninevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human

sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.{11}

## Sanctity of Human Life

What offficials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestigeas in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that todays outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as Gods image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

## Biblical Imitation of a Giving God

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive responsehowever incompetent it may have beenfrom the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Churchs centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world, that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio

transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

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# Clonaid and Eternity

Want to live forever?

Got big bucks?

Clonaid founder Claude Vorilhon, who goes by “Rael,” says you’ll be able to gain eternal life through cloning, but it will cost you plenty. Debates surrounding Clonaid sometimes overlook his stated goal.

“The long-term implication, and this is my mission,” Rael told CNN, “is to give humanity eternal life. Cloning is the key to give us eternal life and to cure all disease on Earth, but eternal life is the ultimate goal.”

Rael says cloning babies is only the first step. Next, he speculates, will come “accelerated growth,” bringing a cloned infant to maturity over a few hours. Phase three transfers the data in your brain to your adult clone.

Your memory and personality then inhabit a new body. Your old body can die while you live on. When your cloned body wears out, presumably you can repeat the process and thus live forever. Hopes of connecting with eternity, of course, touch deep human longings.

Rael, who founded the Raelian religion, says he won’t profit directly from the cloning. Clonaid and the Raelian religion seem to be close philosophically but separate financially. Clonaid’s website features Rael quite prominently. Rael says he won’t shun donations from Clonaid.

Referring to Clonaid president Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, Rael says, “It’s a commercial company and her goal is to make as much money as possible, and I hope she will make as much as possible.”

Hmmm. A religious leader; big money; questionable promises. Sound fishy?

Rael says he encountered a space alien in 1973 in France who told him that extraterrestrials had created life on Earth through cloning. Rael’s mission became to spread the aliens’ message and help earthlings live forever.

Rael claims the alien told him he (Rael) was the brother of Jesus. Jesus, of course, said some significant things about eternal life. Among them: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.”

Jesus also said that his own bodily resurrection – one of the best-attested facts in history – would validate his claims. Raelians say that aliens using “an advanced cloning technique” raised Jesus from the dead. One problem with this theory involves Jesus’ wounds. To convince his doubting disciple Thomas he had really risen, Jesus showed him the wounds in his hands and side. Thomas believed. Presumably cloning, involving genetic copying, does not reproduce physical wounds.

Jesus and his followers charged nothing for eternal life. It was a “free gift” to all who believed, made possible by his sacrificial death.

Beware of religious leaders promising eternity for a fee.

# Global Food Crisis Hits Home

Happy with your grocery bills these days? Do those gasoline pump meters seem to whir like Vegas slot machines, except you never hit the jackpot?

The two issues are not unrelated and theyre affecting pocketbooks and bellies at home and around the globe. Some Westerners might react with detached shock to stories of food riots in places like Haiti, India, and Cameroon. But when your local Costco and Sams Club start limiting rice purchases (as recently reported), reality creeps in.

Americans seem worried. A USA TODAY/Gallup poll found 73 percent of US consumers concerned about food inflation; almost half said it caused their households hardship. Eighty percent expressed concern about energy prices.{1}

Food price increases that may cause inconvenience or hardship in affluent nations can be devastating for families in the developing world. Recent food riots in Haiti cost the prime minister his job. *The New York Times* reports that spiraling prices are turning Haitian staples like beans, corn and rice into closely guarded treasures. Some Haitians eat mud patties containing oil and sugar to silence their grumbling stomachs.{2}

## Silent Tsunami

Economist and special United Nations advisor Jeffrey Sachs says of the global food problem, Its the worst crisis of its kind in more than 30 years. There are a number of governments on the ropes, and I think theres more political fallout to come. {3}

The UN World Food Program says skyrocketing food prices could create a silent tsunami turning 100 million people toward

hunger and poverty. Executive director Josette Sheeran called for large-scale, high-level action by the global community. {4} British Prime minister Gordon Brown asserts, “Tackling hunger is a moral challenge to each of us and it is also a threat to the political and economic stability of nations.” {5}

World Vision, one of the worlds largest relief and development agencies, announced serious cutbacks, saying they are able to feed 1.5 million fewer people than last year. The well-respected Christian humanitarian organization appealed for international donors, citing swelling food prices and increased food need. Rising fuel costs boost fertilizer and food transportation costs. Corn diverted to make biofuels cannot become lunch,{6} though some feel biofuel is a misplaced whipping boy.{7}

## Your Strategies

Of course folks in the developed world, not threatened with devastating hunger, can employ multiple strategies to stretch their resources. Careful shopping and research is one. (Holy Coupon Clipping, Batman! Just look how much we can save if we time our grocery shopping to the sales rather than our impulses!) Diet adjustment, portion control, and budgetary belt-tightening are others.

And while youre trying to be sure your outgo doesnt exceed your income lest your upkeep become your downfall—may I suggest another wise move? If possible, share some of what you have with the desperately needy. World Vision founder Bob Pierce had as his life theme, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{8}

Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively fight poverty and hunger. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas

Kristof says, Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices. {9} I would add World Relief and the Salvation Army to the list. Your local house of worship may be a good place to start.

As another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, Blessed are those who help the poor. {10}

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# Castro's Staying Power

"I threw a rock at Castro!" my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain's queen and Thailand's king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

## Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. {1} Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching JFK demand the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel…and humanity…survived.

Several years later my parents' airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

## He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on." {2}

What reflections are in Castro's future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life's finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one's thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, "I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ)." {3}

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it's hard to envision the one who said "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"{4} jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

> *Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably…. This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal*

> *values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.{5}*

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish." {6}

Fidel Castro's physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

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# What's Happening to Our Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, *The Last Christian Generation*, where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, (www.youthtransitionnetwork.org) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak "Christianese" to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1)

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They don't feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They're not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don't feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. Thats a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can't name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don't know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don't believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, don't believe in Satan and don't believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long Mind Games Conference will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the

available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more fruitful:

• www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.

• www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.

• college101seminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.

• Conversations CDthis information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.

• www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.

• TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

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# Debt and Credit

## Introduction

We will be discussing the subject of debt from a biblical perspective. But before we begin looking at biblical principles concerning economics and finances, we need to put the problem of debt in perspective.

You cannot overemphasize the impact of debt on our society. It is the leading cause for divorce and also the reason for many more troubled marriages. It is also one of the causes for depression as well as suicide. People in debt didn't start out to ruin their lives and the lives of their families, but the consequences are often devastating.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about money, and a significant part of these financial warnings concern debt. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender." When you borrow money and put yourself in debt, you put yourself in a situation where the lender has significant influence over you.

Many other verses in Proverbs also warn about the potential danger of debt (Proverbs 1:13-15; 17:18; 22:26-27; 27:13). While this does not mean that we can never be in debt, it does warn us about its dangers.

Romans 13:8 is an often misunderstood verse because it says, "Owe nothing to anyone."

Although some theologians have argued that this verse prohibits debt, the passage needs to be seen in context. This passage is not a specific teaching about debt, but rather a summary of our duty as Christians to governmental authority. We should not owe anything to anyone (honor, taxes, etc.).

The Bible is filled with passages that provide guidelines to lending and borrowing. If debt was always wrong, then these passages would not exist and there would be a clear prohibition against debt. But the implication of Romans 13:8 seems to be that we should pay our debts off a quickly as possible.

At this point, it would be good to make a distinction between debt and credit. Often in our society, the two words are used interchangeably. To put it simply, debt is something that is owed. The Bible does not prohibit borrowing, but it certainly does not recommend it. Credit is the establishment of mutual trust between a lender and borrower.

At the outset, let me acknowledge that some people end up in debt due to no fault of their own. They may have been swindled in a business. They may have made a good faith attempt to start a business but were unsuccessful because their competitions or suppliers cheated them. They may have been unfairly sued in court. The reasons are many.

## The Consequences of Debt

What are the consequences of debt? The Bible describes debt as a form of slavery. Proverbs 22:7 says: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender.” The borrower becomes a servant (or slave) to the person who is the lender.

If you look in the Old Testament, you will notice that debt was often connected to slavery. For example, both debts and slavery were cancelled in the years of Jubilee. Sometimes people even put themselves in slavery because of debt (Deut. 15:2, 12).

Today we may not be in actual slavery from debt, but it may feel like it some times. We have all heard the phrase, “I owe, I owe, so it’s off to work I go.” If you are deep in debt you

know that there may be very few days off and perhaps no vacation. Someone in debt can begin to feel like a slave.

How can you know if you are too far in debt? Here are a few questions to ask yourself. Do you have an increasing collection of past-due bills on your desk? Do you drive down the road hoping you will win the lottery? Do you feel stress every time you think about your finances? Do you avoid answering the phone because you think it might be a collection agency? Do you make only minimum payments on credit cards?

One of the consequences of debt is we often deny reality. In order to realistically deal with the debt in our lives we need to get rid of some of the silly ideas running around in our heads.

For example, you are *not* going to win the lottery. Your debt problem is *not* going to go away if you just ignore it. And a computer glitch in your lender's computer is *not* going to accidentally wipe out your financial records so that you don't have to repay your debt.

Another consequence of debt is a loss of integrity. When we cannot pay, we start saying "the check's in the mail" when it isn't. We not only kid ourselves but we try to mislead others about the extent of our problem with debt.

Sometimes debt even leads to dishonesty. Psalm 37:21 says: "The wicked borrows and does not pay back." We should repay our debts.

A third consequence of debt is addiction. Debt is addictive. Once in debt we begin to get comfortable with cars, consumer goods, furniture, etc., all funded through debt. Once we reach that comfort level, we go into further debt.

A final consequence of debt is stress. Stress experts have calculated the impact of various stress factors on our lives.{1} Some of the greatest are death of a spouse and

divorce. But it is amazing how many other stress factors are financially related (change in financial state, mortgage over $100,000). When we owe more than we can pay, we worry and feel a heavy load of stress that wouldn’t exist if we lived debt free.

## Credit Card Debt

To listen to the news reports, you would think that Americans are drowning in debt, but the story is not that simple. The latest economic statistics say that the average U.S. household has more than $9,000 in credit card debt. The average household also spends more than $1,300 a year in interest payments.

While these numbers are true, they are also misleading. The average debt per American household with at least one credit card is $9,000. But nearly one-fourth of Americans don’t even own credit cards.

An even more telling fact is that more than thirty percent of American households paid off their most recent credit cards bills in full. So actually a majority of Americans owe nothing to credit card companies. Of the households that do owe money on credit cards, the median balance was $2,200. Only about 1 in 12 American households owe more than $9,000 on credit cards.

The $9,000 figure comes from CardWeb. It takes the outstanding credit card debt in America and divides it by the number of households that have at least one credit card. While the average is accurate, it is misleading.

Liz Pulliam Weston, writing for MSN Money, explains: “The example I usually give to illustrate the fallacy of averages is to imagine that you and 17 of your friends were having dinner with Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. The average net worth of a person at that table would be about $5 billion. The

fact that everybody else's personal net worth was a lot less wouldn't affect the average that much because Bill and Warren are so much wealthier than the rest of us."{2}

Yes, Americans are in debt. And some Americans are really in debt. If you are one of those individuals, you should apply the biblical principles we are discussing to your situation. If you are not in debt, learn a vicarious lesson about what can happen if you don't pay attention to debt.

Here are some principles for dealing with credit card debt. First, realize that the problem is not the credit card in your hand. The problem may be with the person holding the credit card. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naïve go on, and are punished for it."

Second, never use credit cards except for budgeted purchases. Impulse shopping with credit cards is one of the major reasons people find themselves in debt.

Third, pay off your credit cards every month. If you cannot pay off your credit card bill, don't use your credit card again until you can pay your bill.

## Home Mortgage

Most Christian financial counselors put a home mortgage in a different category than other debt. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, a home loan is secured by the equity in the home. After an initial down payment, a loan schedule (of principle and interest) is applied to the balance of the home expense. If a homeowner faces a financial crisis, he or she can sell the house and use that amount to retire the loan.

Second, a home is often an appreciating asset. In many housing markets, the price of a home increases every year. This makes

it an even less risky financial investment. But of course, what goes up can also go down. Some homeowners have seen the value of their home decrease significantly. That affects their ability to repay their home loan if they need to sell their house.

Third, a home mortgage is a tax deduction and thus provides a small financial benefit to homeowners that they would not have if they were renting. At the same time, eager home buyers shouldn’t over-estimate the value of this and justify buying a home that is beyond their means.

Fourth, the interest in a home loan is usually within a few percentage points of the prime rate. This means that the interest rate in a typical home loan is about one third the interest rate of a typical credit card.

While a home mortgage may be different from other forms of debt, that doesn’t mean there aren’t dangers and pitfalls. As we have already mentioned, people buy homes assuming that they will appreciate in value. But many find that the house prices stagnate or even decline. After paying closing costs, they may owe more on their home loan than they received from the sale of their house.

Another concern about a home mortgage is that many homeowners end up buying more house than they can really afford. Just because they qualify for a particular house doesn’t mean they should buy a house that will stretch them financially.

Changing financial circumstances may surprise a couple that qualifies for a house mortgage. For example, the wife may get pregnant and no longer be able to work and provide the income necessary to make the monthly mortgage payment. Either partner might get laid off from work and not provide the necessary income. And there are always unexpected expenses for homeowners (new furnace, hot water heater, etc.) that couples may not have budgeted for when they purchased a home.

One formula that is often used in considering a home mortgage is to buy a home that is less than two and a half times a family's annual gross income. Another is to consider what you can currently pay in rent and compare that amount to the home mortgage (plus the additional expenses such as insurance, taxes, etc.). The two amounts should be similar.

## Getting Out of Debt

Let's conclude by talking about how to get out of debt. If you are already in debt, you need to break the debt cycle with discipline applied over time.

First, establish the right priorities. God owns it all. Unfortunately, we often believe that we own it all. We need to mentally transfer ownership of all our possessions to God (Psalm 8). This would also include giving the Lord His part and honoring Him with your giving (even if it is a small amount).

Second, stop borrowing. If a pipe broke in your house, the first thing to you would do is shut off the water before you started to mop up the water. Before you do anything else, "shut off" the borrowing. Don't use your credit card. Don't take out a bank loan.

Third, develop a budget. This is something you might do by yourself or with the help of many online ministries and financial services that provides guidelines. Or you may consult with a financial expert who can give you guidelines.

You would begin by making a list of all of your monthly expenses (mortgage or rent, utilities, groceries, car payments, credit card bills, etc.). Then you need to establish a priority for the loans that you have that are outstanding. This should include information about the amount owed and the interest rates. Then you need to set aside a realistic budget that allows you to have enough money to pay off the loans in a

systematic way.

Write to each creditor with a repayment plan based upon this realistic budget. It might be good to even include a financial statement and a copy of your budget so they can see that you are serious about getting out of debt.

Fourth, begin to retire your debt. If you can, pay extra on the debts with the highest interest rates. If all of them have comparable interest rates, you might instead pay extra on the smallest balance. By paying that off first, you will have a feeling of accomplishment and then free up some of your income to tackle your next debt.

Fifth, develop new spending habits. For example, if you generate extra income from working overtime or at an extra job, use that to retire your debt faster. Don't assume that because you have some extra discretionary income you can use that to spend it on yourself.

Before you buy anything, question yourself. If an item isn't in your budget, ask yourself if you really need it and how much use you will get out of it. We often spend because we are used to spending. Change your spending habits.

Debt is like a form of slavery. Do what you can to be debt free. If you follow these steps faithfully, that can take place in a few years. Debt freedom will reduce your stress and free you up to accomplish what God intends for you to do.

**Notes**

1. The Holmes-Rahe Scale, www.geocities.com/beyond_stretched/holmes.htm.
2. Liz Pulliam Weston, "The big lie about credit card debt," MSN Money, 30 July 2007, tinyurl.com/33zrut.

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# MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking

*MySpace and other social networking sites can be a great boon or a great danger. Byron Barlowe cautions Christian parents of teens to exercise discernment in educating themselves about this important part of life, and look for a redemptive view of this social technology.*

## Very Big and Very Hip

MySpace.com: *It's big, it's growing, it's controversial for good reasons, and it's probably touched your family—and you may not even know it. In this section, we answer the questions, "What is it and why do you as a parent need to learn more about protecting your kids without cutting them off?"*

Is *MySpace* a harmless teen hangout or a treacherous trap? Should parents forbid your kids from using *MySpace* or similar social networking Web sites? Kids, do your parents, like, *even* have a *clue*? And could Christians legitimately use *MySpace* as a mission field?

Controversy about *MySpace* still abounds, even in the fast-moving online world.

Imagine this: Your straight-A, straight-laced teenaged daughter Lori met Aaron online when he visited her *MySpace* profile, a Web page about her. Now she wants to go to the concert with Aaron and his online buddy, "PartyCrasher." "But mom, we've been 'friends' for weeks!" she whines. Mom and Dad,

what do you do now?

This may not happen to your family, but something similar happened to a Michigan family whose previously trouble-free sixteen-year-old daughter sneaked a flight to the Middle East to rendezvous with a *MySpace* "friend"![{1}]

So, what is *MySpace*? According to one top ranking site, in August 2007 it became the sixth-most-visited Web site on the Internet,[{2}] with over 100 million accounts.

A "perfect storm": millions of people—many of them in their teens and twenties—are connecting with friends, meeting new ones, producing Web
pages and video and music, chatting, inviting back and forth to events—even
doing business and art—all within virtual communities.

Think of it as a microcosm of the World Wide Web, only much more easily connected and organized, even by kids. If the Internet was the Wild West, social networking sites—sites like *MySpace*—are becoming its boomtowns.

*Wired* magazine explains, "*MySpace*.Com, the Internet's most popular social networking site…has *helped redefine the way a generation communicates*."[{3}]

One digital culture watcher wrote, "Community-based websites are the fastest growing sites on the Internet. The teen social ecosystem *MySpace*" is the biggest.[{4}]

"According to some," writes Connie Neal, author of *MySpace for Moms & Dads*, "MySpace marks a societal revolution as monumental as the industrial revolution."[{5}]

*MySpace* owner Rupert Murdoch said, "The average person who is computer proficient is self-empowered in a way they never have [been] before."[{6}]

It's this newfound "empowerment" that rightly concerns

parents.

Let's keep perspective. It's only natural that real life is replicated online. A Roper study found that "online communities represent a real and growing phenomenon, but one that is dwarfed by interest in *real-world* social networks . . . [like] extended family (94% interest), neighborhood or town (80%), religious or spiritual organization (77%), hobby/interest (69%)" and so forth.

The directors of *BlogSafety.com* have written a handy book entitled *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking.* ("Blog" is short for Weblog, an online diary or commentary page.) They write regarding the rapidly evolving topic of teens redefining blogging into more of a social interaction: "As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go. . . . To them, these sites are just another tool for socializing."{7} Online and offline distinctions blur into oblivion.

What does this mean for Christian youth and parents?

## Dangers and Solutions

MySpace *and similar social networking sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. Threats like malicious software, cyberbullying, and sexual predators render it risky for the unprepared and unsupervised.* MySpace *is being called to account and is responding, but it's primarily up to parents to protect their children.*

One thoughtful parent and Christian school educator responded to the topic as I first did: "Isn't *MySpace* a waste of time or worse, a place where kids think they're experiencing real relationships but are *only* getting a risky situation?" His observation was that the kind of kids who were drawn to *MySpace* already had deep needs that weren't being fulfilled,

primarily by parents.

As a parent of three pre-teens, I shared his skepticism. Yet, there's a bigger picture, I found. There's hope, too. Nonetheless, it can be scary, especially in light of greater autonomy for kids who naturally lack discretion.

Let's pretend you find your thirteen-year-old son pacing after something hits the wall with a crash. He blurts out, "They put up a site about me with nasty pictures and said I'm fat! Now everybody is messaging about it. I'm not going to school." He's been cyberslammed and feels his young world crashing in.

The sense of public humiliation caused by cyberbullying is coupled with the danger that online threats can spill into real life. *MySpace* and similar sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. As a parent, you may choose to forbid or restrict use of *MySpace* in your home. But I suggest you choose in an informed, careful way.

Sexual dangers are the best known. Chatrooms and posted messages easily enable such temptations and threats. One recent trip to *MySpace* rendered solicitations to chat online with a sultry woman seeking American servicemen and a gang-type fellow with the screen name "King Pimpin'."

In 2002, fifteen-year-old Katie Canton met John in a live online chat room. Since he lived far away, Katie felt free to send photos and flirt. Soon John was sending Katie gifts and e-mailing.

This story ended well: Katie testified at John's trial where he got twenty years in prison. But it had taken Katie participating in a role-playing video game to realize that her behavior and that of her would-be abuser was becoming a classic case of online predation.{8} This is why parental education and supervision are crucial.

Again, some perspective is in order. It's tempting to view

sites like *MySpace*.com as a monolithic online ghetto. A more accurate word picture may be a high school campus. Enter on one side, see the "dopeheads"; enter another, see the "jocks" and cheerleaders. You can't paint with too broad a brush in assessing it accurately. And students can privately stay in the "nice part of town."

Concern is warranted, of course. The required minimum age for *MySpace* is fourteen. However, age verification is still technically impossible, largely due to lack of a public track record for minors—ironic, as many of them create public records openly on such sites.

Parents have sued on behalf of their abused daughters, and thirty-four state attorneys general are now demanding more age-verification controls.{9} Meanwhile, *MySpace* has reportedly discovered thousands of members who are convicted sex offenders. "The attorneys general of Georgia, Idaho, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and New Hampshire joined Connecticut in signing a letter to the company asking it to turn over information."{10}

*MySpace* has responded. The company deleted two hundred thousand "objectionable" accounts.{11} (A similar move by networking site *Friendster* caused a mass exodus, a sad commentary on many of its users.) *MySpace* also began developing parental tracking software, seen by many as just a start.

After hiring a former prosecutor with experience working on sex crimes against children as chief security officer, in January, 2007, *MySpace* donated a breakthrough national database to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). It features the first-ever method to match faces and body features like tattoos to often-elusive sex offenders. Providing "a way to filter convicted offenders from younger *MySpace* members, the database combines the records of individual state registries, plus allows searches based on

images, which the NCMEC said is important."{12}

A new senate bill would require—for the first time ever—sex offenders to register their email addresses. Donna Rice Hughes, president of the watchdog/activist group Enough Is Enough, says, "While there is no 'silver bullet' for protecting children from Internet dangers, this legislation will help to provide another protective barrier for millions of children. . . . Parents must remain proactive and educated about the safety rules and software tools available."{13}

Child safety experts agree: parental guidance should be the first and strongest line of defense. Technology continues to outrun ethical reflection in a culture marked by the philosophy, "If it can be done, go for it!" Pragmatism, the myth of progress as always good, lack of a biblical understanding of sin's pervasiveness and seriousness and sheer greed, drive many of the developments like the *MySpace* revolution.

But so do innately human needs and God-given desires to connect in a disjointed, wired world. Moral panic regarding teens and technology are nothing new. Doomsday prophecies—partially deserved—ensued with the advent motion pictures, television, and the Internet itself, as Internet researcher Danah Boyd points out.{14} Wise adaptation is always essential to being "in the world but not of it."{15}

## Hanging Out and Friending

*Kids hang out on* MySpace *because virtually everyone they know does, even if they would prefer not to. Another big draw: shared interests. But teens need to appreciate the distinction between acquaintances and true friends, as well as appropriate vs. illegitimate public intimacy while being truly "real."*

What can make young men cry? Take away their online "space."

At a conference panel discussion on social networking, four ministry leaders shared nearly identical experiences. Their teens had naturally migrated to *MySpace* with their peers and created profiles there, unknown to these conservative Christian dads. After perusing the site, three of the four outright forbade use of *MySpace*. One by one, they told tales of begging and weeping. One boy sobbed, "Dad, it's the only time I've ever felt cool."

This is tricky. Parents' gut reaction may be to minimize or dismiss such a notion. Yet, socialization at this age happens naturally, inevitably, even critically. But online? Here?

But part of the vital process of adolescent socializing is decoding cues about where you fit into the youth culture and *who* you are perceived to be. If kids are deeply grounded in the love of their God and family, it's just another "place." It's when this grounding is missing that *MySpace* can easily become a platform to present a false self.

Danah Boyd talks about the psychology of publicly viewable social networking: it's performed. "Showing face" becomes key, being "real" has its limits while "friending" online. Note the use of "friend" as a verb there.{16}

Author Connie Neal lists ways *MySpace* meets the needs of teens in uncanny ways, needs to:

- *Communicate with peers*
- *Try on different styles*
- *See what others are like*
- *Explore their generation's music, art, photography*
- *Hear, view, read stories through media*
- *Flirt*

- *Make friends*
- *Feel included in a group{17}*

For a time, *MySpace* also seemed unavoidable (it may be "like, so last year" at this point; *Facebook* is reportedly the social site of choice today among youth). Danah Boyd says, "For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life—they are [at *MySpace*] because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it's cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do.
Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Joneses."{18}

Social networking relies on clicking to "make" or invite "friends." In contrast, an ancient Hebrew proverb states, "A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."{19}

This leads to a deeper question: "What does the term 'friend' really mean?" Certainly more than a popularity contest, which many accuse *MySpace* of becoming. Stephanie Bennett, writing for *Breakpoint,* warns, "In many ways these technologies reduce relationship to a commodity—something one possesses rather than a jointly developed friendship."

Bennett continues:

> *Just as the practice of [slow-paced] courtship . . . gave way to dating and the now common practice of objectifying "the other" [or "hooking up" and casual sex], the rules of relationship are . . . being rewritten, and . . . are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.{20}*

Author C. S. Lewis wrote:

> *Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."{21}*

Perhaps herein lies the greatest appeal of *MySpace*—shared interests. This is not lost on teenagers.

In balance, as one participant in a CNN.com forum wrote, "True friends . . . need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend."{22}

C. S. Lewis also wrote, "Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities."{23} The scantily clad girls parading on certain pages at *MySpace*
reflect our culture. Sex is confused with intimacy nowadays; psychological nudity on the Internet is not so different.

Billed as a place to make friends and connect in community, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Xanga* and the like may be having the opposite effect, according to one study at San Diego State. It uncovered "an attitude of 'It's all about me'" prevailing among college students, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, and "blogging and social networking are 'playing a big role' in this."{24}

Nonsense, says tech educator Andy Carvin. Social networking largely entails "communities where people reinforce interpersonal relationships through sharing and creating content. . . . [They] want to be a part of something bigger than themselves."{25}

Social sites should reflect and enhance relationships, not

define them. Challenge the presumption of *instant-friendship-by-mouseclick* with your kids as necessary. Guard against not only physical but "psychological nudity."

This presents one more important conversational topic for parents training their kids in a biblical worldview marked by serving others, not by parading themselves or sending false signals.

## Parents and Teens Cooperating

*Picture yourself or your child in a situation like this: "We're sorry, Caitlyn, but we just cannot hire you. Your online history isn't in keeping with our company's standards." A growing host of those among the Internet generation with online regrets have walled off their online socializing from prying parents and ended up miring their futures in controversy.*

Another problem with *MySpace* and social sites is what Boyd calls *persistence in digital publics*. Unable to envision the future, kids don't grasp the lasting ramifications of their youthful foolishness, often captured publicly and permanently in cyberspace. "Without impetus," Boyd says, "teens rarely choose to go private on *MySpace* and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've "friended." They would just prefer [that] adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men."{26}
Natural teenage feelings indeed.

Boyd continues:

> *While the potential predator or future employer doesn't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanding complete*

*control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.{27}*

While hers may sound like a throwback to the 1960s "Question authority!" mantra, Boyd raises a good point. She points out that nowadays adults control youth environments as never before due to fear of abduction and safety issues. "Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang outs like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7-11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents."{28} Balancing the imperative to protect against the need to let go is tough.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and youth leaders need to inculcate and model a biblical respect for God-given authority. When kids disrespect this, their Internet privileges should be at stake. Some practical safety tips for parents:

*• Make sure your kids profile themselves online privately, only to well-chosen friends.*

*• Ask your kids to invite you online as a "friend"—but don't embarrass them!*

*• Openly discuss your concerns about social networking with your child.*

*• Tour their online space and those of their friends.*

*• Be alert to kids who are very secretive about their Internet use.*

*• Use the computer in a common area of the house.*

*• Monitor mobile online use and set up accountability with meaningful consequences. Yet, too many rules could exasperate older kids.{29}*

Remember the story of the crying kids who had *MySpace* privileges revoked? One dad took a different approach. He entered into his daughter's online world and began exploring how to safely navigate and do ministry outreach together. Connie Neal describes *MySpace for Moms and Dads* how she participates with her daughter's willing friends as spiritual and relational advisor.{30}

The eventual goal of child-rearing is increasing autonomy and decreasing dependency. Social networking allows kids some autonomy, but they need to be careful in such a public arena. We as parents do well to act knowledgeably, not react out of sheer emotion.

## Redeeming *MySpace*

*MySpace* has effectively tapped into youth culture *and* human nature. Teens are riding a culture-wide wave of self-expression.

But adult audiences there—and especially at other networking sites—are even bigger. Companies are now glomming onto the model for business purposes. *AnimalAttraction.com*, a social networking site for people who love pets, started as a dating service. Now, you can create a tailor-made social network through services like *Ning*.

Up to ten thousand Virginia Tech students conversed on social sites the day thirty-two were murdered in a shooting rampage.{31} Presidential candidates are leveraging networking sites today.

Why is this idea so powerful? Could it be that self-expression is a sign of *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted into the soul of everyone? God spoke the world into existence, and we, his highest creatures, create ideas in much the same way. We seem to have an insatiable need to be heard, especially as we emerge into young manhood or womanhood.

What if we're really after much more—eternally satisfying relating that nothing on earth can compare to? For many folks, online "friends" or a bigger-than-life Web identity are just new ways to reach out for what's unreachable in this life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy . . . we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world."{32}

*MySpace* can be surprisingly redemptive. It served as a clearinghouse of mourning for Anna, murdered in cold blood while working at a McDonald's. A youth-led movement to help Ugandan orphans is building to huge proportions.

The head of Internet outreach for one of the world's largest ministries encourages viewing *MySpace* as a mission field. He tells kids, "It's where your friends and *their* friends are already. Jesus called us to be smart, not safe." As Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."{33}

If you decide that *MySpace* is not for your family, there are Christian alternatives created for fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship; *Meetfish.com* and *MyPraize.com* are two.

Rather than "circle the countercultural wagons," why not explore the frontier of online social networking with your child? In a few years, the choice will be theirs, and they will likely default to socializing online as well as offline. They need to learn how to:

- ***Be discerning online****, asking things like, "Do I know and trust this person? Will this help me or hurt me?"*
- ***Reflect Christ online:*** *"How am I coming across? Does it honor my family and God? Am I teasing with moral compromise?"*
- *Ask themselves "Who seems lost, alone, afraid? Who needs the gospel?"* ***That is, see their online life as a calling of***

***Christ***.

Dr. Kathy Koch of *Celebrate Kids* offers a real-life prescription for healthy self-esteem: "Parents and teachers who pay attention to children and teens for who they are and not just what they do, believe in kids' present value and not just their future potential, and encourage kids by celebrating them on more than their birthdays."{34}

Do this while teaching discernment and a thoroughly biblical worldview, and social networking may not be a problem. It could be a blessing in disguise.

## Notes

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# Life in a Secular Culture – Christian Worldview Living in a Secular World

*Rick Wade looks at the similarities and the differences between the views offered by our secular culture and a Christian, biblical worldview. Understanding the significant differences will help us choose to think biblically about situations we face in our secular society.*

We get our cues about how to live from the society in which we live. Maybe I should say the societies in which we live since, in this day and age, we can find ourselves moving back and forth between very different worlds. Christians belong to the mini-societies of our churches which might extend beyond the walls of our church to define our friendships, our social lives. We also live and work and play in a secular society which is sending us messages constantly about how to live, how to talk, what to wear; in short, what is important in life.

Secular means that which is defined apart from anything religious. Peter Berger, a sociologist, put it this way: By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols…. It affects the totality of cultural

life and of ideation. In other words, secularism works its fingers into all of life, including the ideas we hold. Secularization also refers the consciousness of individuals who decreasingly view the world with a religious perspective. So the influence of religion declines in society and in us individually as we think about life with lessor with no reference to God. {1}

Without God shaping its vision, what does our society teach us about how to think and act? Think about it. How are *we* shaped by the culture in which we live? Just identifying a few things can be a start to combating the corrosive effects of secularism in our lives.

Here are a few things that come to mind.

My society tells me that *my* experience and *my* opinion are all-important (and it thinks of opinion as a purely subjective thing). No one else has the right to set the rules for me. And, if there's a God (and most Americans believe there is), He (or She or It) pretty much leaves us to make our own choices. So I am supposed to refer first to my own tastes and desires when making choices. And that's what really happens when I'm not thinking about it. Vocation, where I live, what music I listen to, what church I attend—it's all up to me. Yes, I know that there are a number of legitimate reasons we make choices that are different from those others make. The point is, should our individual tastes and desires be our primary criteria?

I noted that my society tells me my own experience and opinion is all-important. It's interesting, though, that it wants to decide what choices I can have! We'll see that in some of the next examples.

My society tells me how to dress. We're told that we should express ourselves, our own individuality, in how we dress. The result? People wearing spandex or spandex-tight clothes who

have no business doing so; young men wearing their pants down around their thighs; young women showing us all the contours of their bodies. And we're supposed to be expressing ourselves? Looks like a whole lot of conformity to me. Even worse, while we're told to express ourselves, clothes designers and stores are the ones who decide what our choices are. I hear this most often from young women. Their choice in clothing is either sexy or dressing like mom.

My society tells me that I *deserve* good things, so I spend money on things I might not even *want,* much less really *deserve.* Gratitude for what we have isn't high on the list of virtues these days. Gimme more . . . because I *deserve* it (and I'll go into debt to get it)!

My society teaches me what is funny. The greatest influences on my sense of humor were Bill Cosby and Robin Williams. Who else remembers Cosby talking about smearing Jell-O on the floor of his house to protect him from the monster, or about having his tonsils removed? And when *Mork and Mindy* was all the rage in the 70s, I'd gather with my friends each week to get another dose of Williams's crazy performances.

Now understand that I'm not saying it's necessarily wrong to model our humor on others, even on people who aren't Christians. But what is the character of our humor today? The humor I see routinely on TV and movies is sarcastic put-downs. That's become so much the norm that if anyone objects to it, they're made fun of for being so touchy!

My society also tells me my religion isn't all that important. It has its place, of course, but that place shouldn't be public, at least not until there's some horrible disaster and prayer becomes acceptable. So religion is to stay out of politics and social issues, but is permitted in tragedies such as the recent mine disaster in Utah. To *whom* we pray is irrelevant, of course. You have your God and I have mine.

One place where I see the insignificance of religion in our cultural attitude is on web sites that ask for information about me including my vocation. Religion isn't typically an option (and I'm being generous in saying typically; I can't remember *any* giving me that option). My only choice is Other. The result is that in public I tend to fall into line and keep my religious convictions out of the conversation. Even in our *private* lives religion should mind its manners. One shouldn't be fanatical, you know.

Unfortunately, polls indicate that Christian beliefs are apparently insignificant to *Christians* as well with respect to how they live. The polls I read indicate that people claiming to be born-again don't live any differently than their non-Christian neighbors. We've let the segmenters win. Keep your religion in your church, we're told, and we do just that.

My society tells me that economics is all-important. I wonder if there's anyone else out there who wishes that in a State of the Union address a president would say something like, Our economy is strong, but morally we're in rough shape. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for that! It's the economy, stupid, was a phrase heard often in Bill Clinton's campaign against President Bush in 92. Well, the economy is important, of course. But is it the *most* important thing in individual and social life? Is the U.S. doing just fine as along as the economy is strong?

My society tells us we're free to do what we want in our sexual relationships, that we aren't to be instructed by archaic religious notions. But then, of course, we're told what is expected by society. We've been taught well that a kiss is followed immediately by a romp in the bed. How many times have you seen on TV or in the movies where a man and woman fall into that first embrace and *don't* immediately fall onto the couch or bed or floor? I think of the scene in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* where a woman is astonished to hear that a man and woman have decided to wait till marriage

to have sex. Yes, we're free to do whatever we please (the church has nothing to say about such things—that is, as long as what we please doesn't include abstaining and we don't champion monogamy as loudly as homosexuals champion their, um, lifestyle.

My society tells me what constitutes success. Although you can often see stories through the media about the great things average people do, you also are kept up-to-date on the life and times of Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and soccer star David Beckman. In minute detail. Day after day. Do I really *care* about the latest entry in Rosie O'Donnell's blog? No disrespect intended, but I'm not sure why Ms. O'Donnell's opinions and comings and goings are important enough to make the headlines. Success is doing one's best to accomplish the tasks God has given or those clearly in keeping with the commands and wisdom of God.

My society tells me that objections to crudeness are puritanical; that manners are relics of a by-gone era (since life is all about *me*, while manners are about *others*).

It tells women that the notion of being under a man's headship or devoting herself to her children above her own interests is a throw-back to oppressive days.

It tells parents that they need to let their children determine their own values.

I could go on and on. My point in all this isn't mainly to bemoan the state of our society, but to consider how our secular society tells *us* how to live, and how much of its instruction we swallow and follow without even realizing it. We are definitely going to be shaped by our society, but that shaping shouldn't be mindless.

A few decades ago Christian writers made much of the idea that there shouldn't be a division between the sacred and the secular, that all of life should be infused with the sacred.

Our society works against that. And quite frankly, I think the message has been lost to a significant extent in the church. We like our things, so without even thinking about it, we conform our notions of the sacred to the secular. We make Christianity relevant by adjusting it to our circumstances and desires.

Rather than seeing the secular world, the world we can see and touch, through a sacred lens, we're more apt to look at the sacred through a secular lens. May God help us to see all of life—including our clothes, our humor, our entertainment, our vocation, our relationships, and all the rest—through the eyes of God, as belonging to Him, and give us the resolve to bring them under His lordship.

**Note**

1. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 107-108.

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