

Church and Poverty

The church in general, and evangelical Christians in particular, has been helping people in poverty. But you wouldn't know that if you attended a roundtable discussion of poverty at Georgetown University. President Obama made lots of critical comments, but I wanted to focus on just one of his statements.

The president was critical of churches focusing so much time on social issues and so little time on poverty. He wanted "faith-based organizations to speak out on" the issue of poverty and stop being obsessed with what he called "reproductive issues" or same-sex marriage.

Evangelical Christians do have concerns about abortion and same-sex marriage, but that hasn't kept them from also doing a great deal to help the poor. In fact, Christians are the most generous with their time, treasure, and talents. Also, conservative people are more generous than liberal people. In previous commentaries, I have quoted from the extensive research done by Arthur Brooks in his book, *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth about Compassionate Conservatism*.

What about the institutional church? In term of disaster relief, the Southern Baptist Convention spent more than \$6 million. It was the third largest provider behind the Red Cross and Salvation Army. And that is just one Protestant denomination.

An op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Rob Schwarzwalder and Pat Fagan concluded that: "the evangelical relief group World Vision spent roughly \$2.8 billion annually to care for the poor." They added: "That would rank World Vision about 12th within the G-20 nations in terms of overseas development assistance." And I might mention that World Vision is just one evangelical ministry. "Groups such as Samaritan's Purse, Food

for the Hungry, World Relief and many others provide hundreds of millions of dollars in anti-poverty programs at home and abroad.”

The church has been one of the most effective social outreach programs in history, even if the president doesn't think so.

This blog post originally appeared at pointofview.net/viewpoints/church-and-poverty/ on May 26, 2015.

Expanding the Biblical Worldview of Christians in Myanmar

Don Closson, who has taught Christian worldview on several continents, recently returned from Myanmar, which has in recent years been oppressed heavily by an atheistic regime. Representing his church Christ Fellowship in McKinney (TX), he shared with pastors and students a biblical perspective on world missions and how the Church there is both historically blessed and currently in a good position to reach their own nation (formerly known as Burma) with the gospel.

Details of a trip can begin to fade even as the effects of jet lag seem to grow stronger. Fortunately, I do remember many wonderful aspects of my whirlwind eleven-day trip with friend and pastor Ken Stoneking to Myanmar (the U.S. still insists on calling it Burma), one of the poorest and most oppressed countries in Asia.

Praise God for a Fruitful Trip

This was my most successful cross-cultural teaching experience to date. I say that for several reasons. First, the topic was timely and relevant to my audience of pastors and students at the Mandalay Bible Seminary. I spoke on God's Kingdom as it relates to world missions by breaking the topic down into four parts: the theological, historical, cultural and strategic perspectives. After I finished teaching the 20 hour class over five days, my host told me that he had been struggling with this very topic, particularly how to motivate the church leaders in Myanmar to play a greater role in missions. He expressed that many churches in Myanmar have an inward perspective and needed help seeing that believers have an obligation to be a blessing to those around us. He told me that my talks gave him a number of ideas to develop further after our visit.

Myanmar's Uniqueness

My preparation for this class increased both my own understanding and appreciation for the task of world missions. As I put the lessons together, I got more and more excited about my opportunity to share with the pastors and students. I realized that they live in a strategic place to reach a part of the world limited to Americans. Myanmar is in the global *10/40 window* that defines the least evangelized segment of the globe. In fact, its capital city Yangon is listed as one of the 100 gateway cities to this 10/40 region, the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitudes, according to The Joshua Project. The population of the world is growing more Asian every year and Myanmar is centrally located to impact China, Thailand, and India!

Connecting the Dots...

A serendipity was "connecting the dots" as I researched the relationship between the Church in Myanmar and the early

Reformation—going all the way back to John Wycliffe in the 1300s. Wycliffe challenged the authority of the Pope and the refusal of the Church to put the Bible in of the language of the common people. His followers were known as Lollards, and they preached anti-clerical and biblically-centered reforms.

Jon Huss read the teachings of Wycliffe in the 15th century and attempted to reform the church in Bohemia and the adjacent area called Moravia. Gaining a wide following, the Hussites influenced the region around Prague, Czech Republic, including a group which became known as the Moravian church. Huss was eventually burned at the stake in the center of Old Town Square in Prague for challenging the official doctrines of the Catholic Church. However, the Moravian Brethren continued on and became a powerful force for evangelism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Evangelist and church leader Count Zinzendorf was at the center of this movement during the late 1700s. He traveled to America and England meeting with Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening that brought revival to both England and the Colonies in the 1730s and 40s.

In 1806 a group of college students at Williams College prayed that God would again bring revival to the country, sparking a movement among college students known as the Haystack Prayer Revival. These five students would help influence a young man named Adoniram Judson to commit his life to missions. Judson set sail for India with his wife in 1812, but the East India Company would not allow them to enter because they feared that missionaries would stir up the Hindus. Taking the first boat East, Judson arrived in Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1813. After six years he had his first convert and when he died at age 62, after spending 38 years in Myanmar, it was estimated that there were over 200,000 Christians in the country. Judson was the first to translate the Bible into the Burmese language, a translation that was so good that it is still used today and preferred over recent translations because it is more

theologically conservative.

More Dots

The day after I left, an earthquake hit Myanmar. Thankfully, God spared the Mandalay Bible Seminary. Then our president visited for the first time in recognition of the political changes occurring there. Please pray for the Christians in this strategic country. They are standing boldly and are ready to be used of the Lord for the Great Commission.

the unfit ones

outside the box
in need of a home
but this box is comfort
it's all that we've known

why won't you just fit?
square peg
round hole

we'll file off your edges
('til you're smooth just like us)
with the blade of this Book
which says, by the way, don't fuss

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/06/23/the-unfit-ones/

When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?

Liberal:

Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:

Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do... we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:

[Moralistic Therapeutic Deism](#) is probably a problem for both

sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life... and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the [Trinity Forum](#), Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation... I'm sure there are others, including my [colleagues](#) who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/

If Christ isn't in the name, how will I know it's Christian?

July 22, 2011

Recently, long-standing evangelism non-profit [Campus Crusade for Christ](#) officially announced its plan to change its name to Cru. I admit the over-priced wine bar with mediocre cheeseboards was the first thing I thought of when I heard the news. But the second thing I thought was, *Naturally, that's what people call it anyway.* So I didn't think anything of it. I wasn't freaked out because Christ is no longer in the name. For heaven's sake, Christ himself said, "[Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves;](#)" not, "Subtlety is a sin. Be as obvious and explicit as you can be because that's how people will know you belong to me." No. He said, "[They will know you are my followers by your love for one another.](#)" But yet again, people only see Christians calling their brothers and sisters names like "coward" and "repulsive" and griping at each other. That's just great. (You can read more about how Christians are going to the mattresses here on [Fox News's report.](#))

I agree with Cru: they needed to drop "crusade" from the name. It certainly does recall The Crusades, an awful, dark, embarrassing time in Christianity, or at least medieval Christendom... I'll let my historian colleagues correct my armchair claims here; but that is all the more to the point: popular perception matters; words have baggage, and it is naive to think we can simply plow through it. I will say, it does make it a bit ironic that crusade is the one word they're keeping, even if it is a shortened version of it. Nonetheless,

Campus Crusade for Christ is a dated (and long) name; hence why people commonly shortened it to Cru even before the official name change.

I agree entirely with Cru vice president Steve Sellers when he said it is “more important that the organization is effective at proclaiming Jesus than it is important to have the name of Jesus in the name of the organization.” The fact that people are chalking this up to succumbing to political correctness is evidence that they care more about the outside than the inside; more about appearances than heart; more about rhetorical positions than actually taking a stand. This kind of attitude common among Christians is sad. It isn’t a witness to the world, as Cru has been and continues to be; and it isn’t worthy of the calling we have received in Christ. It reminds me of how many Christians understand “Christian art.” But that’s another blog post for another day.

Part of thinking through our Christianity includes thinking before reacting, perhaps especially on social networking sites where we feel emboldened by our anonymity amid the mob and where instant gratification is part of the point. It also includes being mindful of passages like Matthew 10 and 1 Peter 3 when quoting Romans 1:16.

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/22/if-christ-isnt-in-the-name-how-will-i-know-its-christian/

American Cultural Captivity

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of ways in which American Christians are culturally captive: individualism, consumerism,

racism, church growth values and globalization.

Cultural Captivity

Probe Ministries has dedicated itself to helping Christians be freed from cultural captivity. Therefore, I want to focus on how we as Americans are often captive to an American form of Christianity and thus are culturally captive.



Before we address the issue of cultural captivity, it might be worth mentioning how small American Christianity is compared to the rest of the world. Philip Jenkins reports that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”^{1}

We can put this in perspective by looking at what happened last century. In 1900, about eighty percent of the Christians in the world lived in Europe or North America. Now more than seventy percent live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

A century ago, if you were to describe a typical Christian in the world, you would probably describe a Christian living in the middle of the United States. Today a typical Christian would be a mother in Zambia or a college student in South Korea.

Christianity has also become diverse. “More people pray and worship in more languages and with more differences in styles of worship in Christianity than any other religion.”^{2} Put simply, American Christianity is no longer the norm in the world. Yet we as Americans often make the mistake of assuming that our Western values and assumptions should be the standard for the rest of the world.

Many of my observations come from insights in the book, *The*

Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity.{3} Soong-Chan Rah provides numerous examples of how the American church is captive to a white, Western view of the world and thus is culturally captive. Obviously, the church has been captive to materialism, but I will focus on some of his other descriptions of captivity, namely, individualism, consumerism, and racism.

It is worth noting that the phrase “captivity of the church” has been used in different contexts with varied meanings throughout church history. Martin Luther, for example, wrote the tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Catholic Church’s teaching on the sacraments to the captivity of the Israelites by the Babylonians.{4} R.C. Sproul has written about how many Christians are captive to the Pelagian view of the basic goodness of humanity instead of holding to the biblical view on original sin.{5} And Nancy Pearcey’s book *Total Truth* was written as an attempt at “liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity.”{6}

American Christians don’t like to think of themselves as being culturally captive. But the truth is that they have to a significant extent been assimilated into American culture. While they rightly criticize many of the sins and failings of American society, they are more conformed to the culture than they would like to believe.

Individualism

One example of American cultural captivity that Rah uses in his book is American individualism. He is hardly the first person to talk about this. Many social commentators over the last century have discussed and documented American’s obsession with individualism which has created an individual-focused worldview.

On the positive side, the rugged individualism of Americans is

responsible for the willingness to explore, build, and being willing to “go it alone” when circumstances required it. An individual willing to take a bold stand in the midst of theological heresy or cultural captivity is a good thing.

American individualism also has many negative sides. Christians should be aware of the impact of individualism on their theology. Rah says “the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces faith to a personal, private and individual faith.”[{7}](#)

To put this in perspective, consider that most of the books of the New Testament were written to churches and communities of believers. Only a handful of books (such as Titus and Philemon) were written to individuals. Yet when most Americans read the New Testament, they focus on the individual aspects of the biblical truth rather than consider the larger corporate aspect being presented in Scripture.

Often our Bible study focuses on the individual and personal understanding of God’s Word when so much of it applies to our relationship to the entire body of Christ. Often worship is self-focused and self-absorbed.

Ask a typical Christian about sin, and he or she is likely to describe it in personal terms. Sin certainly is personal, but it can also be corporate. But if you only have a personal, privatized faith, then you are also likely to see sin as merely a personal matter. Rah concludes: “Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology.”[{8}](#)

Consumerism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is consumerism. This is a topic that I have addressed before not only on radio but in my book *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*.^{10} Even secular commentators have noticed that American culture is infected with “affluenza.”^{11}

Rah says, “Materialism and consumerism reduce people to a commodity. An individual’s worth in society is based upon what assets they bring and what possessions they own.”^{12}

How has consumerism affected the American church? First, it means that we have been willing to include materialistic values into our worldview and lifestyle. Often it is difficult to distinguish Christian values from the materialistic values of American society. Some commentators point out that many of our churches look more like shopping malls than like churches.

Second, consumerism affects our mindset and perspective about spiritual things. A consumer mindset sees the spiritual life as a consumable product only if it benefits the individual. Believers with a consumer mindset usually aren’t living for eternity but for the here and now. Essentially they are so earthly minded, they are no heavenly good.

Third, consumerism affects the way we choose to fellowship with other believers. “American evangelicalism has created the unique phenomenon of church shopping—viewing church as yet another commodity and product to be evaluated and purchased. When a Christian family moves to a new city, how much of the standards by which they choose a church is based upon a shopping list of their personal tastes and wants rather than their commitment to a particular community or their desire to serve a particular neighborhood?”^{13}

Finally, consumerism even affects the way we measure success. We should be measuring success by the standards of Scripture.

Often, we measure it by the American consumer value system. Consider what many refer to as the ABCs of church growth. These are: attendance, building, and cash. Often the success of a church is measured in the same way a secular business would measure its success. The bottom line is often the number of attendees or the size of the church budget.

Jesus asked in Mark 8:36, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" A consumer mentality often chooses short-term solutions instead of eternal values despite the possibility of long-term negative consequences.

Racism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is racism. Not only was this a chapter in this book, but he actually wrote another book on the subject of racial and ethnic issues.[{14}](#)

Let's begin by stating that the idea of race is actually artificial. As I pointed out in a previous radio program on [Race and Racial Issues](#), both the Bible and modern science reject the idea of what today we call race. For example, the Bible teaches that God has made "from one blood every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). Here Paul is teaching the Athenians that they came from the same source in the creation as everyone else. We are all from one blood. In other words, there are no superior or inferior races. The Bible refers to people groups and nations, but does not label based upon skin color.

Race is also an imprecise scientific term. For example, people of every race can interbreed and produce fertile offspring. It turns out that the so-called differences in the races are not very great. A recent study of human genetic material of different races concluded that the DNA of any two people in the world would differ by just 2/10ths of one percent.[{15}](#) And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial

categories. The remaining ninety-four percent is “within race” variation. That is why “many scientists are now declaring that the concept of race has no basis in the biological sciences, more and more are concurring that race should be seen as a social invention.”[{16}](#)

How have racial ideas and prejudice affected the church? It is tempting to say that this was merely a problem in the past and should be no concern for a country moving towards a post-racial society. Soong-Chan Rah disagrees: “We are quick to deal with the symptoms of sin in America, but oftentimes are unwilling to deal with the original sin of America: namely, the kidnapping of Africans to use as slave labor, and usurping of lands belonging to Native Americans and subsequent genocide of indigenous peoples.”[{17}](#)

Race is an important issue not only in our past, but our future. Many church growth methods are based upon the idea of racial homogeneity. If it is true that the most segregated place in American culture is an American church at 11 AM on Sunday morning, perhaps we should pay more attention to race and racial issues.

Church Growth and Globalization

We can even see cultural captivity in the way we build our churches and the way we interact with the world. We can see the impact some of these ideas about race and racial issues have on church growth.

The popular church growth movement places a high priority on what is called the “homogeneous unit principle” in order to have substantial numerical growth within a congregation. Homogeneous churches tend to grow faster because church attendees are more comfortable with people with similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Racially and ethnically segregated churches are the natural

result of such teaching. And not only are segregated churches unbiblical, they are impractical. America in the twenty-first century will be more diverse than any previous century. It will no longer be dominated by white, Eurocentric people.

Church growth principles also prioritize “an individualized, personal evangelism and salvation over the understanding of the power of the gospel to transform neighborhoods and communities. They also emphasize a modern, social science approach to ministry, focusing on a pragmatic planning process that leads to measurable success goals.”[\[18\]](#)

Globalization is another challenge in the twenty-first century and can also illustrate how we spread our cultural captivity to the corners of the world. Globalization often means that one nation’s values and mindset predominate. In this case, American Christian values (which often are not biblical) are spread and dominate other cultures.

Thomas Friedman says, “Culturally speaking, globalization is largely, though not entirely, the spread of Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse—on a global scale.”[\[19\]](#) Globalization not only allows us to spread the influence of Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and McDonalds, but it also is the means by which American cultural captivity is spread to believers around the globe. Once these values are transmitted to the rest of the world, we will have a global Christianity that is just as culturally captive to American values as American Christians have been.

This is our challenge in the twenty-first century. American Christians cannot merely look at Christians in other countries and shake their heads about their captivity to their particular cultural values. We too must be aware of culture captivity in our midst and “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception” (Colossians 2:8). We have been assimilated into the American culture and should “not be conformed to this world” but instead should be

“transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Notes

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).
4. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* trans. A.T.W. Steinhaeuser, *Three Treaties* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947).
5. R.C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001.
6. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
7. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 30.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Kerby Anderson, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).
11. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).
12. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 48.
13. Ibid., 55.
14. Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010).
15. J. C. Gutin, “End of the Rainbow,” *Discover*, November 1994, 71-75.
16. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), xi.
17. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 69.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 8.

Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

The [Youth Transition Network](#) has released the results of research about why 70% of students in high school youth groups have left the church within a year after high school graduation.

One big reason is the unrealistic expectations that our young people sense from parents and church authority figures. When asked, "What does it mean to be a good Christian," students responded with a long list of do's and don'ts, always and nevers:

- No sex
- No secular music
- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model
- Don't doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible

- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back
- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

Wow. And that's a PARTIAL list! If someone said to you, "This is what it means to be a Christian," would you want to sign up?

What's also heartbreaking is what ISN'T on the list:

Reveling in God's love for me

Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy

Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

No wonder so many students live a "goody-two-shoes" Christian life on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and a completely other, separate life the rest of the week! No wonder they don't see the point of staying connected to a church once their parents stop making them go.

So many of our students feel that they can't be successful Christians. They think it's hopeless to live up to the expectations they sense. They think that being a Christian is just too hard.

Sounds like they need to be introduced to what grace looks like. Sounds like they need to have it modeled to them. Sounds like the rest of us need to embrace it ourselves and live it out so they can see it up close and personal, and see why following Jesus is so much more than checking off the boxes on our spiritual report cards!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_kids_leave_the_church_after_high_school on April 28, 2009.

Spiritual Family Gatherings

This week (July 6, 2010) my husband and I are back in the Chicago area, where we both grew up. We're enjoying a few days with his family first, and then mine. Both of us are from large families; I'm #1 of seven children, he's #3 of six. Most of our siblings have children, and some have their own grandkids, which means a lot of people when we gather.

There are no intentional, earth-shaking conversations, but important conversations happen while we're just hanging out with each other. They're important because they solidify our connections with each other.

In our families, there's fun too. Different kinds of fun, since our family cultures are quite different. In my husband's family, we enjoy "the littles," being their charming toddler selves when they have sufficient sleep and food. (And we give grace when they're not so charming because they need a nap or a snack.) One of the things my family is looking forward to is a gig where my brother's terrific band is playing. He's a marvelous keyboardist and entertainer, and they cover other people's songs. It's fun to clap and sing and watch Brother Bill bounce and sway at the piano with an enormous amount of energy, rejoicing at the way he displays his giftings.

The reason we came up here is for a family reunion fueled by Facebook connections. Some of us have reconnected online, and it will be good to spend time face to face as adults for the first time. Others of us only see each other every few years

at a wedding or funeral, and it will be such a blessing to just gather together simply to be together.

Family connections are different from any other. Blood relatives share genes and family history that have their own special kind of bonds. Cousins can enjoy a unique connection with each other that goes beyond same-age friends.

So often, God gives us earthbound experiences and illustrations to help us understand spiritual truths. When I think of the biblical injunction to “forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25), I think about how God wants us to connect with and enjoy our spiritual family the way we can enjoy our physical families.

When we hang out with our spiritual family, important conversations can happen simply because we’re together. There is fun to be had in these families, especially when people exercise the gifts God gave them.

There is certainly a different depth of connection with our spiritual family. We are blood relatives, because we are bound together by the blood of the Lord Jesus, Who bought us for Himself. We share spiritual DNA and the privilege of being family as well as friends.

And, at least in the cultures I am aware of, anywhere in the world, where the spiritual family gathers, there is always food. When we gather together, we should always remember why we are family, Whose family we are, and invite Him to the party. We can and should always remember the Lord whenever we break bread together, even if the bread is hot dog buns!

This blog post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/spiritual_family_gatherings

Cross Cultural Apologetics in Uganda

For any speaker, cross-cultural teaching is challenging. So when Pat Zukeran and I were asked to participate in two pastors' training conferences in Uganda, Africa, my prayer life took on a new urgency. Although the official language of Uganda is English, most of its citizens use one of twenty-nine other languages. Uganda is mostly an agricultural society and is somewhat isolated from the Western media. A majority of the pastors had received only a limited education, and would be fortunate to own a Bible much less have books for a theological library. Pat and I realized we would have to adjust the way we normally present our lessons to incorporate word pictures and stories to help the Ugandan translators effectively communicate our messages with this specialized audience.

However, a more central question was whether or not these pastors felt a need for the kind of apologetics information that Probe usually provides. Did they care about arguments for the authority of Scripture or the deity of Christ? Was maintaining a Christian worldview something they would understand or even be interested in? Would defenses against religious pluralism, Mormonism, and Islam be wanted or deemed unnecessary? I fervently prayed for wisdom and discernment as we made our preparations. Thankfully when it came time to go, I experienced a peace as I stepped out in faith. The Lord was sending us and I was eager to see how He would accomplish His plan for the Ugandan pastors!

Our time in Uganda was split into two one-week conferences. The first conference was near the town of Jinja, not far from

the country's eastern border with Kenya. This town is on the shores of Lake Victoria, near the headwaters of the Nile River. Our actual conference location was a 30 minute van ride to what we later discovered was the first church in Uganda, built in the 1880s by the Anglicans. Most of the attendees were lay pastors in area churches along with a few priests. We later discovered that the Anglican priests were responsible for as many as twenty churches and spent most of their time marrying, baptizing, and burying members. Much of the work of evangelizing and mentoring new believers fell upon the lay workers. As a result, this group of 125 workers was essential to energizing and equipping the Anglican movement in the region.

Pat opened the conference with a great session on the biblical mandate to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have in Christ. Some of the pastors admitted that they had never really thought about having to defend what they believe. They would share with their neighbors that they believed about Jesus, but they didn't even think about defending the faith if questions or objections arose. We later discovered that Jinja was the center of Mormon activities in Uganda. The pastors were shocked to hear what Mormons believe concerning the nature of God and specifically the person of Christ. They also responded positively to arguments against religious pluralism acknowledging that they were hearing them for the first time.

For the next leg of the trip, we headed out to Fort Portal to partner with ALARM Ministries on the western border of Uganda next to the Congo. We had received an e-mail from both the Ugandan government and our state department warning us about the ongoing conflict in the Congo. Fortunately, the fighting had not spilled over into Uganda. Other than refugees entering into the country we did not notice any problems.

It turns out that the group of pastors in Fort Portal was especially passionate about the apologetics material Pat and I covered during the six hours each day. They were experiencing a direct challenge



from Islam and had little information with which to respond. Many of them felt the burden to defend their faith from the rising influx of money and mosques from Libya. Libya's ruler Muammar Kaddafi has taken an interest in Uganda. In Fort Portal he has built a large, gold-domed mosque and a mansion for the local fifteen-year-old tribal king. Local Muslims have been targeting pastors and their sons by offering money and even cars to those who would convert to Islam. Sadly, some have done so.

In response, Pat and I decided to change our scheduled topics to make the last day entirely focused on Islam. I did a session on the history of the religion and its basic beliefs while Pat covered apologetic strategies to use when talking with a Muslim. At the end, one pastor jumped to his feet and began shouting in the local dialect. We wondered what we might have said to upset him and looked to the translator. Translated he said,

"For years the Muslims have challenged us and we've never been able to answer their challenges. Today, our teachers have provided answers and addressed the issues they bring up. Now for the first time I feel we are equipped to answer them when they come for their crusades here in Fort Portal!"

Another pastor agreed with him and stood up to say,

“For too long we have given bad answers or just beat around the bush. Now we can provide solid answers!”

Then a third pastor exclaimed,

“After receiving my new Bible (given to them by the mission trip funds) and hearing the teaching today, I love God’s Word more than ever!”



With that, they began celebrating by raising their new Bibles above their heads, dancing and singing a song titled, “Heaven and earth will pass away but God’s Word will endure forever.” It was a very moving for us to see the joy in their hearts

because of our teaching.

Our other material also connected as well. I spoke about temptations all Christians experience when life becomes difficult. We in the U.S. tend to trust in our wealth, technology, and entertainment when we should be turning to God for strength and endurance. In Africa, the tendency is to revert to the traditional African religions that include local witch doctors and ancestor worship. We had a number of good discussions about trusting only in God and the truth revealed in Scripture rather than in other belief systems and unbiblical practices.

Our time in Uganda reconfirmed the need for apologetics regardless of location and culture. Although the challenges may be different, Christians everywhere need to have confidence in the gospel message if they are going to take it into the world. It is our prayer that we left our brothers and sisters in Uganda with tools that will equip them to be more effective ambassadors for Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not

new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long [Mind Games Conference](#) will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

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

- www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.
- www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.
- collegel0lseminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.
- [Conversations CD](#) this information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.
- www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.
- TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

