Hail the Conquering Graduates!

June 10, 2009

I was asked to put together a few resources for the high school grads at church. I thought I’d share the wealth with the World Wide Web.

Below you’ll find helpful and hopefully meaningful resources to guide you as you embark on adulthood. I especially recommend the two blogs. The most valuable resource of all, though, is people. Get involved in your own way on campus and in a local church. But don’t just hang out with people your own age—that’ll make you boring. Be sure to introduce yourself to your professors and tell them thank you (will likely turn that B+ into an A). I’ve been teaching and learning from college students for a really long time. So I know quite a bit about college stuff; and a decent amount about life stuff too—you can always ask me anything. The whole world is before you; but you never have to face it, with all its joys and hardships, alone.

Many congratulations and blessings.

Renea

Bookmark This

GoCollege.com

Here you’ll find really good tips for getting the most out of the really (sometimes really, really) expensive education you’re getting. Classroom lectures, writing assignments, and even exams can be a lot different in college than they were in high school. The tips on this website can help make the transition smoother.

Biblos.com

Biblos.com is this great website I’ve only recently discovered. It’s a one-stop-shop for all your bible study tools including concordances, commentaries, maps, pictures, devotions, and of course the Bible itself in several different translations and languages.

EveryStudent.com

I’m really pumped about this website. It’s a place where no question about God or life is out of bounds. When your friends have questions about God and Christianity, or when you have questions yourself, this website can help. In college you’ll do a lot of exploring, discovering, and learning about yourself: what you think about God, Christianity, the way the world is, the way it should be. This website is designed to guide you on that journey. Be sure to check out Life Issues, which touches on topics such as sex, beauty, racism, and shame.

Probe.org

Curious about Genesis and evolution? Need help answering the tough questions your friends have about Christianity? Whether you want to learn more about your friend’s religion, are struggling with questions like — Why do bad things happen to good people? — or you need a credible source for the paper you’re writing, Probe.org is an excellent resource that can help you think through some really tough topics.
Blogs

Living Spirituality

Living Spirituality offers helpful, encouraging, and even sometimes convicting devotionals. It also provides a weekly discussion about real life stuff. These discussions are helpful as we try to live like Jesus in our everyday lives.

Surviving College Life

Surviving College Life is a really cool blog that’s incredibly comprehensive. Not only will it be helpful as you prepare to arrive on campus. This will be something you’ll find useful throughout your college years as you move from dorms to apartments, friendships to romances, and from major to major. The above link is a list of all the posts divided by topic. So whether you’re looking for time management tips, study aids, roommate advice, financial aid resources, or fitness facts, Surviving College Life can help give you a heads up and point you in a good direction.

Book Buzz

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Romans 12:2

This brief list of books includes stuff I read in college that was really important to my Christian walk, as well as a few books I wish I had read in college. They’re books I hope you will find helpful as you journey with Jesus and strive to think christianly. (Don’t worry; they’re not just “smart people” books. Most of these are very easy to read.)

![Don’t Waste Your Life](image)

*Don’t Waste Your Life*

–John Piper

When Christ gave us real life, he gave our lives meaning and purpose. *Don’t Waste Your Life* is about living on purpose a life passionate for God and people.
The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God

–Brent Curtis & John Eldredge

This is not a girly book; don’t let the title fool you. The Sacred Romance was a really important book for me when I was in college. It helped me understand the big picture of the Bible: the story of God and the story of my own life. It helped me understand the difference between living by the rules and living spiritually.

Welcome to College: A Christ-follower’s Guide for the Journey

–Jonathan Morrow

Welcome to College includes chapters on the problem of evil and suffering, Christology, ethics and much more. You will also find a broad collection of practical topics: health, sex and dating, finances, Internet use, alcohol. This book provides unique and much-needed help for navigating the head-spinning newness of college life.
**Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading**

-Eugene Peterson

This is a really helpful book about how to read and interpret and understand the Bible, how to let the Scriptures nourish and feed us, how to live the Scriptures as they are the Living Words of God.

**Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity**

-Lauren F. Winner

Winner talks about sex in a realistic way. She sorts through the confusing messages we hear about sex from both the world and the church, and helps us think about sex and romantic love within the big picture of God’s story. Real Sex provides biblical and practical guidance for unmarried Christians who desire to honor God with their sexuality and dating relationships.

**Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People**

- Mike Yaconelli
This small book says big things about what being a Christian looks like. It reminds us that we’re all human in need of God’s grace; that there’s no such thing as the ideal Christian—there’s no one-size-fits-all pattern of spirituality.

*The Green Letters*

-Miles J. Stanford

The Green Letters is about spiritual growth. It’s one of those books you can pick and choose what you want to read by scanning over the Table of Contents; that is, the chapters don’t necessarily have to be read in order. This book will challenge you to live less selfishly, or we could say, less as a self-follower and more as a Christ-follower.

*5 Paths to the Love of Your Life: Defining Your Dating Style*

-Alex Chediak

There are basically five different approaches to romantic love from the Christian perspective. This book gives you an overview of these five views, their advantages and disadvantages, and the logic and Scripture behind them. So you can decide for yourself which path you relate to most, which enables you to be intentional about biblical, christianly romance.
What is sin? What are the effects of sin? How do we think and talk about sin (if at all)? How do we deal with sin? These are some of the questions discussed in this small, but impactful book on sin. You’d think a book all about sin would be depressing, but Plantinga understands that sin is only the distortion of something originally good; and that though things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be now, they will be one day soon when Christ returns.

Your Board of Directors

At a conference several years ago I was given a thought-provoking challenge, to identify the people on the board of directors of my life: whose voices do I listen to? Whose counsel do I follow? Whose values do I respond to?

The speaker pointed out that some people ought to be kicked off our board—like parents, if their voices of shame and criticism still control and restrict us. So should voices of much of the media, especially TV. And we can replace them with wiser, more godly voices who can offer us direction and perspective. There was a discussion of categories of potential board members. They don’t have to be alive, and we don’t have to personally know them, either.

The Lord Jesus, of course, needs to be the #1 board member. If we’re married, our spouse should be on our board. The Apostle Paul is a good board member. Peter and James are good too, as is Solomon. So are some of the church fathers and Christian writers like C.S. Lewis. Or a pastor, and not necessarily our own. (I have a friend in a distant city who has adopted my pastor as hers, and listens to every audio recording my church puts online.) Mentors are great board members, and so are wise and trusted friends.

A few weeks ago, John Townsend, one of the co-authors of the Boundaries series, was at my church. I love what he writes and listen to him on the radio show “New Life Live” whenever possible. I had a chance to talk to him briefly, so I told him about my board of directors. “John,” I said, “Several years ago I installed you as a permanent member of my board. Other people have come and gone, but you’re always there. I really appreciate your wisdom and godly perspective, and you have equipped me to respond to various life challenges. Just wanted you to know how you’ve blessed me even
though we’ve never met."

(To my delighted surprise, he lit up and asked if he could hug me!)

Who’s on your board? Who can you kick off to the glory of God? (Hint: magazines that make you unhappy with how God made you as you compare yourself to the celebrities and models inside, certain internet sites, particular TV shows. . .)

Who can you put on your board? Let’s hear it.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/your_board_of_directors in July 2009.

What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo blog post about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here’s my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don’t start any sentence with “At least. . . .”
• “At least you didn’t have time to really love her.”
• “At least he’s in heaven now.”
• “At least you have two other children.”
• “At least that’s one less mouth you’ll have to feed.”
• “At least it didn’t have to go through the pain of birth.”
• “At least you’ve had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis.”

Don’t attempt to minimize the other person’s pain.
• “Cancer isn’t really a problem.” (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
• “It’s okay, you can have other children.”

Don’t try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.
• “I guess God knew you weren’t ready to be parents yet.”
• “Now you’ll find out who your friends are.”
• “This baby must have just not been meant to be.”
• “There must have been something wrong with the baby.”
• “Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great works.”
• “Cancer is really a blessing.”
• “Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong.”

**Don’t blame the other person:**
• “If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed.”
• “Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in.”
• “You are not praying hard enough.”
• “Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?”
• “Oh, you’re not going to let this get you down, are you?” (Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

**Don’t compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else’s problem:**
• “It’s not as bad as that time I . . .”
• “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

**Don’t use the word “should”:**
• “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

**Don’t use clichés and platitudes:**
• “Look on the bright side.”
• “He’s in a better place.”
• “She’s an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
• “He’s with the Lord.”

**Don’t instruct the person:**
• “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
• “Remember that God is in control.”
• “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

**What TO say:**
• “I love you.”
• “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

**What TO do:**
• A wordless hug.
• A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
• Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_not_to_say_when_someone_is_grieving on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.
Procrastination: Conquering the Time Killer - A Christian Cure

Steve Cable considers the causes of procrastination from a biblical perspective. Understanding why we procrastinate is an important step in developing a Christ-centered cure for our ailment. Don’t wait until it’s too late. Stop procrastinating today!

How many of us would drop twenty dollar bills out of our car window as we drive down the highway or smash Rolex watches with a hammer as a means of relaxation? Yet, many of us consistently waste the most valuable resource available to us—our time. Benjamin Franklin put it this way: “Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time; for that’s the stuff life is made of.”{1} From a biblical perspective, Paul admonishes us: “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16).{2} Looking at this statement in the original language, Paul commands us to redeem our time; that is, take time which is part of a fallen, sinful world system and convert it into something good and eternal through using it wisely for God’s purposes.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will admit to feeling uncomfortable with our time stewardship. We want to use our time wisely, but when we look back on the last week, month, or year, we feel some remorse over the amount of time we wasted. A big reason that many of us are uncomfortable with how we use our time is the affliction of procrastination. One researcher in this field summarized her conclusions this way: “Procrastination is, hands down, our favorite form of self-sabotage.”{3} In other words, procrastination undermines our attempts to accomplish our plans and goals.

I want to look at the epidemic of procrastination from a biblical perspective. With God’s help we will gain a better understanding of why we struggle with procrastination and learn some practical perspectives to help us conquer this time killer.

A Biblical Perspective on Time

You might be asking, Is this really a Christian worldview issue or simply a self-help question? Well, the Bible is very clear on how much God is concerned about how we use our time. Let me summarize a few of the principles the Bible teaches us about time:

1. God created time as a part of His “good creation” (Gen. 1:1).


3. God works in this world within the context of time (Gal. 4:4-5).

4. Our time on earth is precious and fleeting (Jas. 4:14, 1 Pet. 1:24).

5. Time has no meaning or value in eternity (Rev. 4:8-10).

6. God is very concerned with how we use our time on this earth (Eph. 5:16-17).

One way to see how much the Bible has to say about time is to replace references to life on this earth with the idea of time on this earth. After all, Ben Franklin was right in saying that time is the
stuff that earthly life is made of. For example, let’s apply this idea to a familiar verse, 2 Corinthians 5:14:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who “have time on this earth” might no longer “use their time” for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.\(^4\)

So, Christ’s sacrificial love for us demands that we use our time for Him.

Another example would be 1 Corinthians 10:31:

So whether you eat or you drink or “however you spend your time, use all of your time for” the glory of God. (NIV)

Peter highlighted the importance of how we use our time when he wrote:

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:17-20).

Knowing the heavy price our Father paid to redeem us, we should be very concerned about whether we are making the most of the time God has entrusted to us. It is very clear that misuse of our time is a great concern to God. As Christians, we have the ability to convert passing time into something good and eternal.

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:12-15).\(^5\)

Naturally, Satan and the world system want us to waste that time and pass into eternity having accomplished nothing of eternal value. Thus, anything that causes us to waste our time is a spiritual issue. Thoreau captured this truth when he wrote: “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”\(^6\)

In other words, procrastination is not a casual laughing matter. It is of great concern to our Lord.

**Procrastination: The Consequences**

As we continue to consider how to conquer procrastination, it would be helpful to have a working definition. An anonymous pundit quipped, “They said procrastination was the source of all my sorrow. I don’t know what that big word means—I’ll look it up tomorrow!” Procrastination literally means “to put off until tomorrow.” One study defined it as “postponing the completion of a task to the point of feeling uncomfortable about one’s delay.”\(^7\)

Well, feeling uncomfortable is not fun, but it doesn’t sound that bad. Is that the only consequence of procrastination? Whether it is putting off balancing the checkbook, yard work, term papers, filling out expense reports, or reading the Bible, many of us have learned to live with our favorite areas of procrastination. However, studies have shown that procrastination has many undesirable
consequences.

A direct consequence is decreased performance and productivity. Some procrastinators say they put off starting projects because they perform better under pressure. Don’t kid yourself! A study of university students showed that students who procrastinated had significantly lower grades than those who did not. Christians are called to “keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles” and to “work heartily as unto the Lord.” When procrastination impacts our performance, we are presenting a negative witness to the world.

The direct consequences of procrastination can be magnified well beyond our expectations. Consider these examples:

- In 1815, Napoleon was prepared to attack Wellington’s British army at dawn, but delayed his attack until 11 AM. This delay allowed the Prussians to arrive in time to attack the French flank turning a certain French victory into a bitter defeat. Literally, procrastination caused Napoleon to meet his Waterloo.

- On October 31, 1846, after a tortuous shortcut gone bad cost them several weeks, the Donner Party decided to rest for a few days rather than press on over the Sierra Nevada mountains. Their delay caused them to be trapped by a monster blizzard resulting in thirty-six people dying of starvation and the rest living out their lives with the stain of cannibalism.

- The nation of Israel chose to delay entering the Promised Land, and the result was forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

These are extreme examples, but most of us have experienced times when we put off getting car repairs, working on the house, or starting a project, and found out that the consequences were much worse than we anticipated.

In addition to the direct consequences, frequent procrastination increases stress, anxiety, and guilt with all their related side effects. A recent study found that “college students who procrastinate have higher levels of drinking, smoking, insomnia, stomach problems, colds and flu.”{8} Many times we delay a task because we feel we need to relax instead, but the ultimate result is greater levels of stress.

Procrastination: Some Causes

Most of us struggle with procrastination in one or more areas of our lives. However, what we share are common symptoms, not necessarily a common root cause. Studies of procrastination have identified some distinctly different causes. If you have a pain in your foot, you need to know whether it is a splinter or bone cancer before selecting a course of treatment. If you are going to conquer procrastination, you need to be aware of your primary root cause.

Two of the most common causes are laziness and avoiding negative feelings. These cause us to delay starting tasks that may be difficult or unpleasant in favor of more pleasurable activities. Research has found that considering a task as boring or adverse is more likely to result in procrastination than a lack of capability to do the task well.{9} The Bible often addresses this issue including Proverbs 24 which says:

_I passed by the field of the sluggard_
_And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,_
_And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;_
Its surface was covered with nettles,
And its stone wall was broken down.
When I saw, I reflected upon it;
I looked, and received instruction.
“A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,”
Then your poverty will come as a robber
And your want like an armed man (vv. 30-34).

This cause is modeled by the college student who spends weeks playing video games and hanging out until the night before the term paper is due.

Two other common causes are lack of perspective and poor time management skills. This person is willing to take on an unpleasant task, but has a hard time knowing which tasks need to be tackled right away and which can or should be delayed. This cause is epitomized by the college student who begins working on their term paper at the beginning of the semester by spending hours selecting just the right binder and creating cover graphics rather than researching their topic.

Perfectionism and fear of failure drive some people to procrastinate. Some perfectionists recognize that they don’t have enough time to do a perfect job so they are discouraged about undertaking the job at all. Others believe they need uninterrupted time to be able to do a perfect job and they never can seem to clear off enough of their schedule to get started. And some wait until the last moment so they can blame any shortcoming of the finished product on insufficient time. They want to be able to say, “I am really much more talented than this shows, but I had to throw it together at the last moment. So, what can you expect?”

A very different cause is resentment. This person says, “I know I should be starting this task, but my spouse has been bugging me about it and I am going to show them that I am in control of my own time.”

**Procrastination: the Cure**

Many of us feel frustrated by a pattern of procrastination. Like one author, we take the position “I am definitely going to take a course on time management . . . just as soon as I can work it into my schedule.”

However, God does not command us to make the most of our time without giving us the ability to do so. We need to tackle procrastination head on if we want to find a cure in our lives. From the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah to the race to the moon in the 1960s, some timeless principles stand out. From my studies of literature and the Bible and my experience in simultaneously raising a family, working as a corporate executive, and pastoring young adults, I suggest five steps to reduce the impact of procrastination in your life. They are:

1. Probing your problem,
2. Praying for perspective,
3. Proper priorities,
4. Perspective-based planning, and
5. Proactive partnering.

**Probing Your Problem**
When we find ourselves consistently suffering the consequences of procrastination or we find ourselves tempted to procrastinate again, we need to do more than just say, “I am putting off tasks that I shouldn’t.” We need examine why we are tempted to delay. The director of student counseling at Cal Tech University counsels us, “Each time you feel ‘stuck’ or find yourself procrastinating, ask yourself, ‘What is going on here?’ What am I feeling and how might that contribute to my procrastinating?”

Knowing that we are being motivated by resentment or fear or simply a desire to avoid unpleasant activities or feelings should determine how we apply the next four steps.

**Prayer**

Acknowledge that God has given us all of the time we need to accomplish everything He wants us to accomplish. Since that is probably far more than we normally accomplish, we need to invite God to lead our time management initiative. We need to pray for a clear understanding of God’s priorities and perspective. If we are dealing with laziness, we should ask for self control. If we are dealing with emotions such as resentment or fear, we need to ask God to take our thoughts captive in obedience to Christ. If we are struggling with anxiety, we need His peace that passes understanding. If we are struggling with perfectionism, we need to acknowledge that our total significance is found in Christ, not in our performance. Do not try to bypass this step. Time is a key battleground in the spiritual war. If we run onto the battlefield in our own power and wisdom, we will soon find ourselves hopelessly behind.

**Proper Priorities**

A simplistic view of our priorities can often get us into time management trouble. God does not want us to have a hierarchy where we do everything possible for the top tier no matter how trivial before we move onto the next level of the hierarchy. Most of us usually have important time commitments for our spouse, our employer, our children, our church, our neighbors, and our personal spiritual and physical health, all on our task list at the same time. The Bible teaches us that Christ is our life, not just a priority (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:1-3). We need to seek His direction each day for what is important for that day. If we are dealing with laziness, we need to acknowledge the importance God places on the tasks we are given.

In the flesh, we have a tendency to forget the unpleasant hard tasks on our list in order to partake of more pleasant interruptions to our plan. One practical tool to help deal with this is keeping an up-to-date task list. Over the last thirty years I have done this in a number of ways. What I have found most practical for me is as follows:

- Keep an ongoing list of all known tasks no matter how far away they are due. I do this on my computer since this is my long-term master list.
- Each week, list all tasks for that week on a sheet of paper. I put my work related tasks on one side of the paper and my personal/family tasks on the other.
- Add a column for each day of the week. Select the first day you may be able to work on each task and place an A or B for that task in the column for that day. An A means the task is critical and really needs to be worked on that day. A B indicates that it would be good to work on that task, but it is not mandatory.
- As tasks are started, mark a dot by the letter. As tasks are completed, put a check mark by the task. If tasks are delegated, put the other person’s initial by the task. If tasks are rescheduled, put an arrow by the task.
- Update the sheet of paper every morning to reflect that day’s priorities. For example, a task that
was a B on Monday and Tuesday may need to be changed to an A on Wednesday.

Note: If I am working on B tasks before addressing all of the A tasks, it is a warning that I may have moved into procrastination mode.

**Perspective-based Planning**

Committing to keep an updated list of priorities is a big step, but that list may not be very meaningful if we do not set aside time for planning. Many of us have been surprised by unintentional procrastination. We thought we had plenty of time until we started working on the task and discovered that it was harder than expected or we forgot that we needed to order some parts with a long lead time. If your task is to pick up a loaf of bread, then no planning is required. If your task is a major term project, a major product development, or putting a man on the moon, you need to take some time to think through the subtasks required by this project. Proverbs 1:25 teaches us:

> The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage,
> But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.

Perspective based planning means to look at the priority of the overall project and ask these questions about each subtask:

- What other tasks must I accomplish before I can do this task?
- How long should this task take?
- What are the consequences of delaying this task?
- Are the tasks broken down into small enough increments to take advantage of openings in my schedule to work on them?
- Should this task be delegated to someone else?
- How likely is this task to take longer than expected?

Once I have done this planning, I can do a good job of filling out my weekly priority sheet.

**Proactive Partnering**

If you are struggling with procrastination issues, don't try to tackle it on your own. Galatians 6:1-5 tells us that we are to help restore those who are struggling and help bear one another’s burdens. Yet we are to accept this help without passing our responsibilities onto someone else: “For each one will bear his own load.”

Look around for someone who seems to be effective in managing their time. Share your dilemma with them and ask them to help provide guidance and accountability. Ask them to take a look at your weekly priority lists and project plans to see if they are reasonable. Pick out some intermediate deadlines that they will check on and hold you to. It is much easier to recover from missing one intermediate deadline than to be almost to the final deadline and realize that you are way behind.

An accountability partner can also help us avoid swinging from procrastinator to workaholic. Sometimes the partner needs to reassure us that it is ok to take some time for relaxation. After all, Jesus told his disciples, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). Sometimes the partner needs to challenge our priorities.

You may have noticed that each of these steps will take some time. Productive people have learned that sufficient time spent in planning will save much more time in the long run.
Conclusion

We have been given the high calling of using our time for God’s glory. We are called to be wise and make the most of our time. However, many of us know that we let procrastination rob value from the time God has entrusted to us. God understands our temptation in this area and wants to help us conquer procrastination. We can participate in this by acknowledging our underlying motivation, adopting God’s perspective and priorities through prayer, practicing a discipline of planning, and allowing others to hold us accountable. When we commit to practicing these things, we will be able to rejoice in the privilege we have of converting fleeting time into eternal value.

Notes
1. Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard’s Almanack, June 1746.
2. All Scriptures are from the NASB except where noted.
4. Italics indicate the author’s substituted words.
5. See also Col 4:5-6.
11. For an interesting treatment of how the race to the moon was accomplished ahead of schedule, check out Mike Gray, Angle of Attack: Harrison Storms and the Race to the Moon (W. W. Norton and Co., 1992).
12. Dr. Kevin P. Austin, Director of the Student Counseling Services, CalTech University; www.counseling.caltech.edu/articles/procrastination.html

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Confessions of a Cellphone-Challenged Journalist

I have a confession.

Not one of those tawdry confessions, but it is a little embarrassing. You see, I am cellphone challenged.
I used a cellphone once — about ten years ago when volunteering to help rebuild Miami after Hurricane Andrew. The BellSouth loaner, a real clunker, helped me navigate the storm-ravaged county amidst downed street signs and landmarks.

But I’ve never owned one. Voicemail takes my messages and I’ve seldom wanted to be more accessible. Some of my friends swear by cellphones. Others swear at them. Ever been in a movie theater when a filmgoer gets a call and decides to talk?

My wife attended a conference presentation during which a woman asked the speaker a question from the audience. In the middle of her question, with all eyes on her, her cellphone rang. She not only answered it, but also conducted a brief conversation while everyone watched aghast.

Airline travelers talk before takeoff until the flight attendant tells them to stop. They resume talking when the plane lands. They talk walking through the airport, on the inter-terminal shuttle, entering the restroom. They talk while using the toilet or washing their hands. Some restrooms sound like offices.

Drivers talk. Beachgoers talk. Students talk between classes. Shoppers talk while cruising the aisles. (“What kind of cheese did you want me to get?”)

Some restaurants ask diners not to use cellphones. Some summer camps have banned them because they distract kids from social and recreational activities.

My doctor’s office has a sign asking patients to please not talk on cellphones while the doctor or nurse is examining them. (Let your mind wander on that theme for a moment.)

One of my favorite signs is inside a nearby church: “Please turn off cellphones during service. (Let God call you.)”

The hit movie, “Bruce Almighty,” depicts God’s attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the number is valid in many area codes. After the film’s release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after 20 calls per hour clogged her cellphone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they’d really discovered a direct line to God. One left a message confessing her adultery.

Another number holder decided to offer some friendly advice. She changed her voice message to say, “Looking for God? Well, I’m not Him, but I do know Him. And knowing Him has changed my life. You can know Him too. In fact, it’s a local call.”

Come to think of it, that may not be a bad idea. Jeremiah (the Jewish prophet, not the bullfrog) said God told him, “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” It doesn’t even require a cellphone.

I guess I can live with cellphones if people can realize that they’re not for everyone. If you have one, I certainly don’t fault you. But please, do turn it off when you go to see the doctor.
Giving Can Be Good for You: Science Says So

“All You Need is Love”

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

“It really is good to be good,” claims Stephen Post, PhD., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. “Science says it is so.”{1}

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their book, Why Good Things Happen to Good People. The institute Post heads has funded “over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities.”{2} 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.{3}

Post and Neimark say around five hundred scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied 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.{4}

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.{5}

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 NASB). Both Jewish and Christian biblical texts admonish us to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mt. 22:39 NIV). I don’t know about you, but I find it fascinating to explore these ways that contemporary science and social science often highlight the value of ancient biblical principles.

Post presents research to support the value of ten ways of expressing giving love. Here we will examine four of them: compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening.

“Love cures,” wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures “both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”{6}

Compassion’s Benefits

Illustrations abound of giving’s 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
Today, Habitat volunteers have constructed over two hundred twenty-five thousand houses, helping over a million people in over three thousand communities worldwide. Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings. And they’re in over ninety countries. In Amman, Jordan, for example, I had lunch with the Habitat director there who involves compassionate volunteers in the Middle East.

As I reflect on his work, I’m reminded of another Middle Eastern leader who showed great compassion. One of His followers wrote, “When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36 NIV).

Stephen Post says “we’re hardwired to open our hearts and to care—and in fact, compassion is important for the survival of the species.” He cites preliminary psychological research in which “compassion significantly reduced depression and stress.”

In that light, consider the 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 Christian 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 twenty-three hundred 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.”

**Humor - Good Medicine**

There are intriguing parallels between some modern social scientific findings and time-tested biblical life-lessons. One of these involves humor. An ancient proverb says, “A joyful heart is good medicine” (Prov. 17:22 NASB).

Humor heals. Think about how you felt the last time you roared with laughter. Maybe a funny movie, a family situation, or an uproarious joke session had you even crying and gasping for air. Your abdominal muscles and heartbeat went wild. One Stanford psychiatrist “found that a hundred laughs is the aerobic equivalent of ten minutes of rowing.”

Stephen Post sees humor as a way to help others, “a very effective way of connecting, of lightening another’s life as well as our own.” Interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted by a Tel Aviv University researcher found that many cited humor “as a way of surviving trauma.” Post notes that Ronald Reagan was a master of using humor to put other people [and perhaps himself] at ease. When President Reagan was shot and at risk of dying, he quipped to the emergency room doctors, “I hope you’re all Republicans.”

Of course, bitter humor can hurt rather than heal. But positive humor can help people relate and communicate openness. Post cites psychologist Robert Provine who monitored and analyzed over twelve hundred “bouts” of laughter in public places. Provine says shared, contagious laughter can be “an important signal you send to someone that says, This is play. I’m not going to attack or hurt
Humor is also important for a successful marriage, according to University of Washington psychologist John Gottman. He found that coping with issues "through dialogue, laughter, and affection" was a good predictor of whether marriages would last.

On a Detroit TV talk show, the host and I were discussing my book, Secrets of Successful Humor. He asked about humor and marriage. I told him, “The secret of our marriage is that we take time two evenings each week to go out to a lovely restaurant. A nice dinner, some candlelight, soft music, a slow walk home. She goes Tuesdays; I go Fridays.”

It hit a nerve. The host roared, long and loud. Contagious laughter spread throughout the studio audience. We all enjoyed some communal fun that helped open us up to each other.

**Loyalty Bonds**

A famous biblical proverb notes, “A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need” (Prov. 17:17 NLT). Post believes that “Loyalty is love that lasts. . . . The commitment inherent in loyalty defuses our deepest existential anxiety.” He continues: “Broken covenants are hard to restore and never quite attain their state of original trust. It’s not easy to find loyalty in our society.”

Marriage and friendship, of course, can be significant expressions of loyalty. University of Chicago demographer Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher co-authored the book The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially. Analyzing data from over six thousand families, Waite discovered strong correlations between marriage and longevity. Gallagher says their research demonstrated that, compared to similar singles, married folks “are physically healthier, live longer . . . experience less anxiety, depression, hostility, and loneliness, and are more likely to tell you that they’re happy with life in general. They have more sex than single people of the same age.” Of course there’s a caveat, Post notes. High-conflict marriages bring stress and can lower immune function.

Friendships count, too. University of North Carolina sociologist Rebecca Adams’ frequent childhood moves had her attending thirteen schools by the time she entered college. She feels she learned how to make new friends but wasn’t as good at maintaining them. These experiences helped motivate her to study friendship. She’s discovered strong links between quality of relationships and mental well-being. Adams notes, “It’s been shown over and over again that friendship is more important to psychological well-being than family relations are. . . . Friendships are voluntary. So we’ll choose friendships that support our psychological well-being.”

Men can learn a lot from women about friendship. Male and female friendship styles often differ, Adams says: “Men define their friendships in terms of shared activities, and women define them in terms of conversation. For men, a friend is their fishing, golfing, or bowling buddy. For women, a friend is someone they can confide in.” Of course there are exceptions, but Post notes that emotional intimacy is what nourishes friendships most.

Giving love through compassion, humor, and loyalty all contribute to our well-being. But, is anybody listening?
"I’m Listening"

The television comedy *Frasier* was one of the most popular TV series in U.S. history. It’s been called “a thinking person’s comedy.” Reruns are ubiquitous, about six episodes daily in our area. Frasier Crane, the protagonist, is a caring, sensitive, cultured—but insecure and sometimes pompous—Seattle radio psychiatrist who always greets his callers with, “I’m listening.” Yet sometimes he becomes so wrapped up in himself that he tunes others out. He’s not alone. In one amusing scene, Frasier’s ex wife, Lilith (also a psychiatrist), tries to converse with Frasier’s brother, Niles (yet another psychiatrist), about an especially weighty matter. Niles, focused on a video game, doesn’t pay her sufficient attention, prompting Lilith to exclaim, “Is there a *chair* here I could talk to?”

I confess that in our home, my wife Meg sometimes has to use Lilith’s line to get my attention. (Mind you, I don’t confess that it’s as often as *she* might *claim*!) But listening is a powerful form of affirmation and an important tool in understanding and communication. Solomon, a wise Jewish king, wrote, “What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!” (Proverbs 18:13 NLT)

Stephen Post writes, “When we truly absorb another’s story, we are saying, ‘You count. Your life and feelings and thoughts matter to me. And I want to know who you really are.'” He claims that listening can help both the listener and the one listened to. New studies indicate: “Listening activates the part of our brains hardwired for empathy. . . . When we listen to others in pain, their stress response quiets down and their body has a better chance to heal.”

Post says that without a good listener, we can feel terribly alone, “like the psalmist in the Bible who cries out, ‘No man cared for my soul.’” He continues, “This has led some scholars to call the God of the Psalms a God of listening. Our need for a listener is an inherent aspect of all prayer.”

So, giving love is good for you. Science says so. Compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening are important ways you can express giving love. Is it as intriguing to you as it is to me that contemporary science and social science are often in harmony with age-old biblical counsel? Makes me think I should read the Bible more often.

Notes

2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 7.
4. Ibid, 7-8, 48-51.
5. Ibid., 8-10, 68-69.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 25, 275.
8. www.habitat.org
10. Ibid., 184.
13. Ibid., 133-135.
14. Ibid., 139-140.
A Doctor’s Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.
Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a website www.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.net to chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows what's most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and you'll see what I mean.

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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, they’re 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**

3. Proverbs 15:1 NIV.

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Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

Written by Rusty Wright

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician's office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, “Have you been under stress recently?” Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life’s mission? Would life itself last much longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you’ve excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents in recent years. “How did you cope?” I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. “But how did you deal with their deaths?” I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. “I guess I haven’t,” he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother’s needs after her father’s passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother’s death, she felt quite somber. “People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around,” she recalls. “That was very sobering.” Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I certainly don’t have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas that have worked for me and for others along life’s sometimes challenging journey?

**Grieve the loss.** Don’t ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

**A little help from your friends.** During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending,
good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don’t try to handle enormous loss alone.

**Watch your vulnerabilities.** In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. “Guard your heart,” advises an ancient proverb, “for it affects everything you do.”{1}

**Look for a bright spot.** Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. “It was very difficult for me when they dropped me,” he recalls. King says one can view firing as “a terrible tragedy” or a chance to seek new opportunities.{2}

**Cherish your memories.** Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don’t become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to . . .

**Turn the page.** After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you’ll emotionally process and respond to the common question, “Where do you work?” Perhaps you’ll want to take a course, exercise and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

**Sink your spiritual roots deep.** I’m glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life’s curve balls, I’ve had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ “become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!”{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He’ll never let you down.

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Christian Discernment

We are confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. We must apply biblical principles to these social and political issues. And we must avoid the pitfalls and logical fallacies that so often accompany these issues.

Turn on a television or open a newspaper. You are immediately presented with a myriad of ethical issues. Daily we are confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. Society is awash in controversial issues: abortion, euthanasia, cloning, race, drug abuse, homosexuality, gambling, pornography, and capital punishment. Life may have been simpler in a previous age, but now the rise of technology and the fall of ethical consensus have brought us to a society full of moral dilemmas.

Never has society needed biblical perspectives more to evaluate contemporary moral issues. And yet Christians seem less equipped to address these topics from a biblical perspective. The Barna Research Group conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only four percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that nine percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.\(^1\)

It is worth noting that what George Barna defines as a biblical worldview would be considered by most people to be basic Christian doctrine. It doesn’t even include aspects of a biblical perspective on social and political issues.

Of even greater concern is the fact that most Christians do not base their beliefs on an absolute moral foundation. Biblical ethics rests on the belief in absolute truth. Yet surveys show that a minority of born again adults (forty-four percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (nine percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.\(^2\) By a three-to-one margin adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.\(^3\)

Social scientists as well as pollsters have been warning that American society is becoming more and more dominated by moral anarchy. Writing in the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim said in The Day America Told the Truth that there was no moral authority in America. “We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect.”\(^4\) Essentially we live in a world of moral anarchy.
So how do we begin to apply a Christian worldview to the complex social and political issues of the day? And how do we avoid falling for the latest fad or cultural trend that blows in the wind? The following are some key principles to apply and some dangerous pitfalls to avoid.

**Biblical Principles**

A key biblical principle that applies to the area of bioethics is the sanctity of human life. Such verses as Psalm 139:13-16 show that God’s care and concern extend to the womb. Other verses such as Jeremiah 1:5, Judges 13:7-8, Psalm 51:5 and Exodus 21:22-25 give additional perspective and framework to this principle. These principles can be applied to issues ranging from abortion to stem cell research to infanticide.

A related biblical principle involves the equality of human beings. The Bible teaches that God has made “of one blood all nations of men” (Acts 17:26). The Bible also teaches that it is wrong for a Christian to have feelings of superiority (Philippians 2). Believers are told not to make class distinctions between various people (James 2). Paul teaches the spiritual equality of all people in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). These principles apply to racial relations and our view of government.

A third principle is a biblical perspective on marriage. Marriage is God’s plan and provides intimate companionship for life (Genesis 2:18). Marriage provides a context for the procreation and nurture of children (Ephesians 6:1-2). And finally, marriage provides a godly outlet for sexual desire (1 Corinthians 7:2). These principles can be applied to such diverse issues as artificial reproduction (which often introduces a third party into the pregnancy) and cohabitation (living together).

Another biblical principle involves sexual ethics. The Bible teaches that sex is to be within the bounds of marriage, as a man and the woman become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31). Paul teaches that we should “avoid sexual immorality” and learn to control our own body in a way that is “holy and honorable” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). He admonishes us to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18). These principles apply to such issues as premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality.

A final principle concerns government and our obedience to civil authority. Government is ordained by God (Rom.13:1-7). We are to render service and obedience to the government (Matt. 22:21) and submit to civil authority (1 Pet. 2:13-17). Even though we are to obey government, there may be certain times when we might be forced to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). These principles apply to issues such as war, civil disobedience, politics, and government.

**Biblical Discernment**

So how do we sort out what is true and what is false? This is a difficult proposition in a world awash in data. It underscores the need for Christians to develop discernment. This is a word that appears fairly often in the Bible (1 Samuel 25:32-33; 1 Kings 3:10-11; 4:29; Psalm 119:66; Proverbs 2:3; Daniel 2:14; Philippians 1:9 [NASB]). And with so many facts, claims, and opinions being tossed about, we all need to be able to sort through what is true and what is false.

Colossians 2:8 says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” We need to develop discernment so that we are not taken captive by false ideas. Here are some things to watch for:
1. **Equivocation** — the use of vague terms. Someone can start off using language we think we understand and then veer off into a new meaning. Most of us are well aware of the fact that religious cults are often guilty of this. A cult member might say that he believes in salvation by grace. But what he really means is that you have to join his cult and work your way toward salvation. Make people define the vague terms they use.

This tactic is used frequently in bioethics. Proponents of embryonic stem cell research often will not acknowledge the distinction between adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells. Those trying to legalize cloning will refer to it as “somatic cell nuclear transfer.” Unless you have a scientific background, you will not know that it is essentially the same thing.

2. **Card stacking** — the selective use of evidence. Don’t jump on the latest bandwagon and intellectual fad without checking the evidence. Many advocates are guilty of listing all the points in their favor while ignoring the serious points against it.

The major biology textbooks used in high school and college never provide students with evidence against evolution. Jonathan Wells, in his book *Icons of Evolution*, shows that the examples that are used in most textbooks are either wrong or misleading. Some of the examples are known frauds (such as the Haeckel embryos) and continue to show up in textbooks decades after they were shown to be fraudulent.

Another example would be the Y2K fears. Anyone who was concerned about the potential catastrophe in 2000 need only read any of the technical computer journals in the 1990s to see that no computer expert was predicting what the Y2K fear mongers were predicting at the time.

3. **Appeal to authority** — relying on authority to the exclusion of logic and evidence. Just because an expert says it, that doesn’t necessarily make it true. We live in a culture that worships experts, but not all experts are right. Hiram’s Law says: “If you consult enough experts, you can confirm any opinion.”

Those who argue that global warming is caused by human activity often say that “the debate in the scientific community is over.” But an Internet search of critics of the theories behind global warming will show that there are many scientists with credentials in climatology or meteorology who have questions about the theory. It is not accurate to say that the debate is over when the debate still seems to be taking place.

4. **Ad hominem** — Latin for “against the man.” People using this tactic attack the person instead of dealing with the validity of their argument. Often the soundness of an argument is inversely proportional to the amount of ad hominem rhetoric. If there is evidence for the position, proponents usually argue the merits of the position. When evidence is lacking, they attack the critics.

Christians who want public libraries to filter pornography from minors are accused of censorship. Citizens who want to define marriage as between one man and one woman are called bigots. Scientists who criticize evolution are subjected to withering attacks on their character and scientific credentials. Scientists who question global warming are compared to holocaust deniers.

5. **Straw man argument** — making your opponent’s argument seem so ridiculous that it is easy to attack and knock down. Liberal commentators say that evangelical Christians want to implement a religious theocracy in America. That’s not true. But the hyperbole works to marginalize Christian activists who believe they have a responsibility to speak to social and political issues within society.

Those who stand for moral principles in the area of bioethics often see this tactic used against them.
They hear from proponents of physician assisted suicide that pro-life advocates don't care about the suffering of the terminally ill. Proponents of embryonic stem cell research level the same charge by saying that pro-life people don’t care that these new medical technologies could alleviate the suffering of many with intractable diseases. Nothing could be further from the truth.

6. **Sidestepping** — dodging the issue by changing the subject. Politicians do this in press conferences by not answering the question asked by the reporter, but instead answering a question they wish someone had asked. Professors sometimes do that when a student points out an inconsistency or a leap in logic.

Ask a proponent of abortion whether the fetus is human and you are likely to see this tactic in action. He or she might start talking about a woman’s right to choose or the right of women to control their own bodies. Perhaps you will hear a discourse on the need to tolerate various viewpoints in a pluralistic society. But you probably won’t get a straight answer to an important question.

7. **Red herring** — going off on a tangent (from the practice of luring hunting dogs off the trail with the scent of a herring fish). Proponents of embryonic stem cell research rarely will talk about the morality of destroying human embryos. Instead they will go off on a tangent and talk about the various diseases that could be treated and the thousands of people who could be helped with the research.

Be on the alert when someone in a debate changes the subject. They may want to argue their points on more familiar ground, or they may know they cannot win their argument on the relevant issue at hand.

In conclusion, we have discussed some of the key biblical principles we should apply to our consideration and debate about social and political issues. We have talked about the sanctity of human life and the equality of human beings. We have discussed a biblical perspective on marriage and on sexual ethics. And we have also talked about a biblical perspective on government and civil authority.

We have also spent some time talking about the importance of developing biblical discernment and looked at many of the logical fallacies that are frequently used in arguing against a biblical perspective on many of the social and political issues of our day.

Every day, it seems, we are confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. As Christians it is important to consider these biblical principles and consistently apply them to these issues. It is also important that we develop discernment and learn to recognize these tactics. We are called to develop discernment as we tear down false arguments raised up against the knowledge of God. By doing this we will learn to take every thought captive to the obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

**Notes**

4. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press,