

Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims,

“it’s just more difficult.” Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today’s postmoderns.

Xenos’ “Conversation and Cuisine” gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it’s not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include “To judge or not to judge,” “Forgiveness in relationships,” “Views of the afterlife,” and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide “OK” or “bad.” Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today’s “tolerate all viewpoints” mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler’s Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God's Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God's truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter's New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother's death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

"The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers," Kellie recalls. "These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that." Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy ("Germ") Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him "great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ" plus "an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert)." Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at www.xenos.org.

Spreading the Passion

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and

apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

"Ephesians tells us to equip the church," he notes. "People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home." He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song's leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as "Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset." Monthly men's breakfasts may deal with "Evidences for the Resurrection" or "Is Jesus the Only Way?" New Song has also invited faculty from the International School of Theology to teach courses on "Developing a Christian World View" and other theological topics.

"I'm trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching," Haraksin explains. "As I identify them, I'm trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders."

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. "I had no idea how to respond to him," Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah's Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah's Witness members showed up at Jeff's door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. "I

was very uncomfortable at first,” Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience “taught me why I believe what I believe,” Jeff remembers. “Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn’t have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively.” He continues to apply what he’s learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no interest.

“There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church,” Haraksin notes. People want to know “Why can’t I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?” Society is on information overload, and some “people don’t want to take the time to read and study,” which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus’ deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song’s “Jesus Under Fire” class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

“We’re relational people in a relational culture,” Haraksin notes. We’re still learning.” This product of his own church’s equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity's truth. Sunday schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall's apologetics emphasis is "Issues and Answers," monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L'Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L'Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group

prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the "Issues and Answers" format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. "The idea," he explains, "was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that."

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals' crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

This article first appeared in the March/April 1999 issue of *Moody Magazine*.

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The New Absolutes

William Watkins' book The New Absolutes says that Americans are not relativists, we're actually absolutists. Rather than abandoning absolutes, we're adopting new ones in place of the old.

Reality in the Balance

When Christians take a stand on a given moral issue—on abortion, for instance—what are some typical responses? Someone might say, “What right do you have to push *your* morality on the rest of us?” Or, “Abortion might be wrong for you, but it’s not for me.”

What these people are implying is that such beliefs are *relative*; that is, they are related to something else—an individual’s desires or circumstances, for example. Because people change through time, however, something that is true or good for a person today might not be so tomorrow. Nothing is true or good for all people at all times.

Have you noticed, however, that many of the same people who claim that truth and morality are relative can be found denouncing certain political views, or actively pushing the social acceptance of a formerly rejected lifestyle, or fighting for new rights in one area or another?

Author William Watkins *has* noticed, and he’s recorded his thoughts in a new book titled, *The New Absolutes*. Watkins believes that despite the rhetoric, Americans are in fact *not* relativists; we are in reality *absolutists*. He says that, rather than *abandoning* absolutes, we are simply adopting *new* ones to replace the *old*.

It is now believed, Watkins says, "that truth and error, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal, and a host of other judgments are determined by the individual, . . . circumstances, or . . . culture. . . . There is no transcendent God or universal natural law we can point to that can inform us about who we are, what our world is like, and how we should get along in it."

What is the source of this thinking? Watkins points to three elements: a loss of belief in absolute truth, a strong belief in tolerance, and a detachment from people and institutions as a result of pessimism and distrust.

If Americans have concluded that ideas and morals are relative, however, why does Watkins say Americans are really absolutists? We are betrayed, he says, by our behavior.

Evidence that Watkins is right is seen in the glut of lawsuits in the courts, calls for law and order in politics, moral outrage over various offenses, cries for human rights, and the spreading of liberal democratic ideas to other countries. Americans have an idea of what is right, and we think others should agree with us. This is not relativism.

More significant, though, is how an absolutist mentality is seen in those who typically espouse relativism. For example, those who scream the loudest for *tolerance* often restrict others to saying and doing only what is politically correct. In the name of *pluralism* secularists push religion out of the public square. And *multiculturalists* condemn the West for its cultural practices. It seems that what is sauce for the goose is *not* sauce for the gander.

The average American who has come to accept relativistic notions of truth and morality might fairly be accused of being only inconsistent. But those who are real activists in the current fight for cultural change must bear the charge of blatant hypocrisy.

Old Absolutes vs. New Absolutes

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins contrasts ten traditional beliefs (old absolutes) with the ten beliefs that are replacing them (new absolutes). Though these new beliefs might not be “absolutes” in a strict, philosophical sense, they *function* as absolutes in contemporary society.

In this essay I'll look at three issues Watkins discusses—pro-life versus pro-death beliefs, religion in the public square, and political correctness and tolerance—to see if, indeed, the social activists mentioned earlier are really the relativists they claim to be. As we consider these topics, I think you'll come to agree with Watkins that the culture war is not being fought between absolutists and relativists, but between two groups of absolutists.

Death: What a Beautiful Choice

First, let's consider the pro-life versus pro-death question.

According to Watkins, the *old* absolute was: “Human life from conception to natural death is sacred and worthy of protection.” The *new* absolute is: “Human life, which begins and ends when certain individuals or groups decide it does, is valuable as long as it is wanted.”

Two issues which bring this new belief to the fore are *abortion* and *physician-assisted suicide*. Few practices are as fiercely opposed or defended as abortion. Opponents say abortion is morally wrong for all people. Proponents say it is a matter of individual choice. Physician-assisted suicide draws similar responses.

It is easy to overstate the thinking of those espousing the new absolute of the value of life. Probably very few would say that they “love death” or would think of death as a “good” thing ranking up there, say, with riches and great health and freedom. Rather, death is more often thought of simply as the

lesser of two evils.

Nevertheless, there *are* many who think of death as a positive thing, as something to be embraced, as the best answer to suffering or to certain hardships of life that many people experience.

Whether they think of death as a good thing or not, however, they think of it as a right not to be tampered with. It is rooted, they say, in a Constitutional “right to privacy.”

In claiming this right, however, any foundation in relativistic thinking must be abandoned. For the very “right” proponents claim is itself an *absolute*. They are saying that the right of individuals to decide for themselves should be observed by everyone else. When they say it is wrong for pro-lifers to try to press their beliefs on others, they are stating an absolute. If they say that the value of human life is a matter of its quality rather than of intrinsic worth, they are stating another absolute.

Some relativists will try to wriggle out of the charge of absolutism by saying that their position might be right for now but not necessarily for all times and all places. Nonetheless, their ideas about the value of human life and the option of death as a solution to human suffering function as absolutes in our society today.

Watkins is correct. The stubbornness of abortion advocates and assisted-suicide proponents in defending their “rights” is good evidence for the claim that Americans, despite all the talk, are not relativists after all.

Freedom From Religion

It used to be held that “religion is the backbone of American culture, providing the moral and spiritual light needed for public and private life.” Now, according to Watkins, we have a *new* absolute: “Religion is the bane of public life, so for the

public good it should be banned from the public square.”

Certainly there are those who are this adamant about the place of religion. These are the ones who raise a fuss when a prayer is uttered at a public school graduation ceremony or who complain when a nativity scene is set up on public property at Christmas.

Probably the majority of Americans are not this combative about the issue. However, for a variety of reasons many believe religion should be kept separate from public life .

One reason is a misunderstanding of the First Amendment. We have been told over and over again that the separation of church and state requires that the government must not be involved with religious matters in any way. The new absolute is this: religion and public policy should be kept separate.

We don't often notice, however, that strict “separationists” do not talk much about our nation's beginnings. A study of our founding documents shows that religion was an integral part of Americans' lives; references to the Bible and Christian beliefs are often cited in the construction of our new government. Amazingly enough, the writers of the Constitution did not see in it the “wall of separation” current interpreters do.

Another reason people think religion should be kept a private matter is a misunderstanding about religion itself. Having been “schooled” in relativistic thinking, many (perhaps most) Americans believe that whatever they believe is true *for them*, but not necessarily for other people.

But this cannot be so. Religions provide an explanation of what is ultimately *real*. Either there is one true God or there is not. Either there is salvation through Jesus, or there is enlightenment through meditation, or there is some other way to find fulfillment. Not all of these can be true *in reality*.

This issue gets really tangled up when we bring in the matter of rights. The idea that everyone has the right to worship as he or she chooses has been transformed to mean that each person's choice of religion is true. "I have the right to believe as I wish" becomes "My belief is as true as yours." The fact that I believe something makes it true.

But is that how things work in other areas of life? If I believe that I am a millionaire, does that make me one? With respect to religion, does believing there is a God put Him there? Or does believing there is no God produce a god-less universe?

The new absolutism with respect to religion is a very real concern for many Americans. As Christians we are taught that our beliefs have meaning for all of life, not just for the prayer closet, yet bringing such beliefs out into the public arena has brought some Christians great difficulty.

It is ironic that, in a nation which began with a strong desire for the free expression of religious beliefs, people are now being forced more and more to leave their beliefs at home.

Does this sound like relativism to you?

The Politically Correct Life

The hypocrisy of the new absolutism is seen more clearly than anywhere else in what is now called "political correctness" or PC for short.

To be politically correct is to be in line with certain ideals promoted by the new cultural reformers, ideals such as abortion rights, multiculturalism, gender feminism, and homosexual rights. To say or do anything which goes against these ideals is to be politically incorrect.

It is easier to understand PC if we think of it as the end of

a chain of thinking.

First is the acceptance of relativism, the idea that there are no absolutes. This belief, taken with our democratic idea of equality, results in the belief that everyone's beliefs and choices are equal or equally valid. There should be no discrimination against other beliefs or lifestyles. This is the *new tolerance*, the prime virtue of the new reformers.

When history is viewed from this perspective, it seems clear that history is the story of the strong taking advantage of the weak. The weak—or disadvantaged—are victims who now require extra help to attain their rightful place of equality. Merely belonging to a victimized group is enough to expect this extra help regardless of whether a given individual has been victimized. The advantaged must now be sensitive to the "needs" of the disadvantaged to avoid making them feel any more victimized and must work to protect their rights. Finally, the advantaged must not do or say anything which could be interpreted as differentiating the disadvantaged, of showing them as different in a negative way. Being sensitive to the plight of the "oppressed" and avoiding doing or saying anything which might make them feel marginalized or inadequate or looked down upon . . . this is *political correctness*.

It is certainly true that there have been and are people who oppress others. This must be opposed. The problem with political correctness, however, lies in over-correcting the wrong.

For example, in *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins lists some words some real estate agents learn to shun in an effort to avoid offending potential buyers. *Executive* has racist overtones since most executives are white. *Sports enthusiast* might make the disabled feel left out. *Master bedroom* creates images of slavery. *Walk-in closet* could offend people who can't walk.

Author Stan Gaede [pronounced Gay-dee], in his book *When Tolerance Is No Virtue*, says that “the overt goal of PC . . . is to enforce a uniform standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background or sexual orientation. The problem is that the items on this list . . . are not precisely parallel to each other. Though each is the basis for discrimination in our society, they involve very different kinds of issues. So the question immediately becomes: What does it mean to be tolerant *in each case*? . . . PC allows each group to define tolerance for itself.”

We have now come full circle. The relativism which purportedly undergirds the new tolerance gives way to exactly what it was trying to be rid of, namely, absolutes. That is, the reformers make their own ideals the new guidelines for society. We are all expected to abide by them. These are the new absolutes.

How should Christians respond to all this? Next, we’ll look at how the new absolutes are promoted, and we’ll think about how we might respond.

Absolutely For the Common Good

It’s a myth that America is a relativistic society. The truth is, Americans are a very moralistic people. What is alarming, however, is how cultural reformers are seeking to establish new absolutes which go against traditional ones. Watkins shows how these reformers are setting up new rules we all must follow.

How shall we understand the contradiction between claims of relativism on the one hand, and the imposition of new absolutes on the other? Watkins believes the claim to relativism is an attempt “to rationalize . . . misbehavior and disarm . . . critics.” For example, individuals might fall back on relativism to justify sexual activity once held to be deviant. However, the supposed relativist quickly becomes an absolutist when he wants *others* to agree with *him* on a given

idea or issue.

But if everything is relative, how are relativists able to convince others of the rightness of their own beliefs? They can't appeal to a foundation of unchanging realities and objective truths and be consistent with their relativism.

So how do they do it? Calling opponents names, "fundamentalist" is a popular term, or repeating simplistic clichés—"safe, legal abortion" for example—are a couple of their favorite means. The media play a strong role in this process, especially television. Captivating images, clever writing, strategically placed laugh tracks, and other elements persuasively convey ideas without logical reasoning.

It is crucial that we step back to see what this situation sets us up for. If we are conditioned to be persuaded by sloganeering rather than by rational discourse, we are prepared to be taken in by any smooth talker. All our clamor for rights and for the authority of the individual has the unexpected result of preparing us to lose our freedoms at the hands of charismatic tyrants.

What can we do to turn things around?

First, Watkins believes that reality itself is on our side. The new absolutes go against the way the universe is. Many women who opt for childlessness, for example, find themselves late in life confronting their own maternal instincts. We can point out these facts to those who believe we can do anything we want and get along quite nicely.

Second, we can learn to recognize sloganeering and insist that the cultural reformers use sound reason when promoting their ideals.

Third, we can point to the hypocrisy of so-called relativists. Homosexuals who barge in on church services demanding tolerance for their lifestyle must see how intolerant *they*

are. Those who demand freedom of thought and expression cannot reasonably exclude religious beliefs from public discourse.

As strange as it might sound at first, William Watkins calls us to a renewed *intolerance*. He says, "We must violate the new tolerance and become people marked by intolerance. Not an intolerance that unleashes hate upon people, but an intolerance that's unwilling to allow error to masquerade as truth. An intolerance that calls evil *evil* and good *good*."

To reestablish the old absolutes, Watkins calls for the acknowledgment of certain beliefs, such as: all life is precious; relativism is false; the moral law is real; and, religion is essential. A return to these basics will return us to sound public policy-making, to greater civil order, and to moral progress.

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