

How Do You Spell Truth?

What is Truth?

Do you remember the commercial that asked, "How do you spell relief?" To the horror of elementary teachers everywhere, you were supposed to answer "R-O-L-A-I-D-S." In a similar fashion, today, if you ask someone, "How do you spell truth?" you might be surprised by the response. As a young Christian in college, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I will never forget the impact of his critique of modern culture and his use of the phrase "true truth." True truth might be thought of as truth with a capital "T" because it is based on the existence of a personal God, the creator of all that exists, and a revealer of Himself via the Bible and the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus. Today, if you ask average men and women how to spell truth, their responses will probably indicate a view that is strictly earthbound truth beginning with a small "t." God is not in the picture; in fact, belief in God would be seen as a handicap in discerning truth accurately. The methodology of science provides this type of truth and also sets its limits. However, there is another spelling for truth that is finding more and more adherents. Today, especially on college campuses, the question might be answered with C-O-N-S-T-R-U-C-T, as in social construct. Like the Roloids answer above, this response doesn't seem to fit. In this approach truth is generated by the social group, whether they be white middle-class male Americans or female southeast Asians. What is true for one group may not be true for another, and there is no such thing as universal truth, something that is true for all people, all the time.

These three conceptions of truth describe three comprehensive systems of thought that are active in Western culture and in the U.S. The first (Truth) portrays Christian theism (what some refer to as a pre-modern view). Although this view is

still quite popular, many in our churches function as if they were members of the second group which is often classified as a modernist perspective (truth). The third group (truth as social construct) is a fairly recent arrival, but has become highly influential both in academia and in common culture. It has been called postmodernism. People within these three different perspectives see the world quite differently. Until recently, Christians focused their apologetics, or defense of the faith, mainly at modernists and as a result often attempted to justify belief within a modernist framework of truth. Now we are being called upon to respond to a postmodern view that will require a far different approach. Although postmodernism has many aspects that Christians must reject, it has also revealed just how much Christian thinking has been influenced by the modernist challenge.

In this discussion we will look at modernism and postmodernism in light of Christian evangelism and apologetics. We are now fighting a two-front battle, and we need to develop different tools for each. We also are in need of a vaccine against assuming the presuppositions of either modernism or postmodernism as we attempt to live and think within a biblical framework. Much of this debate revolves around the notion of what is true, or perhaps how we as individuals can know what is true. This may sound like an ivory tower discussion, but it is a vital topic as we attempt to share the truth of the Gospel to those we encounter.

The Modernist View

In their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*^{[\[1\]](#)}, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh use an interesting metaphor to describe the different views of truth and the ways that we perceive it in our culture. Imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds,

"There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." Each of the umpires may make the same call, but they will be making it for very different reasons. The position of the first umpire is known as naive realism. He believes that his calls correspond to something quite real and substantive called balls and strikes. He is also very confident that he can discern what is a ball or a strike with a high degree of accuracy. This confidence is a trademark of modernism. As we will see later, the other two umpires reflect positions that reject such a confidence in knowing what is true. It doesn't mean that they don't make decisions, they just lack the confidence that their decision conforms exactly to what is really "out there."

Modernism grew out of the Enlightenment and matured in the last century to dominate much of European and American thought. Its greatest American advocate has been John Dewey. Writing around the turn of the century, Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism has dominated American educational theory to this day. In his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,^{2} he highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking. First, modernism rejects the reality of supernatural events or beings. It focuses on this world and the secular. Second, it rejects the authority of the church or religion in general and replaces it with the power of individual minds utilizing the methodology of science. Third, it replaces the static world of the middle ages with a belief in progress towards a future human utopia. Finally, it believes that the patient scientific study of nature will provide the means for this utopia. Humankind is to conquer and control nature for its use.

The implications of modernism were and are profound. Under its umbrella, humans were seen as biological machines just as the universe became understood as an impersonal mechanism needing neither a creator nor a sustainer God. All of human behavior

could conceivably be explained biologically, given enough time for science to study the data. As a result, humans are viewed as self-governing beings and free to embrace whatever their rational minds discover. Modernists might be called rationalistic optimists because they are quite confident in their ability to perceive “reality as reality, relatively unaffected by our own bias, distortion, or previous belief system”[\[3\]](#). One’s conclusions can reflect reality outside ourselves, not just thoughts within our own minds.

With the advent of modernism Christianity found itself under the cold calculating eye of science. Modernism tells a story of mankind as its own savior that is, with the help of science, modernism has no need for a savior provided by God. Sin is not in its vocabulary, and redemption is not needed; humans lack only education.

Next, we will look at the arrival of postmodernism and its accompanying challenges.

The Postmodern Condition

We have considered the impact of modernism on the question of what is true. Now we will focus on the postmodern view. Where modernism is very confident that it can discover truth via science, postmodernism is defined by its skepticism that truth of any type can be known. Much of postmodernism is negative response to the confidence of modernism. Yet, postmodernism is a strange combination of a vague romantic optimism that mankind can solve its social and economic problems, with a dramatic pessimism of ever knowing truth at a universal level. This reflects the strong influence of atheistic existentialism on postmodern thinking. Individuals are told they must stand up and confront an absurd existence and impose meaning and order on to it, all the while admitting that there is no universal truth guiding what they choose to do.

To a postmodern, modernism ended with atomic bombs being

dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Modernism led to imperialism and the colonialization of the third world by the supposedly more modern and advanced industrial nations. It led to the destruction of the environment, and it has led to a naive confidence that technology can solve any problem in its path.

Often, postmodernism is known more for what it doesn't believe than for what it does. One author writes that we have come to the point where answers to the "questions of ultimate concern about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant."[{4}](#)

Let's consider some of the significant themes that postmodernists have written about. The first is the theory that truth is a social construct. This theory would argue, for example, that Western modernity which has come to dominate the globe and define what is rational and normative for human life is not in place because it is any truer than other worldviews. Instead, it is a set of ideas that people have used to manipulate others with in order to gain power over them. Those who are not "scientific" are viewed as primitive and as a result are marginalized and finally oppressed by Western culture. Western culture, then, has not discovered how things really are; instead, it has imposed one view on the world to its advantage. Our basic problem is that all ideas, all concepts, and all truths are communicated via language, and all language is man made. No one can step outside of language to see whether or not it corresponds with reality. In the words of one postmodernist, all principles (or ultimate truths) are really preferences.

As a result of postmodernist thinking, anyone who claims to know something that is universally true, true for everyone, everywhere, anytime, is accused of marginalizing those who disagree. Once a person or group is marginalized, a justification has been established to oppress them. To

postmodernists, a totalizing meta- narrative (a story that claims to answer all the big questions about reality) always results in violence towards those outside the accepted paradigm. They point to Western culture's aptitude towards conquering and destroying other cultures in the name of progress and modernization.

One can easily see that a Christian worldview conflicts with much of what postmodernity teaches. Christianity claims to be true for everyone, everywhere. It is not surprising that postmodern feminists and others have pointed their finger at Christianity for oppressing women, gays, and anyone else who holds to a different construct of reality. How do we as Christians respond to this critique? Do we side with the modernists and join the fight against postmodern influences? Or can we find something helpful in the issues raised by postmodernism?

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen argues that, "When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it." Another has written that modernity has given us "as much terror as we can take."[\[5\]](#) Postmodernists argue that by claiming to know the truth we automatically marginalize and oppress others. It encourages the questioning of everything that modernism has come to accept as natural or good. Capitalism, patriarchy, and liberal humanism are just a few ideas that modernity has left us with and that we have to realize are just social constructs. We are free, according to postmoderns, to throw off anything that doesn't work since all institutions and social norms are social constructs created by society itself. However, with this freedom comes disorientation. The current social scene in America is a prime example of this effect. Traditions about family, gender roles, economic responsibility, and social norms are being questioned and abandoned. This has left us with a sense of loss, a horrifying loss that acknowledges that there is nothing solid

undergirding why we live the way we do. It has left us with an amazing amount of pluralism and a radical multiculturalism that some feel has removed essential buffers to chaos.

The confidence of modern man in rugged individualism has been deconstructed by postmodernism to reveal the inevitability of violence and subjugation. What is left? Many postmodernists argue that not only is the self a construct, that the autonomous self is a myth, but that the self is actually a servant of language. Most people see language as a tool to be used by individuals to express ideas to another person. Many postmodernists see things quite differently. They would argue that our language uses us instead. Another way of thinking of this is that we don't have a language, a language has us. All that we know of reality is given to us by the symbols present in our language. This has created a self-identity problem of dramatic proportions for postmoderns. Many have responded by embracing this lack of rootedness by seeing that life is being in a "state of continuous construction and reconstruction."

Now that we have briefly surveyed both the modern and postmodern positions, let's begin to think about them from a biblical standpoint. We should first acknowledge that when doing apologetics, or defending the faith, we are not merely attempting to win arguments or make others look foolish. Apologetics should always be done in the context of evangelism, the goal of which is to share the gospel in a meaningful way, to convey the truth of special revelation concerning God's plan for salvation with humility and compassion.

Christians should probably reject both the confidence of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism regarding our ability to know and understand truth. Modernity's dependence on science as the only valid source for truth is too limited and fails to consider the effects of the fall on our ability to know something without bias. We are often sinfully rational, willfully rejecting what is true. On the other hand,

the postmodern view leaves us without hope that we can know anything about what is really real. It holds that we are literally a prisoner of the language game played by our culture group, regardless of its social class or race.

Next, we will consider how postmodern thinking should affect evangelism.

A Christian View of Truth

We have been considering the challenges of modern and postmodern thinking to the notion of truth and the communication of the Gospel. Earlier we used the metaphor of umpires who call strikes and balls within different frameworks for knowing. The ump who “calls ‘em the way they are” is a naive realist; the second ump who “calls ‘em like he sees ‘em” represents the critical realist view, and the ump who says “they ain’t nothin’ until I call ‘em” portrays a radical perspectivist view. The questions before us are, What view should a Christian take? and How does this choice affect the way in which we do apologetics and evangelism?

If we accept the view of the first ump who “calls ‘em the way they are,” we have adopted a modernist perspective. Unfortunately, experience tells us that the assumptions that come with this view don’t seem to hold up. It assumes that common sense and logic will always lead people to the Truth of the Gospel we just need to give people enough evidence. While this approach does work with some, it works mainly because they already agree with us on a theistic, Western view of reality. However, modernism has also led many to see the universe as a godless machine run by the logical laws of nature as discovered by science. For example, New Agers or Hindus have a common understanding that leads them elsewhere. Their basic assumptions about reality are quite different from ours, and it is much more difficult to find common ground with them. In fact, they have consciously rejected the Western view of reality.

The third ump who says “they ain’t nothin’ until I call ‘em” sees truth as entirely personal. Although we admit that people do create personal frameworks for interpreting life and reality, there is ultimately only one true reality, one true God. However, we might learn from the perspectivist in order to find common ground when witnessing. One commonality is the notion of an acute consciousness of suffering by marginalized people. Christianity shares this concern yet offers a radically different solution.

The second umpire states that there are balls and strikes, and “I call ‘em as I see ‘em.” This view of truth, called critical realism, recognizes that there is one true reality, but that our ability to perceive it is limited. The Bible teaches that sin has distorted our view. Even as believers we must admit that we don’t always understand why God does what He does. This is partially because truth is personal in the sense that it is rooted in a personal God, and we can never know all that there is to know about Him. Even Peter, who walked with Christ, didn’t understand God’s plans. He rebuked Jesus when Jesus told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and resurrected.

The best evangelistic approach attempts to find common ground with an unbeliever while never relinquishing all that is true of the Christian worldview. If rational, logical arguments are persuasive, use them. If storytelling works, as in the more narratively oriented societies of the Middle East, use it. We should not be limited to either a modernist or postmodernist view of truth, but work from a distinctively Christian perspective that holds that the God who created the universe wants us to gently instruct others in the hope that He will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than*

It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 47-49.

3. Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 23-26.

4. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

5. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, p. 35.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 52.

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Television – A Christian Response

Years ago I witnessed something that has been written indelibly in my memory. The occasion was a week-long summer conference for high school students on the campus of a major university. I was serving as the leader of one of the groups at this conference. In fact, I was given the elite students. They were described as the “Advanced School” because they had attended the conference previously, and they had leadership positions on their respective campuses.

Each of our teaching sessions, which were usually focused on

matters of worldviews, theology, cultural criticism, and evangelism, began with music. Before one memorable session the music leader began to play the theme music from various television shows of the past. To my great surprise the students began to sing the lyrics to each of the tunes with great gusto. They were able to respond to each theme without hesitation; the songs were ingrained in their memories. Obviously they had heard the themes and watched the programs numerous times during their relatively young lives. Whether it was "Gilligan's Island," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," "Sesame Street," or a host of others, they knew all of them. Whereas many of these bright students could not relate a good grasp of biblical content, they had no problem recalling the content of frivolous television programs that were not even produced during their generation.

The Rise and Influence of TV

In a short period of time television has cemented itself in our cultural consciousness. As you read the following titles of television programs certain memories will probably come to mind: "The Milton Berle Show," "I Love Lucy," "The Steve Allen Show," "The \$64,000 Question," "The Millionaire," "Leave It To Beaver," "Gunsmoke," "The Andy Griffith Show," "Candid Camera," "As the World Turns," "The Twilight Zone," "Captain Kangaroo," "Dallas," "Happy Days," "Let's Make a Deal," "The Tonight Show," "Sesame Street," "M*A*S*H*," "All in the Family," "The Cosby Show," "Monday Night Football."

Perhaps you remember a particular episode, a certain phrase, an indelible scene, a unique character, or, as with my high school friends, the title tune. These television programs, and a litany of others, have permeated our lives. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a more pervasive, influential conduit of ideas and images than television. For a large segment of the population "television has so refashioned and reshaped our lives that it is hard to imagine what life was

like before it.”(1)

This powerful medium began to gather the attention of the population soon after World War II. “By 1948, the number of stations in the United States had reached 48, the cities served 23, and sales of TV sets had passed sales of radios.”(2) But it was not until “1952 . . . that TV as we know it first began to flow to all sections of the United States.”(3) Interest was so intense that “by 1955 about two-thirds of the nation’s households had a set; by the end of the 1950s there was hardly a home in the nation without one.”(4) And by 1961 “there were more homes in the United States with TV than with indoor plumbing.”(5) Such statistics have continued to increase to the point where “99 percent of all households possess at least one TV, and most have two or more.”(6)

So the middle- to late-twentieth century has included the development of one of the most dramatic and powerful methods of communication in recorded history.

Can TV Be Redeemed?

But as with all media, the Christian should weigh carefully the use and abuse of TV. Some are quick to call it an “idiot box” while continuing to watch it endlessly. Others, borrowing from a famous poem by T.S. Eliot, may disparagingly refer to TV as a “wasteland.” Still others, as with certain evangelists, may claim that TV is the most powerful tool yet devised for the spreading of the gospel.(7)

But whether your perception of TV is negative or positive, the Christian must understand that the medium is here to stay, and it will continue to have a significant influence on all of us, whether we like it or not. And whether we are discussing TV or any other media, it is the Christian’s responsibility “to maintain an informed, critical approach to all media while joyfully determining how best to use every medium for the

glory of God.”(8)

There is no doubt this is a challenging endeavor, because at first glance it may be difficult to picture ways in which TV can be used legitimately for God’s glory. Perhaps many of us tend to have what may be called the “Michal Syndrome.” Michal, King David’s wife, rebuked David for dancing before the ark of God. She had concluded that the “medium” of dancing in this manner was shameful. But Scripture obviously demonstrates that she was the one to be rebuked in that she “had no child to the day of her death” (2 Samuel 6:12-23). We will do well to heed at least one of the lessons of this story and be cautious if we are tempted to reject TV outright as a potentially unredeemable avenue of expression.

This is an important thought in light of the fact that many highly esteemed thinkers have espoused pessimistic analyses of TV. For example, Malcolm Muggeridge, the great English sage, wrote: “Not only can the camera lie, it always lies.”(9) In fairness we must add that Muggeridge added balance in his critique and even agreed to be interviewed on William Buckley’s “Firing Line,” but his skepticism continues to be well-chronicled. Jacques Ellul has written in the same vein. Neil Postman, another respected critic, wrote an oft-quoted book entitled *Amusing Ourselves To Death* in 1985. In his volume Postman argues that Aldous Huxley’s belief that “what we love will ruin us” is a perfect description of TV.(10) More recently Kenneth Myers, an insightful cultural critic, also has concluded that it is highly doubtful that the medium can be redeemed(11) (that is, brought under the Lordship of Christ and conformed to His teachings). Such gloomy perspectives continue to be expressed by many of those who study media.

On the other hand, such viewpoints have been questioned, if not rejected, by many other well-qualified critics. Their analyses of TV usually are based upon a more optimistic view of technology. Clifford Christians, a communications scholar, writes: “I defend television. Contrary to Postman and Ellul, I

do not consider it the enemy of modern society, but a gift of God that must be transformed in harmony with the redeemed mind.”(12) Quentin Schultze, another communications scholar, believes that many Christian intellectuals “are comfortable with printed words and deeply suspicious of images, especially mass-consumed images.”(13) David Marc, an American Civilization professor, offers a provocative outlook by relating that the “distinction between taking television on one’s own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance. It is the difference between activity and passivity. It is what saves TV from becoming the homogenizing, monolithic, authoritarian tool that the doomsday critics claim it is.”(14) We must view TV with an active mind that responds with a Christian worldview. We are responsible for what TV communicates to us.

How Should We Respond to TV?

So it is obvious there are great disparities of opinion among those who think about TV more than most of us. How can we humbly approach the subject while considering both positions? I propose that we reflect on an answer to this question by giving attention to several facets of a response.

TV and Communication

First, we should remember that as with many contemporary forms of communication and entertainment, the Bible does not include explicit insights about TV. We are left to investigate applicable passages and gather perspectives based upon our study. Let’s consider some of those passages and see if we can discover needed insights.

Neil Postman relates an intriguing thought regarding the second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4, NASB). Postman’s response to this verse is that

“it is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.”(15) Postman’s statement strongly suggests that the ways in which we communicate significantly influence our lives. He continues by stating that “iconography thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter a culture.”(16)

There is much food for thought in such statements. First, it is true that the “author,” in this case God via the personality of Moses, was emphasizing the importance of “forms of communication.” But it is a misapplication of the text to conclude anything more than that it is not permissible for man to form visual images of God. Second, it is also true that “forms of communication” are connected to the “quality of a culture.” But again it is a mis- application to conclude that visual images cannot be a positive or beneficial part of that quality. Third, it is not true that “iconography thus became blasphemy” for the people of God. If that were so it would make a mockery of the tabernacle and temple that were so important in the cultural and religious life of the Israelites (in particular, see Exod. 31 and 35-40). Both structures contained icons that were representative of God’s revelation, and they were filled with images that were pleasing to the eye. There was an aesthetic dimension. Of course the icons were not representative of God Himself, but they were representative of His actions and commands. They symbolized God’s presence and power among His people.

The point of this dialogue with Postman and his analysis of the second commandment is that he has related one of the more prominent biases against TV. That is, TV is an image-bearer, and thus it is inferior to forms of communication that are word-bearers. Even if we were to concede that this is true, it does not follow that the inferiority of TV means that it cannot be a legitimate form of communication. It simply means that it may be inferior to other forms. Steak may be superior

to hamburger, but that doesn't mean steak should be our only food.

Let's reverse the emphasis upon the superiority of written communication by considering a contrast between reading the letters of the apostle Paul and actually being in his presence and hearing him expound upon them. Most of us would probably say that actually hearing Paul is superior to reading him, but few of us would say that reading his letters is not a worthwhile enterprise. If we follow Postman's reasoning, and the reasoning of other critics, we may be tempted to conclude that the issue of inferiority/superiority could lead us to reject reading Paul because that does not provide the same level of communication as would his actual presence. Television may be inferior to other things in our lives, but that doesn't mean it must be excluded.

The Cultural Mandate and TV

Second, we should analyze TV in light of the cultural mandate. Clifford Christians has related that Christians "often seem to be aliens in a strange land." That is, we are living in a secularized society that makes it increasingly difficult to assert biblical principles. But he goes on to draw a parallel between the ancient Israelites in their Babylonian captivity to our present condition. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah: "Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce.... And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.... For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:4,7,11).

This passage can serve to remind us that we are to "convert cultural forms, not...eliminate them wholesale." (17) The Israelites were forced to live in a culture not their own, but they were still enjoined to "cultivate" it. In the same sense

we should be cultivating the medium of television.

TV Is Still In Its Infancy

Third, we should give thought to the fact that TV is still in its childhood. As a result, it is possible that it has not yet realized its potential beyond the banalities that we tend to associate with it at the present time. A study of the history of various media indicates that all of them have proceeded through stages of development, and that is still true. For example, even though drama was born in ancient Greece, its development had to wait to a great extent until Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Era. During this period, the theater began to acquire its present form, and many were outraged. It was a suspicious and inferior form of communication in the opinion of the learned and pious. And with this development came the idea of a "spectator" who observed the action and dialogue on the stage. This manner of communication or entertainment led the London city fathers to eradicate it from the city into the suburbs. Thus the famous Globe theater was built on the south side of the Thames and not in the walled city.(18)

So it could be that many of us, like the London city fathers, are too impatient, or we are biased toward certain media. We often cry that there is reason to be impatient or biased because of the TV content that has become so much a part of our lives. Yes, there is too much violence, sex, secularism, and there are too many vapid plots and insipid dialogue. But our concerns about content should not automatically lead us to assume that the medium is irredeemable. Perhaps we have not allowed TV the time it may need to attract its most creative and redeeming champions. And again, this is where the Christian should enter armed with the cultural mandate. The Christian who seeks to communicate through TV should understand its peculiarities and surpass the unimaginative, superficial, narcissistic productions offered by too many contemporary Christians.

TV and Visual Literacy

Fourth, we should give consideration to the possibility that many of us are visually illiterate. Just as the disciples of Jesus were frequently “parable illiterate,” we may have need for more insights as to how to react to TV. This may sound strange since such a great percentage of the population spends so much time with TV. Unfortunately, most of us don’t “view” TV. Instead, we “watch” TV. That is, we don’t often engage in a mental, much less verbal, discussion with the images and dialogue.

The critical viewer of television has the difficult job of translating the tube’s images into words. Then the words can be processed by the viewer’s mind, evaluated and discussed with other viewers. This is a crucial process that all Christians must engage in if they hope to be discerning users of the tube.(19)

Much of current television is designed to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the intellect. The frenetic style of MTV, for example, is increasingly used for everything from commercials to news programs. Unless we want to leave TV as a medium that only applies to our emotions, we must find ways to interact intellectually with what TV delivers. And perhaps more importantly, we need to encourage a new generation to become visually literate to the point that they will begin to affect the use of the medium.

Good Decisions About TV

Fifth, many of us need to make decisions prior to spending time with the medium. This should be done not only for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren. Perhaps a good rule for turning on the tube is to “map out” what may be worthy of our attention each day. Of course this means that we will have to spend a few minutes to read about what is available. But surely this will prove to be beneficial. Instead of automatically activating the power switch as part

of a daily routine, regardless of what may be "on" at the time, selectivity should be routine.

Television is with us and will continue to exert its influence in ways that are difficult to predict at the present time. The proliferation of cable TV, the increasing interest in satellite systems, the unfolding of futuristic technology, virtual reality, and a host of other developments will probably force us to give even more attention to TV than we have to this point in its history.

So as Christians it appears that we will continue to have the same dilemma: do we reject the medium, or do we redeem it? Since we are called to glorify God in all we do, it appears we should not leave TV out of this mandate. Let us commit ourselves to the redemption of television.

Notes

1. Douglas Gomery, "As the Dial Turns," *Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 1993), 41.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. John W. Kennedy, "Redeeming the Wasteland," *Christianity Today* (2 October 1995), 92-102.
6. Quentin J. Schultze, *Redeeming Television* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 28.
7. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:
8. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), viii.
9. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 157-77.
10. Clifford G. Christians, "Television: Medium Rare," *Pro Rege* (March 1990), 2.
11. Schultze, 28.

12. David Marc, "Understanding Television," *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1984), 35-36.
13. Postman, 9.
14. Ibid.
15. Christians, 5.
16. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators* (New York: Random House, 1992), 308 9.
17. Schultze, 94-95.

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Wealth and Poverty – A Biblical Perspective

Questions surrounding the biblical perspective on wealth and poverty are important to Christians for two reasons. First, a biblical view of wealth is necessary if we are to live godly lives, avoiding asceticism on the one extreme and materialism on the other. Second, a biblical view of poverty is essential if we are to fulfill our responsibilities to the poor.

A Biblical View of Wealth

Our materialistic culture is seducing Christians into an economic lifestyle that does not glorify God. The popularity of television programs such as "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" and the veneration of social groups such as the glamorous "yuppies" testify to our society's materialistic values, values that many Christians have adopted.

Even within the Christian community, believers are bombarded with unbiblical views of wealth. At one extreme are those who preach a prosperity gospel of "health and wealth" for all

believers. At the other extreme are radical Christians who condemn all wealth and imply that *rich Christian* is a contradiction in terms.

What, then, is the truly biblical view of wealth? At first glance, the Bible seems to teach that wealth is wrong for Christians. It appears even to condemn the wealthy. After all, both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets preached against materialism and seemed to say at times that true believers cannot possess wealth. If this is so, then all of us in Western society are in trouble, because we are all wealthy by New Testament standards.

But a comprehensive look at the relevant biblical passages quickly reveals that a biblical view of wealth is more complex. In fact, Scripture teaches three basic principles about wealth.

First, wealth itself is not condemned. For example, we read in Genesis 13:2 that Abraham had great wealth. In Job 42:10 we see that God once again blessed Job with material possessions. In Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, wealth is seen as evidence of God's blessing (Deut. 8; 28; Prov. 22:2; Eccles. 5:19).

But even though wealth might be an evidence of God's blessing, believers are not to trust in it. Proverbs, Jeremiah, 1 Timothy, and James all teach that the believer should not trust in wealth but in God (Prov. 11:4; 11:28; Jer. 9:23; 1 Tim. 6:17; James 1:11; 5:2).

Second, when wealthy people in the Bible were condemned, they were condemned for the means by which their riches were obtained, not for the riches themselves. The Old Testament prophet Amos railed against the injustice of obtaining wealth through oppression or fraud (4:11; 5:11). Micah spoke out against the unjust scales and light weights with which Israel defrauded the poor (6:1). Neither Amos nor Micah condemned

wealth *per se*; they only denounced the unjust means by which it is sometimes achieved.

Third, Christians should be concerned about the effect wealth can have on our lives. We read in Proverbs 30:8-9 and Hosea 13:6 that wealth often tempts us to forget about God. Wealthy believers may no longer look to God for their provision because they can meet their basic needs. We read in Ecclesiastes 2 and 5 that people who are wealthy cannot really enjoy their wealth. Even billionaires often reflect on the fact that they cannot really enjoy the wealth that they have. Moreover, Proverbs 28:11 and Jeremiah 9:23 warn that wealth often leads to pride and arrogance.

So the Bible does not condemn those who are wealthy. But it does warn us that if God blesses us with wealth, we must keep our priorities straight and guard against the seductive effects of wealth.

A Biblical View of Poverty

The Bible classifies the causes of poverty into four different categories. The first cause of poverty is oppression and fraud. In the Old Testament (e.g., Prov. 14:31; 22:7; 28:15) we find that many people were poor because they were oppressed by individuals or governments. Many times, governments established unjust laws or debased the currency, measures that resulted in the exploitation of individuals.

The second cause of poverty is misfortune, persecution, or judgment. In the book of Job we learn that God allowed Satan to test Job by bringing misfortune upon him (1:12-19). Elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 109:16; Isa. 47:9; Lam. 5:3) we read of misfortune or of God's judgment on a disobedient people. When Israel turned from God's laws, God allowed foreign nations to take them into captivity as a judgment for their disobedience.

The third cause of poverty is laziness, neglect, or gluttony. Proverbs teaches that some people are poor because of improper habits and apathy (10:4; 13:4; 19:15; 20:13; 23:21).

The final cause of poverty is the culture of poverty. Proverbs 10:15 says, "The ruin of the poor is their poverty." Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack the nutrition and the education that would enable them to be successful in the future.

Poverty and Government

While government should not have to shoulder the entire responsibility for caring for the poor, it must take seriously the statements in Leviticus and Proverbs about defending the poor and fighting oppression. Government must not shirk its God-given responsibility to defend the poor from injustice. If government will not do this, or if the oppression is coming from the government itself, then Christians must exercise their prophetic voice and speak out against governmental abuse and misuse of power.

Government must first establish laws and statutes that prohibit and punish injustice. These laws should have significant penalties and be rigorously enforced so that the poor are not exploited and defrauded. Second, government must provide a legal system that allows for the redress of grievances where plaintiffs can bring their case to court for settlement.

A second sphere for governmental action is in the area of misfortune. Many people slip into poverty through no fault of their own. In these cases, government must help to distribute funds. Unfortunately, the track record of government programs is not very impressive. Before the implementation of many of the Great Society programs, the percentage of people living below the poverty level was 13.6 percent. Twenty years later,

the percentage was still 13.6 percent.

We need a welfare system that emphasizes work and initiative and does not foster dependency and laziness. One of the things integral to the Old Testament system and missing in our modern system of welfare is a means test. If people have true needs, we should help them. But when they are lazy and have poor work habits, we should admonish them to improve. Our current welfare system perpetuates poverty by failing to distinguish between those who have legitimate needs and those who need to be admonished in their sin.

Poverty and the Church

The church has the potential to offer some unique solutions to poverty. Yet ever since the depression of the 1930s and the rise of the Great Society programs in the 1960s, the church has tended to abdicate its responsibility toward the poor to the government.

A Cooperative Effort

In the Old Testament, there were two means to help the poor. The first was through the gleaning laws listed in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22. As farmers reaped their crops, they would leave the corners of their fields unharvested, and anything that fell to the ground was left for the poor.

The second method used to help the poor was the tithe. In Leviticus 27:30 we find that the tithe provided funds both for the church and for the poor. The funds were distributed by the priests to those who were truly needy.

In the New Testament, the church also had a role in helping to meet the needs of the poor. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul talks about a collection that was sent from the churches to the Jerusalem believers. We also find many scriptural admonitions calling for Christians to distribute their resources to others

compassionately (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Tim. 5:9-10; 6:18; James 1:27).

These verses concerning the gleaning laws and the tithe seem to indicate that both the government and the church should be involved in helping the poor. Ideally, the church should be in the vanguard of this endeavor. Unfortunately, the church has neglected its responsibility, and government is now heavily involved in poverty relief.

I believe poverty relief should be a cooperative effort between the government and the church. As I noted above, government can provide solutions to exploitation and oppression by passing and enforcing just laws. It can also provide solutions to economic misfortune through various spending programs. But it cannot solve the problems of poverty by addressing injustice and misfortune alone. Poverty is as much a psychological and spiritual problem as it is an economic problem, and it is in this realm that the church can be most effective. Although salvation is not the sole answer, the church is better equipped than the government to meet the psychological and spiritual needs of poverty-stricken people. Most secular social programs do not place much emphasis on these needs and thus miss an important element in the solution to poverty.

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

As I stated earlier, one of the causes of poverty is the culture of poverty. People are poor because they are poor. An individual who grows up in a culture of poverty is destined for a life of poverty unless something rather dramatic takes place. Poor nutrition, poor education, poor work habits, and poor family relationships can easily condemn an individual to perpetual poverty.

Here is where the church can provide some answers. First, in the area of capital investment, churches should develop a mercies fund to help those in need. Christians should reach

out to those in poverty by distributing their own financial resources and by supporting ministries working in this area. Such an outreach provides churches with a mechanism to meet the physical needs of the poor as well as a context to meet their spiritual needs.

A second solution is for Christians to use their gifts and abilities to help those caught in the web of poverty. Doctors can provide health care. Educators can provide literacy and remedial reading programs. Businesspeople can impart job skills.

This kind of social involvement can also provide opportunities for evangelism. Social action and evangelism often work hand in hand. When we meet people's needs, we often open up opportunities to reach them for Jesus Christ.

This leads to a third solution. Christian involvement can lead to spiritual conversion. By bringing these people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, we can break the culture of poverty. Second Corinthians 5:17 says that we become new creatures in Jesus Christ. Being born again can improve attitudes and family relationships. It can give new direction and the ability to overcome handicaps and hardships.

A fourth area of Christian involvement is to call people to their biblical task. Proverbs 6:6 says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard, observe her ways and be wise"; we see here that we are to admonish laziness and poor habits that lead to poverty. In the New

Testament, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of their church rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). Christians should gently but firmly admonish those whose poverty is the result of poor work habits to begin taking responsibility for their own lives.

The church can help those addicted to alcohol or other drugs to overcome their dependencies. Christians can work to heal

broken families. Dealing with these root causes will help solve the poverty problem.

The Christian Lifestyle

What, then, does this biblical view of wealth and poverty have to say about the way Christians should live? A brief survey of Scripture shows godly people living in a variety of different economic situations. For example, Daniel served as secretary of state in pagan administrations and no doubt lived an upper-middle-class lifestyle. Ezekiel lived outside the city in what might have been considered a middle-class lifestyle. And Jeremiah certainly lived a lower-class lifestyle.

Which prophet best honored God with his lifestyle? The question is of course ridiculous. Each man honored God and followed God's leading in his life. Yet each lived a very different lifestyle.

Christians must reject the tacit assumption implicit in many discussions about economic lifestyle. There is no ideal lifestyle for Christians. One size does not fit all. Instead, we must seek the Lord to discern His will and calling in our lives.

As we do this, there are some biblical principles that will guide us. First, we should acknowledge that God is the Creator of all that we own and use. Whether we are rich or poor, we must acknowledge God's provision in our lives. We are stewards of the creation; the earth is ultimately the Lord's (Ps. 24:1).

Second, we should "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). We must recognize and avoid the dangers of wealth. Greed is not an exclusive attribute of the rich, nor is covetousness an exclusive attribute of the poor. Christians must guard against the effect of wealth on their spiritual lives. There is nothing wrong with owning

possessions. The problem comes when the possessions own us.

Third, Christians must recognize the freedom that comes with simplicity. A simple lifestyle can free us from the dangers of being owned by material possessions. It can also free us for a deeper spiritual life. While simplicity is not an end in itself, it can be a means to a spiritual life of service.

Here are a few suggestions on how to begin living a simple lifestyle. First, eat sensibly and eat less. This includes not only good nutrition, but occasional times for prayer and fasting. Use the time saved for prayer and meditation on God's word. Use the money saved for world hunger relief.

Second, dress modestly. This not only obeys the biblical injunction of dressing modestly, but avoids the Madison Avenue temptation of having to purchase new wardrobes as styles change. A moderate and modest wardrobe can endure the drastic swings in fashion.

Third, give all the resources you can. This includes both finances and abilities. Wesley's admonition to earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can is appropriate here.

Look for opportunities to give the resources God has blessed you with. If God has blessed you with wealth, look for opportunities to give it away prudently. If God has blessed you with great abilities, use them for His glory.

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