Civil Discourse? – Radio version

Conservative Bridgebuilder

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

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

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

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

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

A couple of weeks later, a Kennedy aid phoned to say, "The senator has decided to accept your invitation." "What invitation?" replied Thomas. "The one for the senator to visit Lynchburg," came the response.

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

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

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

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

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

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

Mark Pinsky's book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for*

the Perplexed,{2} tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey"{3} ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue.{4} During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on major evangelical leaders and had little connection with grassroots evangelicals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gotcha” Politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

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

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

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

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

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

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

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

1. Learn about views different from your own. Read what others believe and ascertain why they feel and think as they do. Ask yourself how you might feel in their situation.

2. Discover Common Ground. Starting where you agree can help overcome many emotional barriers.

3. Befriend people with differing views. Friendly conversation or shared meals can help open hearts.

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

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

> *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.{20}*

Notes

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

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

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Michael Moore's Sicko Healthcare Perspective

June 29, 2007 marked the official opening of Michael Moores newest mockumentary, *Sicko*. And in true Moore form, it is controversial and in-your-face. The subject this time is a critique on the American Healthcare system, and as before, Moore takes a liberal stance on a pet cause: healthcare reform. Here is a summary of his proposal:{1}

> *1. Every American must have full, uninterrupted healthcare coverage for life.*
> *2. Private, for-profit health insurance companies must be abolished.*
> *3. Profits of pharmaceutical companies must be strictly regulated like a public utility.*

After researching several movie reviews from every part of the political spectrum, I am concerned about Moore's use and misuse of statistics and convolution of facts that are taken out of context. However, I think this provides an excellent opportunity to open the discussion on the Christian

perspective on healthcare. I will mainly address the idea of universal healthcare coverage (Moore's point 1) and offer a slightly different perspective on private health insurance companies (Point 2). I'll save pharmaceutical company regulation for another article.

The Biblical Perspective

Before we can apply biblical truth to today's cultural issues, let's make sure we know what is biblically clear about healthcare. Several places in the Bible, God admonishes his people to care for the orphans and widows.{2} Orphans and widows are the vulnerable in society. In today's society, that status falls mainly to the elderly, the chronically ill, the poor, etc. The Bible is quite clear about the need to care for these people as well as an individual's responsibility in the matter:

> *When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.{3}*

This principle is exemplified when Boaz allows Ruth to glean from his field, drink from his water vessels and eat at his table.{4}

The biblical model seems to be that those with plenty are to take responsibility for those that are vulnerable. While government intervention is not explicitly mentioned, the

mention of orphan- and widow-care in the Law implies a universal understanding of a duty to care for the least of these. It also seems to indicate that those who are healthy (i.e. who can work in the field, harvest their own crops, etc.) are to be held accountable and responsible for themselves. In practical terms, how do we apply this to our own culture and healthcare systems?

Modern-Day Applications

In Kerby Anderson's article on National Healthcare,{5} he suggests three needs in today's healthcare structure, each related in such a way that one would perpetuate the others:

The Need for Personal Responsibility

He brings to light an important point about human nature: when someone else pays, we are less likely to consider the quality and cost before buying. When the government subsidizes healthcare or health insurance, people tend to be less thoughtful on cost, and the result is the high prices of healthcare. If there were more personal accountability, people would comparison shop and bring market pressures to bear on some of the healthcare costs.

I find it fascinating that health insurance requires so little personal responsibility, while car insurance demands so much. When I buy car insurance, it is only used in the event of an accident, either caused by nature or another driver. I have my own account that I use for my basic car care needs (gas, oil change, registration, tires, cleaning, brakes, etc.). I shop for the cheapest gas prices, the best bang for my buck on oil changes, and will go out of my way for a cheaper car wash. Why? Because it is coming out of my pocket. When I was in an accident, the insurance company was paying, so my car went to the body shop they specified and the company paid the price the shop requested. Honestly, I was less concerned about how much the insurance company paid than whether I got my car back

in one piece.

Why is it that most people want insurance to pay for their basic check-ups that occur annually or biannually? If individuals paid for their regular maintenance, this would not only decrease the cost of health insurance, but it would also free up some resources for the orphans and widows of our society so that they, too, might have regular, preventative healthcare.

The Need for Portability

Anderson continues:

> *Americans usually cannot take their health insurance with them if they change jobs. A fair tax system would offer no tax subsidy to the employer unless the policy was personal and portable. If it belongs to the employee, then it would be able to go with the employee when he or she changed jobs. Health insurance should be personal and portable. After all, employers don't own their employees' auto insurance or homeowners insurance. Health insurance should be no different.{6}*

This is a critique on the requirement of employers to provide health insurance, and also argues for private companies to be made available to individuals. My husband and I are young, healthy individuals, and were paying $450 per month on his prior health insurance, until he changed jobs. The problem is that $450 counted as part of his earnings, and when he left his job, we lost the amount paid into the insurance. Our car insurance and renters insurance was unaffected by his job change, but our health insurance ceased. We now see that it would have been more valuable to have a portable insurance option, such as a private company or a tax-deductible health account into which we would deposit money directly. This would also tie into the idea of individual responsibility for one's health finances, and, again, applies to those that can afford

it while the vulnerable are provided for.

The Need for Price Fairness

Anderson writes:

> *Price fairness is another issue. Proponents of socialized medicine would force people with healthy lifestyles into a one-tier system with people who smoke, drink too much, use drugs, drive irresponsibly, and are sexually promiscuous. A better system would be one that rewards responsibility and penalizes irresponsibility. Obviously we should provide for the very young, the very old, the chronically ill, etc., but we shouldn't be forced into a universal risk pool and effectively subsidize the destructive behavior of those who voluntarily choose sin over righteousness.{7}*

Going back to our car insurance/health insurance comparison, my husband and I have been with our car insurance company with a clean record for so long that our rates went down. Also, our rates decreased when he turned twenty-five because he was no longer a high-risk driver. This encourages cautious driving and places the responsibility on the driver. The universal healthcare model does just the opposite, because no matter your lifestyle, the government will take care of it. I think if we're honest with ourselves about human nature, a monetary compensation or savings for maintaining proper health would be one effective way to combat behavioral diseases such as obesity and type II diabetes.

Problems with Universal Healthcare, or Why Michael Moore May Not Know What is Best for the Country

Business Costs

I am no economist or a business analyst, so I will defer to

Anderson's example of Herman Cain, president and CEO of Godfathers Pizza. Mr. Cain confronted President Clinton about many of the hidden costs of healthcare reform that affect businesses. He came with spreadsheets that pointed out just how much it would cost his business if employer mandates were put in place, and it also pointed out how President Clinton had vastly underestimated the cost on businesses.

Or what about Michael Moore's suggestion of having totally socialized healthcare? He gives several countries as an example, including France, but never mentions that all of these countries pay significantly higher tax rates than we do. This would place a burdensome cost on individuals and companies.

As Kerby warns in his article, Healthcare reform may cost much more than we think it will. The direct costs may not seem like much, but don't forget to count the indirect costs to you and to American business.

Moral Costs

There are several issues to consider here, but let us focus on the one that is already taking place in many other countries with socialized healthcare: rationing. Universal coverage of healthcare increases overall demand, which means that you will have to decrease the supply of health care benefits provided to each individual citizen, especially since there is less profit and hence less reason to increase overall supply. This is inevitable in a universal healthcare system, and, as recently reported in the *Scotsman*, is already happening in countries with socialized healthcare:

> *It is no longer possible to provide all the latest [medical technology] to absolutely everybody without notable detriment to others. Rationing is reduction in choice. Rationing has become a necessary evil. We need to formulize rationing to prevent an unregulated, widening, post code lottery of care.*

> *Government no longer has a choice. When it comes to the list of conditions, it's all about quality of life. It would be about the prioritization of clinical need.{8}*

A utilitarian approach to a person's quality of life is definitely not within the Christian worldview,{9} but that is precisely and inevitably the direction of a socialized healthcare system.

Our current healthcare system does have some flaws, but I do not think throwing government money at the problem is the best solution. Looking at the biblical model of individual responsibility, we can glean from the text how God's timeless truths can be effective when applied to our culture today.

Notes

1. www.michaelmoore.com
2. Exodus 22:22, Jeremiah 7:6,7, Isaiah 1:17, 1 Timothy 5:3, James 1:27, English Standard Version (ESV).
3. Deuteronomy 24:19-22 (ESV).
4. Ruth 2:8,9,14-16 (ESV).
5. Kerby Anderson, "National Health Care," Probe, 1994, www.probe.org/national-health-care/.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Moss, Lyndsay "NHS rationing is 'necessary evil,' say doctors" *Scotsman*, June 26, 2007, news.scotsman.com.
9. See Kerby Anderson, "Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," 2004, www.probe.org/utilitarianism-the-greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number/

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Your Money, Your Life or Your Wine

Could offering a cup of human kindness save your life sometime? It helped protect guests from a menacing gunman at a recent Washington, DC, dinner gathering.

Comedian Jack Benny had a famous skit in which an armed robber pointed a gun at Benny, whose comedy often poked fun at his own miserly show business persona. In the routine, Benny told the robber to put the gun down. The robber persisted. "Your money or your life!" demanded the crook, irritated by the delay. "I'm thinking it over," deadpanned Benny.{1}

Quick thinking helped save the DC dinner guests.

Give me your money!

The Washington Post reports{2} that some friends had enjoyed steak and shrimp at a DC home and were sitting on the back patio sipping wine around midnight. A hooded gunman slipped in through an open gate and held a pistol to a fourteen-year-old girl's head. "Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," demanded the intruder.

The guests—including the girls parents—froze. Then one adult—Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan—had an idea.

"We were just finishing dinner," Rowan said to the uninvited guest. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The robber sipped their French wine and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

Michael Rabdau, the girl's father, offered the man the glass.

Rowan offered the bottle. The man—with hood down, by this point—sipped more wine and sampled some Camembert cheese. Then he stowed the gun in his pocket and admitted, “I think I may have come to the wrong house. I’m sorry. Can I get a hug?”

Rowan hugged the man. Then Rabdau, his wife and the other two guests each hugged him. The man asked for a group hug; the five adults complied. He left with the wine glass. There were no injuries, no theft. The stunned guests entered the house and stared at each other silently. Police came. Investigators discovered the empty and unbroken wine glass on the ground in a nearby alley.

“I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty,” Rabdau recalled, according to the *Post*. “He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don’t know what it was.”

“There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time,” Rabdau observed. “Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned—like, we’re one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?” The entire encounter lasted about ten minutes. DC police chalked it up as strange but true.

Gentle Answers

An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” {3} I suspect her friends are extremely grateful that Cha Cha Rowan had the presence of mind to offer a gentle reply to the intruder’s demands.

Sometimes the psychological approach can deter disaster. Kindness and hospitality often can defuse tension and help open hearts and minds. Was the robber lonely? Feeling sad or rejected? Weary of his lifestyle? Hungry for acceptance and friendship? Rowan and her friends struck an emotional chord that resonated, apparently deeply.

Brute force and overwhelming arguments are common cultural responses to danger or opposition and, of course, theyre sometimes necessary. Most of us are glad Hitler was defeated and that legislators outlawed slavery. But could gentle answers improve any disputes—or families, marriages, workplaces, political relationships—that you've seen?

Notes

1. George Grow, "Funnyman Jack Benny Won Hearts Mainly by Making Fun of Himself," Voice of America News, 21 May 2005; at www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-05/2005-05-21-voa1.cfm (accessed July 19, 2007).
2. Allison Klein, A Gate-Crasher's Change of Heart, Washington Post, July 13, 2007; B01; at http://tinyurl.com/2q9mjc (accessed July 17, 2007).
3. Proverbs 15:1 NIV.

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Recommended Responses to The Golden Compass

The Golden Compass: Pointing In the Wrong Direction
Steve Cable
www.probe.org/the-golden-compass-pointing-in-the-wrong-direction
Probe staffer Steve Cable recommends Christian parents steer clear of The Golden Compass film based on Phillip Pullman's trilogy, His Dark Materials. It is openly anti-God from an avowed anti-Christian writer. Kids will not be able to handle it.

The Golden Compass: A Primer on Atheism
Russ Wise
http://www.christianinformation.org/article.asp?artID=117
Former Probe staff member Russ Wise examines this anti-Christian book and movie.

Kerby Anderson also recommends:

The Golden Compass Fraud
L. Brent Bozell III
http://www.cultureandmediainstitute.org/printer/2007/20071109161918.aspx

The upside-down world of Pullman's "Golden Compass"
Berit Kjos
http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/007/compass-pullman.htm

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Sex and Violence on Television – A Christian Worldview Perspective

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

purity in mind and action.

The Extent of the Problem

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

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

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

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

First, on a per-hour basis, sexual material more than tripled in the last decade. For example, while references to homosexuality were once rare, now they are mainstream. Second,

the study found that foul language increased five-fold in just a decade. They also found that the intensity of violent incidents significantly increased.

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

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

Television's Impact on Behavior

What is the impact of watching television on subsequent behavior? There are abundant studies which document that what you see, hear, and read does affect your perception of the world and your behavior.

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

In 1992, the American Psychological Association concluded that forty years of research on the link between TV violence and real-life violence has been ignored, stating that "the 'scientific debate is over' and calling for federal policy to

protect society."{7}

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

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

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

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

Sex on Television

Most Americans believe there is too much sex on television. A survey conducted in 1994 found that seventy-five percent of

Americans felt that television had “too much sexually explicit material.” Moreover, eighty-six percent believed that television had contributed to “a decline in values.”{9} As we documented earlier, sexual promiscuity on television is at an all-time high.

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

In a message given by Donnerstein, he concluded with this warning and observation: “If you take normal males and expose them to graphic violence against women in R-rated films, the research doesn’t show that they’ll commit acts of violence against women. It doesn’t say they will go out and commit rape. But it does demonstrate that they become less sensitized to violence against women, they have less sympathy for rape victims, and their perceptions and attitudes and values about violence change.”{12}

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

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

Christians must be careful that sexual images on television don't conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Instead we should use discernment. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things."

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

Violence on Television

Children's greatest exposure to violence comes from television. TV shows, movies edited for television, and video games expose young children to a level of violence unimaginable just a few years ago. The American Psychological Association says the average child watches eight thousand televised murders and one hundred thousand acts of violence before finishing elementary school.{14} That number more than doubles by the time he or she reaches age eighteen.

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

The impact on behavior is predictable. Two prominent Surgeon General reports in the last two decades link violence on television and aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health issued a ninety-four page report, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties.* They found "overwhelming" scientific evidence that "excessive"

violence on television spills over into the playground and the streets.{15} In one five-year study of 732 children, “several kinds of aggression, conflicts with parents, fighting and delinquency, were all positively correlated with the total amount of television viewing.”{16}

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

Twenty years later Eron and Rowell Huesmann found the pattern continued. He and his researchers found that children who watched significant amounts of TV violence at the age of eight were consistently more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spouse abuse at thirty.{18} They concluded that “heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of intelligence.”{19}

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

Biblical Perspective

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

I’ve had many people tell me that they watch television, and

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

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

And if this is true of adults, imagine how television violence affects children’s perceptions of the world. Gerbner and Gross say, “Imagine spending six hours a day at the local movie house when you were twelve years old. No parent would have permitted it. Yet, in our sample of children, nearly half of the twelve-year-olds watch an average of six or more hours of television per day.” This would mean that a large portion of young people fit into the category of heavy viewers. Their view of the world must be profoundly shaped by TV. Gerbner and Gross therefore conclude, “If adults can be so accepting of the reality of television, imagine its effect on children. By the time the average American child reaches public school, he has already spent several years in an electronic nursery school.”{21}

Television viewing affects both adults and children in subtle ways. We must not ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perceptions and behaviors. Our worldview and our subsequent actions are

affected by what we see on television. Christians, therefore, must be careful not to let television conform us to the world (Romans 12:2), but instead should develop a Christian worldview.

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Crusader Terrorists? — How Should Christians Respond

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

The stated goal of the event was summarized nicely by the

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

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

Still others mentioned that this is not the first time a school district had deliberately steered clear of the obvious terrorist groups, deciding instead to pick on Christians. For example, three years ago a Michigan school district substituted a group of crazed Christian homeschoolers called Wackos Against Schools and Education for their mock terrorism drill to avoid offending any Muslims.

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

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

school and surrounding community.

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

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

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Civil Discourse?

Conservative Bridgebuilder

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

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

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

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

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

A couple of weeks later, a Kennedy aid phoned to say, "The senator has decided to accept your invitation." "What invitation?" replied Thomas. "The one for the senator to visit Lynchburg," came the response.

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

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

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

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

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

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

Mark Pinsky's book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*,{2} tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey"{3} ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue.{4} During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on major evangelical leaders and had little connection with grassroots evangelicals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gotcha” Politics

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

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

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

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

In 2000, his longtime friend Senator Joseph Lieberman—Democratic vice presidential candidate and an orthodox Jew—garnered liberal criticism for “bringing up God

too much." Reflecting on a famous Abraham Lincoln speech invoking divine assistance and encouraging prayer, Lanny wondered, "Would my liberal friends have regarded Abraham Lincoln as 'bringing up God too much?'"{16} He decries intolerance and "contempt or disrespect for the deeply religious and those who believe in the power of prayer."{17}

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

May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

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

I entered university in the turbulent late 1960s. The Vietnam War, Civil rights, sexual revolution, and campus upheaval permeated our lives. The fraternity I joined was quite diverse. We had political liberals and conservatives; athletes and scholars; atheists, agnostics, Christians, and Jews. Late night bull sessions kept us engaged and learning from each other.

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

“Jesus and His Lambda Chi Alpha disciples will be autographing Bibles in the hallway during intermission.”

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

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

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

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

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

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

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Responding to Poverty – As a Christian

Poverty's Devastating Effects

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

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

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

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

Income level and standard of living are often-used but insufficient measures of poverty. Some townships in South

Africa and shanty towns in the Philippines make some North American housing projects seem like the Ritz.

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

The precise economic line may be difficult to draw, but poverty's effects can be devastating. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs says, "More than 8 million people around the world die each year because they are too poor to stay alive. Every morning our newspapers could report, 'More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty.'"{2} They die from disease, lack of medicine, unsafe drinking water.

Homeless Assistance

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

By its twelfth year, Miami's Community Partnership for Homeless had helped over twenty-seven thousand men, women and children leave the streets for a better life. Their Homeless

Assistance Centers are a community success story in which private and public sectors teamed to create a national model for eliminating homelessness. Would you believe all this started from a church Bible class?

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

Alvah had become distressed observing the plight of Miami's homeless and the lack of community leadership. He recalls, "The county said it was a city problem. The city said it was a county problem. And the Chamber of Commerce was not sure it was their problem."{3} The Chapmans decided to tackle homelessness. "The commitment to 'do something' was very strong" in their hearts, he explains: "We made a commitment to our [Bible] class and to our God that we would together provide leadership to the homeless problem in Miami."{4}

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

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

Helping the Total Person

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus of Nazareth emphasized the total person. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He also told people how they could

find meaning and fulfillment through faith in Him. Many Christian development programs have a similar focus, operating on the time-honored philosophy that if you give someone a fish you can feed them for a day; if you also teach them how to fish you can feed them for a lifetime.

World Relief, a Christian organization, provides worldwide disaster relief as well as self-help efforts like well-digging and agricultural training. Their microenterprise development programs establish community banking, savings and lending programs to help the poor become self sufficient. For example, a $75 loan to a Cambodian grandmother allowed her to expand her small home-front stand. She repaid the loan in full, entitling her to another, slightly larger loan. Eventually, she could support her sixteen grandchildren and serve as a role model for women in her village.{8}

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

Money and Poverty

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

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

Obasanjo is a follower of Jesus who has tried to root out corruption in his own nation. The *New York Times* gives a glimpse into the task he still faces. Nigeria export billions

of dollars of oil each year and returns thirteen percent of revenues from its states back to the states. The *Times* notes that "Much of that is siphoned off by corrupt regional officials who often pocket the money or waste it on lavish projects that do little, if anything, for ordinary people. For instance, one state produces a third of Nigeria's oil and has an annual budget of more than half a billion dollars to spend on its three million people. But most of [that money] goes to white elephants like a mansion for the governor and his deputy."{10}

On one of my speaking tours to Nigeria, a local doctor told me how businesses had adapted to the common custom of using bribes. Seems they started budgeting bribe money for their traveling representatives to use. The budget item was called public relations. But a problem arose when employees began to pocket the public relations money instead of using it for bribes.

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

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

What Can You Do?

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

Student leaders at Wheaton Academy in suburban Chicago had a burden to raise $53,000 from their fellow students for a schoolhouse in Zambia. They found little enthusiasm at first, but then they began to pray regularly. Things took off and they exceeded their goal. Over a three-year stretch, the Christian students raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for HIV/AIDS relief in Africa. Students encourage each other to forgo movies, Starbucks runs, and even Christmas presents and prom dresses.{13} The campus chaplain estimates that ninety percent of students have participated financially to build the schoolhouse and a medical clinic and to feed a villages children for a year. Students feel a personal connection with their Zambian peers. Some have visited the village they support.

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

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

> *First, pray. God's concern for the poor far exceeds our own. Those Wheaton Academy students saw answers to their prayers. (Probably some faculty spouses did, too!)*
>
> *Second, give. An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{15} Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively*

fight poverty. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof says, "Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices."{16} I would add World Relief, the Salvation Army and your local church to the list.

Third, go. Maybe you can volunteer with Habitat for Humanity or an international mission group. CNN highlighted Campus Crusade for Christ college students spending Spring Break helping to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. You even may want to devote your life or career to relief and development. It is a worthy cause. I like what Jesus' mother Mary advised: "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."{17} And another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, "Blessed are those who help the poor."{18}

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9/11 and You

My sister had a 9:00 a.m. appointment at the World Trade Center.

On September 12.

Since September 11, 2001, I've often wondered what might have happened had her appointment been a day earlier or the terrorist attacks a day later. I could have been walking the streets of New York City with her picture.

What were your feelings that tragic day? Shock? Fear? Anger? Confusion? Sadness? How do you process those feelings now, as reminders of the attacks come in anniversary commemorations and media coverage? Nearly two-thirds of American Red Cross

9/11 adult counselees still grieve, according to a study of those directly affected by the attacks{1}.

“I Hate You!”

In the immediate aftermath, my feelings of sadness blended with intense hostility. Once when Osama Bin Laden’s face appeared on television, I spontaneously shouted, “I hate you!”

I was and am a follower of Jesus. He taught his followers to “love your enemies.”{2} Why was I yelling “I hate you!” to a picture on a TV screen?

I wondered why this guy hated my sister. If Deborah Wright had been among the victims, her death would have been included among those he applauded. If I had been a victim, he would have applauded mine. I wrote a radio series on “Why Radical Muslims Hate You” to discover historical, socio-cultural, political, religious, and psychological roots of such anger. It helped me to connect with Muslims who shared similar concerns but disavowed the radical methods.

Dust of Death

Deborah’s experience as a corporate chaplain took her back to New York to help WTC-based companies and their employees who suffered loss on 9/11 cope with the emotional and spiritual whirlwinds their worlds had become. Many suffered from survivor guilt. Failure to process grief could lead to serious consequences. Some firemen, for instance, were assigned to look after widows of fallen comrades. “There can be enormous intimacy and bonding in shared grief,” Deborah notes. “Some of the firemen and widows ended up in bed together.”

Some competitive, driven businesspersons re-examined their rat race—making big bucks and accumulating the most toys—and asked, “Is that all there is?”. Long looks at corporate culture prompted many to consider spiritual realities.

Part of helping survivors process their experiences involved taking them to Ground Zero. Deborah comments, “As I stood at Ground Zero and picked up the dust, I could not help but think that we were standing in a giant crematorium. The ground seemed hallowed to me.”

Personal Lessons from 9/11

What personal 9/11 lessons persist? Perhaps you can relate to these that seem poignant to me:

We live in a contingent universe. Human decisions and actions have consequences, often for good or evil.

Life is temporary. One early spiritual leader wrote of our lives’ fleeting nature, “You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”{3}

Link with the eternal. Jesus of Nazareth, whom people of diverse spiritual persuasions respect as a great teacher, told a friend grieving her brother’s death, “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.”{4}

Cherish your friends. In the aftermath of 9/11, many friendships were deepened as people linked with each other for encouragement, solace and support.

Understand and love your enemies and intellectual adversaries. Support national defense, but learning about state enemies can help communication with moderates who share some of their convictions. Getting to know neighbors or associates with whom you differ politically, philosophically or spiritually can help build bridges that foster civility in public discourse.

Notes

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Globalization and the Wal-Mart Effect – How Wal-Mart Changes the Way Products are Sourced and Sold

Kerby Anderson helps us understand the foundational principles and some the current factors which make Wal-Mart the dominant force in consumer sales in the world. Wal-Mart has fundamentally changed the way products are sourced and sold as shown in the examples presented in this article. Kerby does not take a position for or against those changes but encourages us to consume in ways that consider the impact of our consumption.

Introduction

In this article, we revisit the issue of global trade and the process of globalization. In an earlier article I asked, Is the world flat?{1} I talked about the various things that have made our world flat and used Wal-Mart as one of the examples.

I would like to further develop our discussion by using Wal-Mart as an example of what is happening in our world. Thomas Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat*, says that if Wal-Mart were an individual economy, it would rank as China's eighth-biggest trading partner, ahead of Russia, Australia, and Canada.{2}

Often I will be referring to many of the facts and figures from Charles Fishman's book *The Wal-Mart Effect*.{3} For example, he points out that more than half of all Americans live within five miles of a Wal-Mart store. For most people, that's about a ten- to fifteen-minute drive. Ninety percent of Americans live within fifteen miles of a Wal-Mart. In fact, when you drive down the interstate, it is rare for you to go more than a few minutes without seeing a Wal-Mart truck.

Wal-Mart has over 3800 stores in the United States. That is more than one Wal-Mart store for every single county in the country.{4} And they don't exactly fade into the landscape. They sit on vast aprons of asphalt parking and stand out because of their sheer size.

Wal-Mart has also become the national commons. Every seven days more than one hundred million Americans shop at Wal-Mart (that's one third of the country). Each year, ninety-three percent of American households shop at least once at Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart's sales in the United States are a bit more than $2000 per household. And Wal-Mart's profit on that amount was just $75.00.{5}

The size of this company is hard to grasp. Wal-Mart isn't just the largest retailer in the nation and the world. For most of this decade, it has been both the largest company in the world as well as the largest company in the history of the world.

In 2006, Wal-Mart will be bumped from the number-one spot on the Fortune 500 list of the largest companies by ExxonMobil, whose sales will surge past Wal-Mart's because the world price

of oil rose so much in the last year.

But if you consider payrolls, there is no comparison. ExxonMobil employs about 90,000 people worldwide. Wal-Mart employs 1.6 million.{6} And there's another difference. ExxonMobil is growing by raising prices. Wal-Mart is growing despite lowering prices.

Put another way, Wal-Mart is as big as Home Depot, Kroger, Target, Costco, Sears, and Kmart combined. Target might be considered Wal-Mart's biggest rival and closest competitor, but it is small in comparison. Wal-Mart sells more by St. Patrick's Day (March 17) than Target sells all year.{7}

The Wal-Mart Effect

Ask people to give you their opinion about Wal-Mart and you are likely to get lots of different responses. They may talk with enthusiasm about the "always low prices." Or they might talk about the impact Wal-Mart had on small businesses in their community when the first store arrived. They may even talk about the loss of American jobs overseas. Believe me, most will have an opinion about Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart had its creation in the mind of Sam Walton who promoted a single idea: sell merchandise at the lowest price possible. It began with Wal-Mart working hard to keep the costs of their company as low as possible. This idea moved from their company to their suppliers as they asked them to be as frugal as possible. As the company grew in size, they began looking for every way to wring out the last penny of savings from materials, packaging, labor, transportation, and display. The result was "the Wal-Mart effect."

Consumers have embraced "the Wal-Mart effect." As a store moves into a community bringing lower prices, it drives down prices in other stores. And either they compete or close their doors. And it also reshapes the shopping habits of those in

the community.

But with “the Wal-Mart effect” comes fears of “the Wal-Mart economy.” This is the nagging feeling that there are social and economic costs to be paid for “always low prices.” Critics talk about low wages, minimal benefits, and little chance for career advancement.

The company has found itself under attack from many quarters. There is a lawsuit on behalf of 1.6 million women who have worked at Wal-Mart that alleges systematic sex discrimination. Add to this the allegations that managers have required employees to work off the clock and even have locked employees in stores overnight.

There is also the constant complaint that Wal-Mart does not provide adequate health care benefits. Last year, for example, the Maryland legislature passed a bill that forces companies with more than 10,000 employees to spend at least eight percent of their payroll on health care or pay the state the difference. Since Wal-Mart is the only employer with over 10,000 employees in the state, it is easy to see that the legislation was only targeting Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart recently settled a federal investigation of its use of illegal aliens to clean its stores. The company made a record-setting payment to the federal government.

Sam Walton’s goal from the beginning was an unrelenting focus on controlling costs in order to provide “always low prices.” He instilled in his employees core values like hard work, frugality, discipline, and loyalty.{8}

In his book *The Wal-Mart Effect*, Charles Fishman says these values have become inverted. He points out how the company has changed. When Sam Walton died in 1992, Wal-Mart was a $44 billion-a-year company with 370,000 employees. The number of employees has now grown by 1.2 million, and sales have grown by $240 billion. “Wal-Mart is not only not the company Sam

Walton founded, it is no longer the company he left behind."{9}

Out of the Box

You probably never thought about the packaging around deodorant, but Wal-Mart did. Until the early 1990s, nearly every brand of deodorant came in a paperboard box. Most consumers opened the box, pulled out the deodorant container, and tossed the box into the garbage. Some of us recycled them, but we were a very small minority.

In the early 1990s, Wal-Mart (along with a few other retailers) decided the paperboard box was a waste. The product came in a can or plastic container. These were at least as tough as the box. The box took up wasted space, and it wasted cardboard. Shipping the weight of the cardboard added weight to trucks and wasted fuel. And the box itself cost money to design and produce. It even cost money to put the deodorant into the box.

Wal-Mart began to apply pressure on the suppliers to eliminate the box. Deodorant manufacturers calculated that the box cost about a nickel for every consumer. Wal-Mart split the savings. Deodorant makers keep a few pennies, and Wal-Mart passed a couple of pennies savings on to the consumers.

Walk into Wal-Mart today and look at the deodorant aisle. You will probably find eight shelves of deodorant, sixty containers across. In this sea of nearly five hundred containers of deodorant, not one box.

Consider the impact of this one decision. First, there is the environmental impact. Whole forests were not cut down to provide a box that consumers did not use. A few recycled them, but the vast majority threw them away seconds after they removed their deodorant. Was Wal-Mart's pressure to unbox deodorant a good thing? It certainly was, if you are concerned

about environmental issues. And Christians should be concerned about our stewardship of the environment.

The economic impact was also considerable. A savings of one nickel might seem trivial until you multiply it by the two hundred million adults in the United States. If you just account for the container of deodorant in every American bathroom, you have a savings of $10 million, of which consumers got to keep half. But don't forget that the savings is recurrent. Americans are saving $5 million in nickels about five to six times a year.

But there is also a third impact. The impact this decision had on jobs. So far the decision looks like a win-win. But you might not feel so excited about the decision if you work in the forestry industry or are in the paperboard box business.

This story illustrates only so well the problem with providing a clear, unambiguous analysis of consumer behavior in American markets and, even more so, the ethics of corporations in a global market. And this story is probably easier to analyze if your first priority is the environment. But the ethics of other situations that arise from globalization aren't quite so easy to evaluate.

Wal-Mart illustrates the world in which corporate entities significantly influence our decisions and even transform an economy. While we might like the outcome of saving paperboard boxes, we certainly don't like other aspects of "the Wal-Mart effect." The company has grown so large and evolved in unexpected ways that it is difficult to predict what the future holds. And when we begin to ask moral questions, it isn't so easy to always determine whether the outcomes are good for us or the country.

Salmon

Americans love to eat salmon. In fact, we eat more than 1.75 million pounds of salmon a day.{10} We eat it at home and when we go out to a restaurant.

And Americans buy lots of cheap salmon from Wal-Mart. But they are probably unaware of the impact their purchase has on the environment. Most of the salmon served in the United States is Atlantic salmon (which is a species that is not only found wild but is also the species of choice for salmon farmers).

The salmon that you buy in Wal-Mart is "a factory product." In other words, they are hatched from eggs, raised in freshwater hatcheries, and then grown to maturity in open-topped ocean cages in cold coastal waters.{11}

Wal-Mart sells more salmon than any other store in the country. Wal-Mart also buys all its salmon from Chile. In fact, they purchase about one-third of the annual harvest of salmon that Chile sells. Wal-Mart sells the salmon for $4.84 a pound. It seems incredible that they can sell it for so little, but there are hidden costs.

Atlantic salmon are not native to Chile (its coastline runs along the Pacific). It's an exotic species that is literally farmed and processed by thousands of Chileans. The labor conditions are certainly a concern (long hours, low pay, processing of salmon with razor-sharp filleting instruments).

Another concern is the environment. Salmon farming is already transforming the ecology of southern Chile "with tens of millions of salmon living in vast ocean corrals, their excess food and feces settling to the ocean floor beneath the pens, and dozens of salmon processing plants dumping untreated salmon entrails directly into the ocean."{12}

When we buy salmon from Chile are we contributing to this environmental damage? Charles Fishman asks, "Does it matter

that salmon for $4.84 a pound leaves a layer of toxic sludge on the ocean bottoms of the Pacific fjords of southern Chile?”{13} After all, these salmon are raised in pens (with as many as one million per farm). They are fed antibiotics to prevent disease. As a result, you have quite a mess. One million salmon produce about the same amount of waste as 65,000 people. And add to that additional waste from unconsumed food and antibiotic residue. In essence, the current method of salmon farming creates a toxic seabed.

So how do we change this? The answer is simple: by changing consumer behavior. If shoppers won’t buy salmon until Wal-Mart insists on higher standards, Wal-Mart will insist on them. The same company that created this huge market for salmon can also change it. But this will only happen if consumers voice their concerns and back it up with their behavior.

Consumer Behavior

As I said earlier, mention the name Wal-Mart and you are likely to get lots of varied reactions. While shoppers love the “always low prices,” critics point to the impact that the company has had on the economy and the environment.

In fact, it is a bit misleading to think of Wal-Mart as merely a company. In reality it’s a global market force. Without a doubt it is one of the most efficient entities at improving its supply chain not only in this country but around the world. Most of us just shop at the store and don’t think of the implications of what we buy and where we buy it.

The size of Wal-Mart gives it the power to do many positive things. It recently announced fuel-savings plans for its stores and trucks. This could provide a model for the nation.

Wal-Mart also provided a model of how to deal with a disaster like Hurricane Katrina. Even though they had 171 facilities in the path of the storm, they were able to recover and reopen

eighty-three percent of their facilities in the Gulf area within six days.{14}

One key to Wal-Mart's success was associates who were dedicated to their communities. The local connection helped it deliver goods when the government failed. Wal-Mart sprang into action even before the hurricane hit. Whenever there is a possibility of a hurricane, its supply chain automatically adjusts and sends in plenty of non-perishable food and generators.

What is Wal-Mart's effect on the local economy? One famous study found that the arrival of a Wal-Mart store had a dramatic impact. "Grocery stores lost 5 percent of their business, specialty stores lost 14 percent of their business, and clothing stores lost 18 percent of their business—all while total sales were rising 6 percent, mostly due to Wal-Mart."{15}

Critics of Wal-Mart say that it forces small businesses into bankruptcy. But if you think about it, it is the consumers who put people out of business. We vote with our wallets. Shoppers are the ones who have made it possible for Wal-Mart's phenomenal growth. And we are the ones who need to pay attention to what we buy and where we buy it.

In this article, we have identified a few economic and environmental issues that result from "the Wal-Mart effect." Previously, we have produced articles discussing the Christian's responsibility towards economics{16} and the environment.{17}

Our consumer behavior can have a positive impact on our world. As individuals, we have a minimal impact, but collectively we have an impact on our lives and our economy every day when we spend money. For too long, Christians have been willing to separate ethics from economics. Yet in earlier centuries theologians asked important questions about the relationship

of morality to money.

It is time to return to that moral reflection, especially in this age of globalization. Christians should be alert consumers in this global economy.

Notes

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