

Gay Teen Suicide and Bullying: A Christian Response

The rise in gay teen suicides is alarming and heartbreaking, whether it is an actual rise in suicides or a rise in the reporting and awareness of these needless deaths. Five teens killed themselves in a recent three-week period because of bullying or “outing,” but no one knows for sure how many there are.

Teens who experience same-sex attractions are already stressed simply by the difficulties of adolescence. This is painfully exacerbated by the confusion that accompanies unwanted desires and feelings that make them feel “other than,” different, like they don’t belong. Many of those who struggle with gay and lesbian feelings are very emotionally sensitive, and they can feel their pain more deeply than many of their classmates. They can easily buy into the lies that life is too hard, the challenges too daunting, that the hopelessness is too overwhelming.

When one factors in the excruciating pain of being taunted and bullied for even being perceived as gay or lesbian, the shame can become too much. If one is overweight, there is a possibility of losing weight; if one is a poor student, there is a possibility of working hard and studying to do better. But if one feels disconnected from and unaccepted by their same-sex peers, and if they can’t explain and did not choose the attractions that plague them, then most students will despair, believing there is no hope of anything changing. This is especially true for those who have prayed—many of them every single day—for God to take away their feelings, and He doesn’t seem to answer. (There are [good reasons for this](#), but they don’t know that.) Gender identity is at the center of

one's identity; what do you do when you don't feel comfortable in your own skin?

Given these stresses, Christians could and should be the first ones to reach out to the marginalized, the ostracized, and the bullied. Every single person is precious to God, made in His image, and deserving of dignity and respect.

The emphasis needs to be on "teen suicides," not "gay suicides." Any time a young person takes his or her own life it is horrific and unacceptable—and, may I repeat myself, heartbreaking.

I am grateful for the way the media is highlighting the problem of bullying. This is a problem we can do something about—regardless of our particular beliefs about sexuality.

My friend Randy Thomas, executive vice-president of Exodus International, responded to the highly publicized suicide of Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi on the Exodus blog (Exodus is a ministry to those dealing with unwanted same-sex attractions):

Christians we need to speak out strongly against bullying and condemn vicious and violating behavior like this. God is the author of every breath. As long as there are Tylers in this world we have to defend their right to freedom and self-determination. We must afford them at least the very basics in human respect [and] dignity and defend them from those [who] would exploit and abuse them God is the author of every breath, and when we look into the face of another we are seeing a dim reflection of Him.

Whether they know Him or not. [\[1\]](#)

Christians should be at the forefront of the anti-bullying movement. Bullying is the opposite of the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus standing up

for the underdog; consider how He stood up to the religious bullies who had entrapped a woman caught in adultery (John 8). When it comes to bullies, what would Jesus do? Stand up to them. Defend the bullied. Communicate that they are precious, valued, and loved.

I have read a number of stories of people who were bullied when they were growing up. I can't imagine how difficult it is to live through the painful isolation and rejection, of feeling that no one cares and nothing can fix the problem (apart from the bullies disappearing). I can't imagine how painful it is to see teachers, bus drivers, and other adults say nothing and do nothing to come to the defense of kids being picked on—for being different, for being new, for being "other than," for no reason at all other than the arbitrary attack of someone who felt small, and who bullied someone else to feel "bigger than."

To understand the problem of gay teen suicides, it's helpful understand the issues for gay teens (please see my article ["Helping Teens Understand Homosexuality."](#)) We also need to understand more about bullying and what to do about it. The very wise and experienced Dr. Allan L. Beane offers "Tips for Parents, Assertiveness Skills for Students Who Are Bullied" and "Assertiveness Strategies for Siblings and Other Students (Bystanders)" on his web site.[{2}](#)

Parents, pastors, youth workers and students need to encourage one another to stand up against any bullying of any student. There is strength in numbers, especially when it comes to dealing with a bully, although it only takes one voice to say, "Stop it." Experienced teachers say a no-tolerance policy toward bullying is essential to taking power away from bullies. The key is the community—the school, the church, the neighborhood, the youth group: when the community says nothing, bullying explodes. When the community refuses to allow bullies to exploit others' weaknesses, it is quenched.

At the same time, however, as we encourage teens to reach out to their marginalized peers by standing with them against their bullies, we don't want to be naïve. Although community pressure on bullies to stop often works, Scripture makes it clear that living like Jesus and standing up for the outcast will not be easy. Just as the Pharisees were upset by the way Jesus interfered with their social hierarchy, so too things will get sticky for those who upset those at the top of the social ladder. High school bullies are often at the top of the social food-chain. We need to prepare our students for the teasing and bullying they very likely will face for defending the marginalized, reminding and encouraging them that being persecuted for doing the right thing is to be expected, and is part of what makes the hope we have in a world and a kingdom beyond this one so sweet.

Gay teen suicides happen when students feel alone and isolated, when they feel "other than" and feel judged for that other-ness. Many of those who find themselves attracted to other boys or other girls are already uncomfortable with their desires; most of them try to pray or wish them away, but that's not how those feelings are changed into the God-given, normal attractions for the opposite sex.

We can do something to prevent more gay teen suicides. The most influential people in gay teens' lives are their peers, whose affirmation or shaming holds extreme power. But teens need to be instructed in how to fulfill the second greatest commandment, in loving their neighbor. We can teach them that all young people need to be loved, to be accepted as people made in God's image, to be valued. They all need the "three A's": attention, affirmation, and affection. If sexually confused or gender-insecure teens, who are often marginalized by the other students, experienced Christians reaching out to them in friendship, simply communicating the grace of acceptance and value, that could make a big difference. It can be choices as simple as inviting someone to sit with them at

lunch, or telling others to “lay off” if they make insulting and negative comments about one of those marginalized students. They can even say affirming things to the bullies like, “Hey. You’re better than that, dude. Leave him alone.”

Jim Wallis recently wrote something stellar in a blog post on “Christians and Bullying”:

My mother used to give us kids two instructions:

1. If there is a kid on the playground that nobody else is playing with—you play with them.
2. If there is a bully picking on other kids—you be the one to stand up to him or her.[\[3\]](#)

Being “Jesus with skin on.” That’s how teen suicides, regardless of sexual identity, can be prevented. May God use His people to love these hurting young women and men whom He loves dearly.

Notes

1. Thomas, Randy, “Step Up, Speak Out Against Bullying: The Tragic Case of Tyler Clementi,” Exodus International Blog, posted Oct. 1, 2010, accessed Nov. 11, 2010: blog.exodusinternational.org/2010/10/01/step-up-speak-out-against-bullying-the-tragic-case-of-tyler-clementi.

2. Beane, Dr. Allan, Bully Free Program, “Tips for Parents” and other posts: www.bullyfree.com/free-resources/tips-for-parents accessed Nov. 11, 2010.

3. Wallis, Jim, “Christians and Bullying: Standing with Gays and Lesbians,” God’s Politics blog: blog.sojo.net/2010/10/21/christians-and-bullying-standing-with-gays-and-lesbians, accessed Nov. 11, 2010.

Examining Our Cultural Captivity – A Christian Look at the Impact of Popular Thought on the Church

Steve Cable looks at the current epidemic of cultural captivity as a repeat of the concerns introduced by the Apostle Paul in the second chapter of Colossians. When Christians give up their biblical worldview and take on the ideas of the culture around them it weakens their witness to a dying world. He offers practical ideas to combat the types of captivity identified: carnal, confused, compromised and contented.

A common theme of many science fiction tales is mass delusion. From *The Matrix* to *The Truman Show*, we find fictional characters who think they are making decisions on their own volition based on an accurate perception of their situation. In each of these cases, the people are actually experiencing a false reality manipulated by outside forces using them for their own purposes.

Sadly, many of us are unwittingly being manipulated by distorted perceptions of reality. And, just as in these fictional tales, these distortions are not an accident. They are promoted by the spiritual forces of darkness to keep us from being effective agents of light in this world.

As the Apostle Peter explained, to fulfill our purpose of proclaiming Christ in a world of darkness, we must

Keep (our) behavior excellent . . . so that in the thing in

which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Pet. 2:12)

Distinctive thoughts produce distinctive behavior. Only by applying Christ to every aspect of life will we be able to “keep our behavior excellent” even as we are being slandered by the world. This is why Paul commands us:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Col. 2:8-9)

Paul is not talking about physical bars or chains. He is warning us about invisible chains constraining our minds to think like the world. Whenever we assume that the perspective of the world overrides the truth of Christ in some aspect of life, we are allowing ourselves to be taken captive. Paul also says that “in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3) Since that is true, we need to filter all truth claims through biblical revelation about the nature of God, man and the universe.

Let’s be honest. Most of us are oblivious to the invisible bars of cultural captivity. We think we are A-OK in balancing our spiritual beliefs with our everyday lives. However, most of us must be captive to some degree or the church would not be conforming to a degraded culture. As believers, we have the resources to escape from cultural captivity, but we need to make it a priority.

In this article we look at four types of captive believers: ***carnal, confused, compromised*** and ***contented***.

As we consider these different manifestations of captivity, let’s ask God to make us aware of areas of captivity in our own lives.

Carnal Christians

Just as there are different types of prisons, there are different ways that captivity can affect the lives of believers. **Carnal Christians** are believers who have misplaced priorities. As citizens of heaven,[{1}](#) they are living as if they are citizens of earth. The apostle Paul introduces us to these believers in his first letter to the Corinthians:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. . . . For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Cor 3:1-3 NKJV)

The word *carnal* comes from the Greek word that literally means *fleshly*. These are believers who are focused on serving their flesh rather than on using their flesh to serve God. The carnal Christian looks upon salvation as an opportunity to cater to the flesh while avoiding eternal consequences.

For example, carnal Christians view marriage as a means to meet their needs. As one young husband told his pastor, “God wants me to be happy. I am not happy in my marriage. So, God must want me to get a divorce.”[{2}](#) A 2008 survey found the divorce rate among “born again” Christians was the same as the rate among the population as a whole: about one in three (33%).[{3}](#) However, the rate of divorce among those who regularly attend church is much lower, about 1 in 4.[{4,5}](#) And my personal observation among actively growing Christians is a rate of less than 1 in 10.

Another area where carnality is evident is in business practices. We all drop our heads when we read about a “respected” church member who has been caught applying unethical and sometimes illegal business practices. It is highly likely that these individuals viewed the Scriptures as supporting their unethical attempts for temporal riches.

As Paul points out, minds that view the world through a fleshly perspective often lead to division and strife within the church. In fact, if the church is dominated by carnal Christians it may be worse than the world as “cheap grace” turns into license.

Let’s examine ourselves. Do we elevate the temporal above the eternal? What do our daily decisions reveal about our perspective? Is it carnal or spiritual?

A Christian struggling with a carnal perspective needs to start asking the question, “Which decision or course of action has the most positive benefits for eternity?” In Christ, we are no longer slaves to our flesh, so when we start turning control over to the Holy Spirit, the flesh cannot keep its control over us.

[For helpful articles on divorce: [Probe’s Marriage and Family section](#)

On business: [Business and Ethics](#) and [Can the Just Succeed?](#)]

Confused Christians

Confused Christians desire to please God, but they are confused about what God wants. Unlike the carnal Christian, confused Christians are concerned about the spiritual life. However, instead of being grounded in the Bible, they create their own spiritual truth from multiple sources.

Two thousand years ago, Paul warned believers that people will try to “delude you with persuasive arguments” (Col. 2:5) based on “the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14). Today, believers are still bombarded with deceptive ideas designed to prevent them from living in a way that exalts Christ.

Recent surveys by the Barna Group show that this approach is prevalent among those between the ages of 18 and 25. According

to their surveys, 78% of young adults identify themselves as Christians,{6} but more than half of them believe that the Qur'an and Book of Mormon offer the same spiritual truths as the Bible.{7} Is it any wonder that many sincere believers are confused?

Confused Christians are often influenced by those who offer to enhance their Christian experience with new insights. Recently, Oprah hosted a popular webinar with Eckhart Tolle. His repackaged Eastern mysticism is counter to the teachings of Christ on almost every topic. However, many of the participants were Christian women duped into believing that this false teaching was what Jesus was really trying to say all along.

One woman asked, "It's really opened my eyes up to a new way of thinking; . . . that doesn't always align with the teachings of Christianity. . . . Oprah, how have you reconciled these spiritual teachings with your Christian beliefs?"

In part, Oprah's reply was "I took God out of the box. . . I'm a free-thinking Christian who believes in my way, but I don't believe that it's the only way," In other words, "I am going to abandon the God of the Bible and create my own God who thinks like me."

Confused Christians often misapply God's character of love and compassion. We see this confusion in the debates on abortion, same sex marriage and homosexual clergy.

[For more information on these issues see these Probe articles:

[Abortion](#)

[Arguments Against Abortion](#)

[The Dark Underside of Abortion](#)

[Same Sex Marriage: A Facade of Normalcy](#)

[Answering Arguments for Same Sex Marriage](#)]

Once again, we need to examine ourselves. Am I confident that my beliefs are based on the principles revealed in the Bible? Am I confusing the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of Christ?

The primary prescription for a confused Christian is a steady dose of God's word through personal study and trusted teachers who understand the Bible as the ultimate source of truth.

Compromised Christians

Compromised Christians profess a set of beliefs generally consistent with a biblical worldview, but compromise those beliefs by living like the world in one or more areas.

Jesus may have been referring to compromised Christians when He said,

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (Mark 4:18-19)

Knowing that they are called to a fruitful life, they allow the pressures and the temptations of the world to take precedence over the truth of Christ. They have allowed their concern for the things of the world to compromise their walk.

Some Christians are compromised by the desires of the flesh, addictions to alcohol, drugs or pornography. The high percentage of Christian men struggling with pornography is an example. Satan promotes the lie that this is a secret sin that can be kept from compromising one's public witness for Christ. Yet, anytime we consistently make provision for the flesh, it is going to result in a compromised walk. I distinctly remember the day my friend and fellow church leader who had been struggling with pornography had to confess to his wife

that he had committed adultery. Even with his sincere heart for restoration and reconciliation, the healing process was painful.

Other Christians are compromised by their pride or desire for earthly success. As Jesus warned the Jewish leaders,

How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? (John 5:44-45)

They rationalize unethical practices, questionable morals and exploitation of others as worth the price to achieve success. These Christians embrace the sacred/secular split described by Nancy Pearcey in her book *Total Truth*. They partition their lives and their minds so that biblical truth only applies to their spiritual, church life while pragmatism determines what is true for every other aspect.

Let's examine our lives to see if we are rationalizing un-Christlike behavior to satisfy our own selfish desires. Are we choosing to conform to the world because we think we will enjoy that more than conforming to Christ?

If you are struggling with compromise, look for others who can help hold you accountable, mature believers who can join with us in allowing God's Spirit to "destroy fortresses and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God." [\[8\]](#)

Contented Christians

Contented Christians are actively choosing the truth of Christ for their own lives, yet they are content to allow others to continue in cultural captivity. Either from fear of persecution or concern with hurting others or time pressures, these Christians avoid confronting others to unmask the deceptive, destructive ideas crippling their witness.

Although the apostle Paul was always content despite his physical circumstances, [{9}](#) he was never satisfied with the spiritual condition of the world. Paul said:

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. (Col. 1:28-29)

Mature Christians are called to impart their understanding to others, particularly carnal, confused and compromised Christians. The fact that we have not been doing so in recent decades can be seen in the diminished influence of the church on public life.

For example, over 87% of Congress members are affiliated with a Christian denomination. Yet, this Congress recently passed so-called "hate crimes" legislation which will limit the ability of Christians to speak biblical truth on sexuality. While abhorring any crimes, we realize that one of the most loving things we can do is to point out to others when they are engaged in destructive behavior. Yet contented Christians stood by as a nation with a Christian majority elected national leaders who seem to be carnal, confused and compromised.

As contented Christians, we have let family hour on television move from "Father Knows Best" to "The Secret Life of Teenagers" which feeds American youth a constant diet of promiscuity and disrespect for authority.

As contented Christians, we have let carnal, confused and compromised believers set the example for our younger generations. Is it any wonder that these generations are largely confused about their beliefs? Recent surveys indicate that although over one in three young adults can be identified as born again, less than one in a hundred has beliefs

consistent with a biblical worldview.

So let's examine ourselves. Do I sit on the sidelines watching other believers conforming to the world without attempting to intervene?

We are not spectators seeking to keep from getting stains on our white, linen knickers; instead, we are called to be warriors in the battle for the fate of our fellows. If we do not stand firm and confront error, we are just as much captives of our culture as the others.

Notes

1. Philippians 3:20
2. Al Janssen, *The Marriage Masterpiece* (Colorado Springs: Focus Publishing, 2001).
3. Barna Group, New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released, March 31, 2008, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released
4. Ibid.
5. Bradley Wright, Divorce Rates Among Christians by Church Attendance, December 4, 2006, brewright.blogspot.com/2006/12/divorce-rates-among-christians-by.html
6. Barna Group, Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years
7. Barna Group, New Research Shows How Different Generations View and Use the Bible, October 19, 2009, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible
8. 2 Corinthians 10:4
9. Philippians 4:11-13

Lessons from Camp Quest

In August of this year, the North Texas Church of Freethought (NTCOF) hosted Camp Quest Texas on a farm outside of Dallas. This eight-hour event for children of atheists, agnostics and other “free thinkers” included nearly 40 children between the ages of five and 15. According to a published report^{1}, the day began with an exercise in making up creation myths based on the Apache story of fire before leading into activities with exotic animals, fossils and staged UFO sightings. The primary purposes of the event were twofold:

- *Encourage the children to have open minds and embrace scientific skepticism*
- *Provide a fun experience for the children where they could make friends among the community of non-believers. This objective was partially motivated by a desire to counter negative experiences some of the children had experienced with schoolmates who believed in God.*

Let me begin by stating that I applaud the organizers and parents for taking positive steps to encourage their children to ask good questions and look for good answers. Even though I suspect that the event was slanted towards promoting an atheistic worldview, I believe all parents should assume an obligation to steer their children toward the truth as they see it. At the very least, they should equip their children to see through the illogical arguments of some enthusiastic proponent of a cultic religion (even if they think that I am just such a proponent!).

The newspaper account of this event and an accompanying interview with the executive director of NTCOF can teach us several lessons as we evangelicals take on the task of raising younger generations.

Background

Before looking for takeaway lessons, let's investigate a little more background. Zachary Moore, the executive director for NTCOF, described their church this way:

"We're a church of freethinkers, which means that we try to understand the natural world by relying on reason and evidence. Like most people, we enjoy spending time with others who share our values and have similar interests. Forming a church just seemed like the natural thing to do, since many of us thought the only thing wrong with churches were the strange things they told you to believe in." [\[2\]](#)

At one time, Zachary considered himself a believer in Christianity. At some point, he came to the conclusion that the evidence did not support his belief in God. As he said,

"If Christianity were true, then I would want at least what Doubting Thomas got. If another theistic worldview were true, then I'd need something equivalent. I don't think it's too much to ask to be able to talk to a deity personally before I'm asked to worship it." [\[3\]](#)

This question, "If God wants me to believe in Him, why doesn't He present me personally with overwhelming evidence?" is one of the classic hard questions raised against our faith. The purpose of this article is not to answer this question, but if you want more information you can find it at Probe.org (see related articles).

Zachary and the NTCOF represent a point of view that is heavily in the minority among Americans, but is growing more vocal as it grows numerically. Recent Pew Institute surveys

indicate that the number of atheists, agnostics and others who claim no faith is less than 10% of the population. However, a 2007 Barna survey provides a revealing look inside that statistic.

The table below shows the number of people with “no faith” in each age demographic based on surveys taken in 1992 and 2007. The data reveals two important trends. First, the number of people claiming no faith in God in 2007 grows markedly higher with each younger generation, more than tripling from the 6% for those over 61 to 19% for those from 18–22. Second, the percentages for each generation have not changed significantly in the last fifteen years. We don’t see more people turning to faith as they grow older. It appears that the skeptics remain skeptics as each generation ages.

Percent of Americans who are atheist or agnostic^{4}:

<u>Generation</u>	<u>Ages in 2007</u>	<u>1992 Survey</u>	<u>2007 Survey</u>
Adult Mosaics	18-22	–	19%
Boomers	23-41	16%	14%
Busters	42-60	8%	9%
Elders	61+	4%	6%

Could it be that our secular schools, culture and public square are creating their expected result—generations that are becoming more and more secular? It also appears that on average, once people reach the age of 18, their belief in God is pretty much set for life.

How should we respond to this trend of succeeding generations turning away from God? I believe the report on Camp Quest reveals some lessons we can take away and apply to this question. I want to consider three possible lessons:

- *Respect those who express doubts*
- *Understand that the Truth is not afraid of skepticism (or scientific inquiry)*
- *Don't be intimidated by an unfriendly world.*

Respect Those Who Express Doubts

Many of the children attending Camp Quest felt like they are living in a culture where it is taboo to ask the question, "Why should I believe in God?"

One fourteen year old boy "was at camp hoping to meet some nonbelievers his age. All his friends in Allen believe in God, he said, and he tries to keep his atheism a secret from them. 'They'd probably avoid me if they knew,' he said." [\[5\]](#)

"Another boy, 14, whose stepfather requested his anonymity, started home-schooling this year after enduring years of bullying for his open atheism." [\[6\]](#)

In my opinion, looking at the experience of the Quest campers gives startling insight into the issue of teenagers from Christian homes turning away from the church in their college years.

Consider a teenager from a Christian family who has questions about the God they learned about in Sunday school. Where can they get some answers to the tough questions? They look around and see how their peers and parents react to other children who question the party line. They realize they may risk status with their peers if they ask these questions. So, at a time when they are around Christian adults on a regular basis who could help them deal with the tough questions and the evidence for God, they are intimidated into keeping silent. Once they leave the home for college or other vocations, they enter an environment where the primary people that claim to have

answers to these questions are belittling Christianity as a crutch for people who believe in myths.

In other words, if the children of atheists are afraid to bring up their doubts in public, how much more do many children from Christian families feel forced to go through the motions while hiding their major doubts and concerns?

If we teach our children to respect those with genuine questions about God, we receive a double benefit:

- *Our children will be more willing to bring up questions that cause them to struggle.*
- *Our children will have opportunities to hear the questions of others who need to know Christ. If we model for our children a gentle and respectful response to peoples' questions/beliefs, their friends are more likely to be willing to share their questions with them.*

Understand That the Truth Is Not Afraid of Skepticism (or Scientific Inquiry)

Most parents at Camp Quest indicated that they did not want to dictate their children's beliefs, but clearly they wanted to impact the thought process. As one mother stated:

"Our job isn't to tell children what to think," she said. "It's about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions." [\[7\]](#)

Just as we hope that the children at Camp Quest will ultimately ask the right questions about the purpose of life and their eternal destinies, we should encourage our children to examine the truth claims of Christianity. After all, Jesus told Pilate:

'For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the

world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." John 18:37-38 (*NASU or New American Standard Updated.*)

Lies and hoaxes are afraid of skeptics. The Truth welcomes skeptics because it shines in the light of examination. If we are willing to examine the truth with our children, it will build their confidence in their faith.

Many teenagers in Sunday School and youth meetings learn the things that Christians do (and don't do) and some things that Christians believe, but never learn about why we believe that the evidence for Christianity is strong and a biblical worldview answers the hard questions better than any other worldview. I suspect that many teenagers get the impression that their pastors and teachers are afraid of hard questions and want to avoid them. Perhaps in too many cases this suspicion is reality.

This reinforces what we have stated in prior articles on the subject of youth retention (see *The Last Christian Generation*, related articles). We need to:

- *Encourage students to ask tough questions and respect them for doing so.*
- *Equip parents and student leaders with solid answers for the tough questions.*
- *Take the initiative and address these topics in Sunday school and youth meetings even before the students ask the questions.*
- *Point them to resources like Probe for those that want to go deeper into these topics.*
- *Expose them to Christian adults who are living out a mature biblical worldview*

Don't Be Intimidated By An Unfriendly World.

How many of us can identify with the following statement:

Just as evangelical adults need social support from their church, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school because their parents are evangelicals, or because they're sharing their own faith at school. It can also be challenging to be an evangelical parent when most people assume that you're intolerant and ignorant if you teach your children to believe in hell and in Jesus as the only way to heaven. Christian camps provide a valuable resource for parents, plus they are full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our values—faith in Christ, love for God and our neighbors, good morals, and a desire for others to receive eternal life.

It rings true, doesn't it? It is interesting to consider that the statement above is a slight modification of a statement made by Zachary Moore:

Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they're developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you're immoral if you don't teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it's full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values – science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.[\[8\]](#)

American society as a whole does not have a high regard for atheism. However, in many ways, our public sector and public

schools are more supportive of the NTCOF than they are of evangelicals. This is the reality our children will become adults within. We need to encourage them through a community of like-minded believers while at the same time preparing them to stand up in an unsympathetic and sometimes hostile public square.

Youth groups and Christian camps are not refugee camps to protect our children from the world. They need to focus on equipping them and encouraging them to stand for the Truth in whatever cultural setting they encounter.

You may not be excited about the prospect of a Church of Freethought. However, their experience and reactions may help expose some of our inadequacies in preparing our children to stand firm in their faith in this world. Let's make sure that our children know that we are open to their hard questions and are prepared with real answers.

"For he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" Heb 11:6-7 (NASU).

Notes

1. Avi Selk, "Secular kids' camp in Collin County aims to provide questions, not answers," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

2. Rod Dreher, "A church for skeptics," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

3. Ibid.

4. Barna Group, "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians", June 11, 2007, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/102-at-heists-and-agnostics-take-aim-at-christians.

5. Selk.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Dreher.

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- [The Answer is the Resurrection](#)
- [The Last Christian Generation](#)

Faith-based Film Faith Like Potatoes

It's movie night with Mom; so I'm at the video store browsing the new releases and I come across *Faith Like Potatoes*. I'm not sure I would have picked it up if I were looking just for myself, but I saw the words, "Based on an inspiring true story," and thought, Mom will like this. She did. But much to my surprise, so did I. Oh, I thought I'd enjoy it tolerably, but I didn't expect to be, yes, actually inspired.

Faith Like Potatoes centers around a young, white African farmer who is forced to move his family to South Africa and start all over. As he does, he must overcome drought, tension in his family and his own deep-seated anger, as well as the tension and violence between white and black South African

farmers. It's a story of pain, truth, beauty, and redemption.

Nonetheless, even though I was able to read all this on the back cover, I wasn't expecting to be very impressed. To be entirely truthful, I've come to expect a fair amount of cheesy dialogue and frankly, poor artistry (cinematography, plot nuance, imagery, symbolism, subtlety, etc.) from Christian film, with a few notable exceptions. To be fair, I like those "weird artsy films" that make you think, and I understand that isn't everyone's cup of tea. But that also means I've seen my fair share of high-quality, low-budget film. And while I think we still have lots of ground to recover as we relearn how to engage the arts, I'm also aware that we have and are making progress.

Faith Like Potatoes from Affirm Films, is evidence of this progress. The producers, editors, directors, and composers are highly experienced, award-winning experts both within and without faith-based film-making, and it shows. Often, faith-based films come across as unrealistic because they lack engaging, believable characters and dialogue and they oversimplify characters and their issues. These movies often provide one-size-fits-all answers and end up resolving problems and characters so pristinely that there are no complications, no loose ends, no lingering struggles or doubts, no ambiguities, no room for interpretation... no depth. Real people in real circumstances aren't like that. People are complicated; what's right and what's wrong is sometimes unclear; accepting Jesus doesn't make everything rosy and happily-ever-after all at once.

As Christians we ought to know better than anyone that complete resolution will never take place until Christ returns at long last to bring Justice and Peace to a hurting world. If we want our productions to speak to real people in real ways, we need to get real. We need to stop avoiding the wonderfully complex simplicities of the paradoxical life God designed (the last is first, die to live, etc.). *Potatoes'* Regardt Van Den

Bergh understands this. The well-known South African actor and director writes this of his work (of which *The Visual Bible's Matthew* is his best known): "I, as a director, love telling true stories. To tell stories of how God impacts the lives of people is the best, but with it comes an awesome responsibility: the responsibility of being truthful and also representing the way of God in the person's life accurately." (www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/faithlikepotatoes/about/production-bios.html).

Overall, I think the film is successful in doing this. It doesn't shy away from the tragedy that happens in Buchan's life. (*Faith Like Potatoes* is based on the life of Angus Buchan, and is also the title of Buchan's autobiography.) I did, however, feel that the aftermath of the death of his nephew was covered a bit speedily. I understand there are limits on film as a medium, and time is almost always a factor—*Faith Like Potatoes* is almost an even two hours long as it is—however, I still feel it was an important part of the whole of this man's experience that shouldn't have been rushed. We only glimpse rather than truly encounter the shame and guilt and anger Buchan struggled with. The film brings us face-to-face with Buchan's immense sadness, but his other, darker feelings and struggles are only hinted at. Nonetheless, this dose of realism which portrays both the triumphs and tragedies of life is a good step in the right direction.

You've heard the old adage: It's not what you say, but how you say it that matters most. We all have experience with this. We know that how we say what we're saying affects how people receive it, and often whether they receive it at all. This being the case, we can see how bad art is an impediment to a good message; we begin to understand how it is nearly impossible to communicate a good message through a movie that just isn't good. This is why I want to highlight Regardt's *Faith Like Potatoes*. It's good art. Not exceedingly great perhaps, but good. This film has quality acting, dialogue,

cinematography—all believable, which allows its message to be believable too. And that is inspiring.

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Exponential Times – Applying Christian Discernment

Kerby Anderson discusses some of the trends in our rapidly changing world, calling for Christians to “understand the times” with discernment.

You may have seen the YouTube video asking, “Did you know”? Sometimes it has the title “We are living in exponential times.” I want to look at some of the trends that illustrate the fact that we live in exponential times. While I will use the video as a starting point, I will also be citing other authors and commentators as well.

The video begins by talking about population. How often we forget that there are countries like China and India that have a billion people. For example, the video says that if you are one in a million in China, there are thirteen hundred other people just like you. That is because there are over a billion people in China.

The video also points out that twenty-five percent of India’s population with the highest IQs is actually greater than the total population of America. Put another way, India has more honors kids than America has kids.

This reminds me of a statement in *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman. He says that when he was growing up his parents would tell him “Finish your dinner. People in China and India

are starving.” Today he tells his daughters, “Girls, finish your homework—people in China and India are starving for your jobs.”[\[1\]](#)

Consider the population explosion. There were one billion people in 1800. We did not reach two billion until 1930. The planet had three billion people in 1960 and four billion in 1975. We reached five billion people in 1987 and six billion people in 1999. It is estimated that the planet will hold seven billion people in 2012.

Of course, life expectancy has been going up, and this is changing the demographic of various countries. Many more people are living to age 100 and beyond. For example, there were only two hundred centenarians in France in 1950. The number is projected to reach a hundred fifty thousand by year 2050. That is a seven-hundred-fifty-fold increase in one hundred years.[\[2\]](#)

Or consider the United States population increase in this demographic group. In 1990, there were approximately, thirty thousand centenarians. Some believe that estimate may be a bit too high, but it provides an approximate baseline. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates there will be two hundred sixty-five thousand centenarians by 2050.[\[3\]](#)

One last trend is that world population growth is slowing down as populations are aging. Demographers tell us that we need 2.1 children per woman to replace a population. Back in the 1950s, the average number of babies per woman of child-bearing age was 5.0 but has been dropping ever since. It will most likely reach 2.3 in 2025.[\[4\]](#)

In the developing world, fertility is already moderately low at 2.58 children per woman and is expected to decline further to 1.92 children per woman by mid-century.[\[5\]](#) While only three countries were below the population replacement level of 2.1 babies in 1955, there will be one hundred and two such

countries by 2025. [{6}](#)

Exponential Growth

What is the impact of exponential growth on society? Richard Swenson argues in his book *Margin* that this has created unprecedented problems for us:

One major reason our problems today are unprecedented is because the mathematics are different. Many of the linear lines that in the past described our lives well have now disappeared. Replacing them are lines that slope upward exponentially. [{7}](#)

Exponential growth is very different from arithmetic growth. We live our lives in a linear way. We live day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month. But the changes taking place around us are increasing not in a linear way but in an exponential way.

Exponential growth is not something that we would consider intuitive. Scott Armstrong demonstrated that when he asked a graduate class of business students the following question. If you folded a piece of paper in half forty times, how thick would it be? Most of the students guessed it would be less than a foot. A few guessed it would be greater than a foot but less than a mile. Two students guessed it would be greater than a mile but less than two thousand miles. The correct answer is that the paper would be thick enough to reach from here to the moon. [{8}](#)

This is the challenge of living in exponential times. If the graph is linear, we have a fairly good grasp of what that will mean for us in the future. When the graph curves upward exponentially, we have a difficult time comprehending its impact.

But will the graph continue to trend upward? It will until it reaches some limit. Eventually there is an upper limit to most of the trends we are seeing. Objective things (people, government buildings, and organizations) have limits. Subjective things (relationships, creativity, and spirituality) also have limits.

At this point the curve changes from a J-curve to an S-curve. The exponential slope begins to flatten and reach a new equilibrium. Eventually there is a turning point at which the upward curve no longer grows exponentially. Finally, the curve levels as growth and limits reach an equilibrium.

One of the challenges of living in exponential times is that the various trends are at different points on the curve. The amount of new information seems to be exploding exponentially and looks like a J-curve. The number of e-mails you receive might not be growing exponentially like it did a few years ago but may still be increasing. Population in many developing countries has been leveling off (and often decreasing), and so the graph looks more like the S-curve. All of these trends are at different parts of the curve and are happening simultaneously. Thus, it is often difficult for us to comprehend what this means to us personally.

Futurists who are trying to understand what will happen in the future are faced with an even more daunting task. If they look at each trend in isolation, they can begin to get an idea of what might happen. But as soon as someone tries to integrate all of these trends into a comprehensive whole, the future becomes blurred.

Trying to integrate all the various trends (many growing exponentially) creates a challenge for anyone trying to accurately predict the future. We might know the individual trends, but trying to integrate hundreds of trends into a comprehensive picture is difficult, if not impossible.

Warnings About Exponential Growth

In the past, a number of authors have warned about the dangers of exponential growth. And because their predictions did not come to pass, the concept of exponentiality and its impact have faded from current discussion.

In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Malthus wrote his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* in which he argued that population growth would outstrip food production. He reasoned that population would grow exponentially while food production would merely grow arithmetically. Thus, he predicted a future crisis due to this exponential growth.

In 1968, Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich published his controversial best-seller, *The Population Bomb*. He also noted that population was growing exponentially and made numerous predictions about catastrophes that would befall the human race in the 1970s and 1980s.

Dennis Meadows and others with a group known as The Club of Rome published their report in the book *The Limits to Growth*. The authors used a computer simulation to consider the interaction of five variables (world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion). By changing the various assumptions about population and resources, they predicted various dire scenarios for the future.

Of course these doomsday predictions never came to pass. So it was inevitable that discussion and warning about exponential growth were no longer published on the front pages of newspapers and newsmagazines.

Another reason we have ignored the potential impact of exponential growth is due to the remarkable technological achievements of the twentieth century. Automobile manufacturers have been able to significantly increase gas

mileage in cars. Petroleum engineers have been able to find more effective and efficient ways to pull oil from the ground. Farmers and scientists have essentially tripled global food production since World War II, thereby outpacing even population growth.

Nevertheless, there are indeed limits to growth. If we understand what those limits are and work within them, then the future will be bright. If we ignore them, the human race could be in for some rough times. Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson expressed this dichotomy when he asked, "Are we racing to the brink of an abyss, or are we just gathering speed for a takeoff to a wonderful future? The crystal ball is clouded; the human condition baffles all the more because it is both unprecedented and bizarre, almost beyond understanding."[{9}](#)

Columnist Tom Harper is more pessimistic: "Currently we are behaving like insane passengers on a jet plane who are busy taking all the rivets and bolts out of the craft as it flies along."[{10}](#)

Whatever our future, it is certain that it will be more complex than ever before. And it will be a world in which information has exploded exponentially.

Information Explosion

One aspect of exponential times is the information explosion. The YouTube video by the same title reminds us that information is exploding exponentially. For example, it points out that there are thirty-one billion searches on Google every month. The best estimate is now there are about thirty-six billion searches on Google each month. In 2006, it was 2.7 billion. That's a thirteen-fold increase in just three years.

In order to keep up with this information explosion, engineers have been working at a breakneck pace to increase the efficiency and capacity of computers and other devices that

process and store information. Every year, fifty quadrillion transistors are produced. That is more than six million for every human on the planet.[{11}](#)

Look at the exponential growth of Internet devices. In 1984, there were a thousand. By 1992, there were one million. By 2008, there were one billion and the number is about to exceed two billion. Some experts believe that there will be fifteen billion Intelligent Connected Devices by the year 2015.[{12}](#)

The YouTube video estimates that a week's worth of *The New York Times* contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a lifetime in the eighteenth century. This figure is more difficult to quantify even though it, or variations of it, is cited all the time.

In fact, this may be our biggest challenge in the twenty-first century. There is so much information that most of us are having a difficult time trying to make sense of all the data. Facts, figures, and statistics are coming at us at an accelerating rate. That is why we need to evaluate everything we see, read, and hear from a Christian worldview in order to make sense of the world around us.

One last point is that most of this information is still in the English language. The YouTube video says that there are about 540,000 words in the English language. And this is five times as many words as in the time of Shakespeare.

It turns out that these estimates may be a bit off. Part of the problem is deciding what constitutes a word. After all, we have so many derivatives of a word and we have many words that have multiple meanings. Do you count the word or the various meanings of a word?

Let's start with the English vocabulary at the time of Shakespeare. We know how many words he used. If you count all the words in his plays and sonnets there are 884,647 of them. The estimate for the number of different words he used varies

from eighteen to twenty-five thousand. I might also mention that it appears that Shakespeare coined or invented about fifteen hundred new words. Even so, it seems like the estimate that there were a hundred thousand English words in Shakespeare's time might be too high.

Do we have over five hundred thousand words in the English language today? Again, it depends how you count words. The largest English dictionary has about four hundred thousand entries. A more realistic number is around two hundred thousand. The latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains entries for 171,476 words in current use, and 47,156 obsolete words.

Nevertheless, English has become the language of choice for the world. Approximately three hundred seventy-five million people speak English as their first language. Another seven hundred million speak English as a foreign language. English is also the language most often studied as a foreign language in the European Union. English is more widely spoken and written than any other language.

English is the medium for eighty percent of information stored in the world's computers. English is the most common language used in the sciences as well as on the Internet. Not only have the number of English words expanded since Shakespeare's time, its influence has expanded as well.

Exponential Times and a Biblical Worldview

The Bible tells us that we are to understand the times in which we are living. First Chronicles 12:32 says that the sons of Issachar were "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do." Likewise we need to understand our times with knowledge of what we as Christians should do.

We have also been looking to the future by trying to plot trends from today into tomorrow. The Bible also tells us that we should plan for the future. Isaiah 32:8 says that “the noble man devises noble plans, and by noble plans he stands.” Proverbs 16:9 says “the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” So we should not only plan for the future, but commit those plans to the Lord and be sensitive to His leading in our lives.

When you live in a world that is increasing exponentially, you have to be ready for change. In fact, it is probably true that most of us now expect change rather than stability in our world. Not so long ago, there were those telling us that change would shock our senses and disorient us.

As commentator Mark Steyn points out, we developed a whole intellectual class of worriers. He says:

*The Western world has delivered more wealth and more comfort to more of its citizens than any other civilization in history, and in return we've developed a great cult of worrying. You know the classics of the genre: In 1968, in his bestselling book *The Population Bomb*, the eminent scientist Paul Ehrlich declared: “In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.” In 1972, in their landmark study *The Limits to Growth*, the Club of Rome announced that the world would run out of gold by 1981, of mercury by 1985, tin by 1987, zinc by 1990, petroleum by 1992, and copper, lead and gas by 1993. {13}*

Obviously none of that happened. But we shouldn't dismiss the potential impact of exponential growth, but learn to be more careful in our predictions.

I believe one of the greatest challenges for Christians will come from the information explosion. Not only are we inundated with facts, figures, and statistics, but we must

also confront various philosophies, worldviews, and religions. It is absolutely essential that Christians develop discernment. We must work to evaluate everything we see, read, and hear from a Christian worldview.

This is one of the foundational goals of Probe Ministries. We are dedicated to helping you to think biblically about every area of life. I would encourage you to visit the Probe website (www.probe.org) to read other articles. You can also get a podcast of this program or any other program, and even sign up for the *Probe Alert*.

Kerby Anderson discusses some of the trends in our rapidly changing world, and calls for Christians to 'understand the times' with discernment. We live in a world of change. And as I have discussed above, many of these changes are not linear but exponential. May all of us be found faithful in speaking biblical truth to a culture in the midst of change.

Notes

1. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 237.
2. "50 Facts: Global health situation and trends," World Health Organization, 1998.
3. "Centenarians in the United States," U.S. Census Bureau, 1999.
4. "50 Facts: Global health situation and trends."
5. "World population to increase by 2.6 billion over next 45 years," World Population Prospects, 24 February 2005.
6. "50 Facts: Global health situation and trends."
7. Richard Swenson, *Margin: How to Create the Emotional,*

Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 44.

8. Scott Armstrong, *Long-Range Forecasting: From Crystal Ball to Computer* (NY: Wiley, 1985), 102.

9. E.O Wilson, "Is Humanity Suicidal?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 May 1993, 27.

10. Tom Harper, quoted by William Goetz, *Apocalypse Next: The End of Civilization as We Know It?* (Camp Hill, PA: Horizon Books, 1996), 15.

11. George Gilder, "Happy Birthday Wired: It's Been a Weird Five Years," *Wired*, January 1998, 40.

12. "15 Billion Connected Devices – Powered by the Embedded Internet," Small Forms Factors Blog, 28 April 2009.

13. Mark Steyn, "It's the Demography Stupid," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2006.

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Rome and America – Comparing to the Ancient Roman Empire

Kerby Anderson looks at the comparisons between modern America and ancient Rome, i.e. the Roman Empire. Do Americans have a worldview more like ancient Romans than the biblical worldview spelled out in the Bible? In some ways, yes, and in other ways, not so much.

Similarities

The philosopher George Santayana once said: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” To which I might add that those who remember Santayana’s maxim also seem condemned to repeat the phrase.

✘ Ask anyone if they see similarities between Rome and America, and they are likely to respond with a resounding, “Yes!” But I have also found that people who see similarities between Rome and America see different similarities. Some see similarities in our moral decay. Others see similarities in pride, arrogance, and hubris. But all seem to agree that we are repeating the mistakes of the past and need to change our ways.

In his book *Are We Rome?*, Cullen Murphy argues that there are many similarities between the Roman Empire and America.^{1} But he also believes that the American national character couldn’t be more different from Rome. He believes those differences can help us avoid Rome’s fate.

Let’s begin by looking at some of the political, geographical, and demographic similarities.^{2}

1. Dominant powers: “Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their world, by many orders of magnitude. Their power includes both military might and the ‘soft power’ of language, culture, commerce, technology, and ideas.”

2. Approximately equal in size: “Rome and America are comparable in physical size—the Roman Empire and its Mediterranean lake would fit inside the three million square miles of the Lower Forty-eight states, though without a lot to spare.”

3. Global influence: “Both Rome and America created global structures—administrative, economic, military, cultural—that the rest of the world and their own citizens came to take for

granted, as gravity and photosynthesis are taken for granted.”

4. Open society: “Both are societies made up of many peoples—open to newcomers, willing to absorb the genes and lifestyles and gods of everyone else, and to grant citizenship to incoming tribes from all corners of the earth.”

5. Culturally similar: “Romans and Americans can’t get enough of laws and lawyers and lawsuits. . . . They relish the ritual humiliation of public figures: Americans through comedy and satire, talk radio and Court TV; the Romans through vicious satire, to be sure, but also, during the republic, by means of the *censorial nota*, the public airing, name by name, of everything great men of the time should be ashamed of.”

6. Chosen people: “Both see themselves as chosen people, and both see their national character as exceptional.”

While there are many similarities, there are also profound differences between Rome and America. Before we look at the six major parallels that Murphy talks about, we need to remind ourselves that there are many distinct differences between Rome and America.

Differences

It is no real surprise that people from different political and religious perspectives see similarities between Rome and America. While some see similarities in moral decay, others see it in military might or political corruption. Although there are many similarities between Rome and America, there are some notable differences.

Cullen Murphy points out these significant differences. [\[3\]](#)

1. Technological advancement: “Rome in all its long history never left the Iron Age, whereas America in its short history has already leapt through the Industrial Age to the

Information Age and the Biotech Age.”

2. Abundance: “Wealthy as it was, Rome lived close to the edge; many regions were one dry spell away from famine. America enjoys an economy of abundance, ever surfeit; it must beware the diseases of overindulgence.”

3. Slavery: “Rome was always a slaveholding polity with the profound moral and social retardation that this implies; America started out as a slaveholding polity and decisively cast slavery aside.”

4. Government: “Rome emerged out of a city-state and took centuries to let go of a city-state’s method of governance; America from early on began to administer itself as a continental power.”

5. Social classes: “Rome had no middle class as we understand the term, whereas for America the middle class is the core social fact.”

6. Democracy: “Rome had a powerful but tiny aristocracy and entrenched ideas about the social pecking order; even at its most democratic, Rome was not remotely as democratic as America at its least democratic, under a British monarch.”

7. Entrepreneurship: “Romans looked down upon entrepreneurship, which Americans hold in the highest esteem.”

8. Economic dynamism: “Rome was economically static; America is economically transformative.”

9. Technological development: “For all its engineering skills, Rome generated few original ideas in science and technology; America is a hothouse of innovation and creativity.”

10. Social equality: “On basic matters such as gender roles and the equality of all people, Romans and Americans would behold one another with disbelief and distaste.”

While it is true that Rome and America have a vast number of similarities, we can also see there are significant differences between the two. We therefore need a nuanced view of the parallels between the two civilizations and recognize that these differences may be an important key in understanding the future of the United States.

Six Parallels

Murphy sees many parallels between the Roman Empire and America in addition to the above.^{4} The following are larger, more extensive, parallels.

The first parallel is perspective. It actually involves “the way Americans see America; and more to the point, the way the tiny, elite subset of Americans who live in the nation’s capital see America—and see Washington itself.”

Like the Romans, Americans tend to see themselves as more important than they are. They tend to have an exaggerated sense of their own presence in the world and its ability to act alone.

A second parallel involves military power. Although there are differences, some similarities stand out. Both Rome and America start to run short of people to sustain their militaries and began to find recruits through outside sources. This is not a good long-run solution.

A third parallel can be lumped under the term privatization. “Rome had trouble maintaining a distinction between public and private responsibilities.” America is currently in the midst of privatizing functions that used to be public tasks.

A fourth parallel concerns the way Rome and America view the outside world. In a sense, this is merely the flip side of the first parallel. If you believe your country is exceptional, you tend to devalue others. And more importantly, you tend to

underestimate another nation's capabilities. Rome learned this in A.D. 9 when three legions were ambushed by a smaller German force and annihilated.[{5}](#) The repercussions were significant.

The question of borders is a fifth parallel. The boundary of Rome "was less a fence and more a threshold—not so much a firm line fortified with 'Keep Out' signs as a permeable zone of continual interaction." Compare that description to our border with Mexico, and so can see many similarities.

A final parallel has to do with size and complexity. The Roman Empire got too big physically and too complex to manage effectively. The larger a country or civilization, the more "it touches, and the more susceptible it is to forces beyond its control." To use a phrase by Murphy: "Bureaucracy is the new geography."[{6}](#)

Cullen Murphy concludes his book by calling for greater citizen engagement and for us to promote a sense of community and mutual obligation. The Roman historian Livy wrote, "An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it." America is not beyond repair, but it needs to learn the lessons from the Roman Empire.

Decline of the Family

What about the moral decline of Rome? Do we see parallels in America? I have addressed this in previous articles such as "[The Decline of a Nation](#)" and "[When Nations Die.](#)"[{7}](#) Let's focus on the area of sexuality, marriage, and family.

In his 1934 book, *Sex and Culture*, British anthropologist Joseph Daniel Unwin chronicled the historical decline of numerous cultures, including the Roman Empire. He found that cultures that held to a strong sexual ethic thrived and were more productive than cultures that were "sexually free."[{8}](#)

In his book *Our Dance Has Turned to Death*, Carl Wilson

identifies the common pattern of family decline in civilizations like the Roman Empire.^{9} It is significant how these seven stages parallel what is happening in America.

In the first stage, men ceased to lead their families in worship. Spiritual and moral development became secondary. Their view of God became naturalistic, mathematical, and mechanical.

In the second stage, men selfishly neglected care of their wives and children to pursue material wealth, political and military power, and cultural development. Material values began to dominate thought.

The third stage involved a change in men's sexual values. Men who were preoccupied with business or war either neglected their wives sexually or became involved with lower-class women or with homosexuality. Ultimately, a double standard of morality developed.

The fourth stage affected women. The role of women at home and with children lost value and status. Women were neglected and their roles devalued. Soon they revolted to gain access to material wealth and also freedom for sex outside marriage. Women also began to minimize having sex relations to conceive children, and the emphasis became sex for pleasure.

In the fifth stage, husbands and wives competed against each other for money, home leadership, and the affection of their children. This resulted in hostility and frustration and possible homosexuality in the children. Many marriages ended in separation and divorce.

In the sixth stage, selfish individualism grew and carried over into society, fragmenting it into smaller and smaller group loyalties. The nation was thus weakened by internal conflict. The decrease in the birthrate produced an older population that had less ability to defend itself and less will to do so, making the nation more vulnerable to its

enemies.

Finally, unbelief in God became more complete, parental authority diminished, and ethical and moral principles disappeared, affecting the economy and government. Because of internal weakness and fragmentation, the society came apart.

We can see these stages play out in the decline of the Roman Empire. But we can also see them happening before our eyes in America.

Spiritual Decline

What about the spiritual decline in Rome and America? We can actually read about the spiritual decline in Rome in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In the opening chapter he traces a progression of spiritual decline that was evident in the Hellenistic world of his time.

The first stage is when people turn from God to idolatry. Although God has revealed Himself in nature to all men so that they are without excuse, they nevertheless worship the creation instead of the Creator. This is idolatry. In the past, this took the form of actual idol worship. In our day, it takes the form of the worship of money or the worship of self. In either case, it is idolatry. A further example of this is a general lack of thankfulness. Although they were prospered by God, they were ungrateful. And when they are no longer looking to God for wisdom and guidance, they become vain and futile and empty in their imaginations. They no longer honor God, so their foolish hearts become darkened. In professing to be wise, they have become fools.

The second stage is when men and women exchange their natural use of sex for unnatural uses. Here Paul says those four sobering words, "God gave them over." In a society where lust-driven sensuality and sexual perversion dominate, God gives them over to their degrading passions and unnatural desires.

The third stage is anarchy. Once a society has rejected God's revelation, it is on its own. Moral and social anarchy is the natural result. At this point God has given the sinners over to a depraved mind and so they do things which are not proper. This results in a society which is without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful.

The final stage is judgment. God's judgment rightly falls upon those who practice idolatry and immorality. Certainly an eternal judgment awaits those who are guilty, but a social judgment occurs when God gives a nation over to its sinful practices.

Notice that this progression is not unique to the Hellenistic world the apostle Paul was living in. The progression from idolatry to sexual perversion to anarchy to judgment is found throughout history.

In the times of Noah and Lot, there was the idolatry of greed, there was sexual perversion and promiscuity, there was anarchy and violence, and finally there was judgment. Throughout the history of the nation of Israel there was idolatry, sexual perversion, anarchy (in which each person did what was right in his own eyes), and finally judgment.

Are there parallels between Rome and America? I have quoted from secular authors, Christian authors, and a writer of much of the New Testament. All seem to point to parallels between Rome and America.

Notes

1. Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
2. Ibid., 14-15.
3. Ibid., 16-17.
4. Ibid., 18-20.
5. Ibid., 122.
6. Ibid., 135.

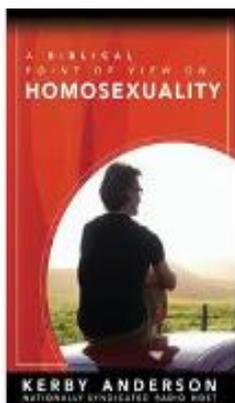
7. Kerby Anderson, [“The Decline of a Nation,”](#) Probe Ministries, 1991, and [“When Nations Die,”](#) 2002; both available on Probe’s Web site, www.probe.org.
8. J.D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture* (London: Oxford University, 1934).
9. Carl Wilson, *Our Dance Has Turned to Death* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 84-85.

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Answering Arguments for Same-Sex Marriage – A Christian Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson considers the arguments in favor of same-sex marriage from a biblical worldview perspective. He shows that arguments such as tolerance, equal rights, and no impact on others do not hold up under critical examination. As Christians, we can love those who live a different lifestyle without allowing them to claim their lifestyle is identical and harmless to society.

Shouldn't We Be Tolerant?



As more and more states are either

legalizing same-sex marriage or willing to recognize same-sex marriages from other states, it is crucial that Christians know how to answer arguments for same-sex marriage. We will look at some of these arguments and provide answers from my book, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality*.[\[1\]](#)

One of the first arguments for same-sex marriage is that we should be tolerant. We used to live in a society where the highest value was a word with a capital T. It was the word Truth. Today, we live in a society that has switched that word for another word with a capital T: [Tolerance](#).

Should we be tolerant of other people and their lifestyles? The answer to that depends upon the definition of "tolerance." If by tolerance someone means we should be civil to other people, then the answer is a resounding "yes." In fact, civility should be the hallmark of Christians. Jesus expressed the goal of civility when he taught that "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

[Civility](#) also includes being gracious even in the midst of disagreement or hostility. Other people may be disagreeable, and we are free to disagree with them. But we should disagree in a way that gives grace. Often such a gentle response can change a discussion or dialogue. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that "a gentle answer turns away wrath."

Civility also requires humility. A civil person acknowledges that he or she does not possess all wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, one should listen to others and consider the possibility that they might be right and that he is wrong. Philippians 2:3 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."

There is also an important distinction we should make between judging a person and judging their sinful behavior. Some have said that the most frequently quoted Bible verse is no longer

John 3:16 but Matthew 7:1. It is where Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." People misuse this verse all the time to say you should not judge anything another person does.

The context of this verse is important. It seems that what Jesus was condemning was a critical or judgmental spirit. It is a judging spirit when someone believes they are superior to you. Jesus was obviously not saying that people should not make judgments. A few verses later Jesus calls certain people "pigs" and "dogs" (Matthew 7:6). He even calls some "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15). There are many passages in the Bible that admonish us to use sound judgment and discernment (1 Kings 3:9; Proverbs 15:14; 1 Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 1:9-10).

The Bible says that Jesus was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) and provides a model we should follow. We should model both biblical compassion and biblical convictions when considering the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Don't Homosexuals Deserve Equal Rights?

Each person in our society deserves equal rights. But redefining marriage is not about equal rights but about adding special rights to our laws and Constitution. Currently we all have the same right to marry a person of the opposite sex who is of a certain age and background. We don't give people the right to marry their siblings. We don't give people the right to marry a young child. As a society we have placed certain limits on marriage but give everyone the equal right to marry under those specified conditions.

When we redefine marriage, then all sorts of new relationships will also vie for social acceptance. Already the legalization of same-sex marriage in one state had resulted in the call for the legalization of polygamy. Some gay activists are calling

for the legalization of polyamory (multiple sexual relationships with multiple partners).

We should also realize that the government is not prohibiting homosexuals from engaging in their behavior or even having a partner. All government is saying is that it is not going to redefine marriage to include same-sex relationships. And when citizens of this country have been given an opportunity to vote on a constitutional amendment in their state defining marriage, they have overwhelmingly approved of the traditional definition of marriage.

As we have already noted, the push for same-sex marriage has been more about respect and acceptance than it has been about rights. If government recognizes the legal validity of gay marriage, then that places government's "seal of approval" on homosexuality.

Often when gay activists are calling for equal rights, they are really asking for special benefits. Homosexuals have the same right to marry as heterosexuals. They have the right to marry a qualified person (age, marital status) of the opposite sex. Homosexuals and heterosexuals cannot marry someone of the same sex, someone who is too young, someone who is already married, etc.

But the activists argue that because they cannot marry someone of the same sex, they lose out on certain benefits. But that is not a justification for redefining marriage. It may be a justification for reconsidering the benefits we provide as a society, but it isn't a justification for changing the definition of marriage.

Consider the issue of visitation rights. Gay activists argue that government needs to grant same-sex marriage rights to homosexuals so they will have visitation rights. But again, this may be an argument for changing the laws concerning visitation, but it isn't an argument for redefining marriage.

A bigger question is whether this is really a problem. In this day where major corporations and governmental entities are granting domestic partnership rights, it is difficult to see this as a problem. If such a case were brought to light people could use public pressure to force the hospital to change its policies.

Isn't Homosexual Marriage Like Interracial Marriage?

When objections are raised about legalizing same-sex marriage, proponents argued that the same concerns were said about interracial marriage. For years gay activists have tried to hitch their caboose to the civil rights train. While many in the African-American community have found this comparison offensive, the tactic is still used on a fairly regular basis.

There are significant differences between interracial marriage and same-sex marriage. First, removing certain state laws banning interracial marriage did not call for a *redefinition* of marriage but merely an *affirmation* of marriage. Traditional marriage is not about equal rights but about establishing norms for sexual relationships within society. We ban discrimination based on race because it is an immutable characteristic that each person has from the moment of conception. And the word "race" appears in the Constitution.

A person who participates in homosexual *behavior* is different from someone who is born with an immutable *characteristic*. As many people have pointed out, there are no former African-Americans or former Asian-Americans. But there are hundreds of people who have left homosexuality.

Actually, interracial marriage and same-sex marriage differ from one another at the most fundamental level. The genetic difference between various races is insignificant biologically. 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.^{2} And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial categories. The remaining ninety-four percent is “within race” variation. And the moral difference between the races is also insignificant since the Bible teaches that God has made all of us “from one blood” (Acts 17:26, KJV).

But even though race and ethnicity are insignificant to marriage, gender is fundamental to marriage. There is a profound biological difference between a man and a woman. Marriage is defined as a bond between a man and a woman.

The Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia* struck down state laws prohibiting interracial marriage, arguing that marriage is one of the “basic civil rights of man.”^{3} The Supreme Court of Minnesota later ruled in *Baker v. Nelson* that race and homosexual behavior are not the same.

To legalize same-sex marriage is to change the very nature and definition of marriage. And there is good reason to believe that is exactly what gay activists want. Michelangelo Signorile is a leading voice in the homosexual community. He explained in *OUT* magazine that the real goal in legalizing same-sex marriage was to radically transform marriage.^{4}

He later goes on in the article to admit that the idea of the “freedom to marry” was actually a suggestion from the Los Angeles PR firm which they thought would be successful because it would play well in the heterosexual world.

Does Same-Sex Marriage Hurt Traditional Marriage?

One of the arguments against legalization of same-sex marriage is that it will have an adverse effect on traditional marriage. Proponents of same-sex marriage argue that it will

not have any impact. They ask, "How can my marriage to someone of the same sex have any impact at all on your marriage?" So what would be the consequences of same-sex marriage?

First, when the state sanctions gay marriage, it sends a signal of legitimacy throughout the culture. Eventually marriage becomes nothing more than sexual partnership and the sanctity of marriage and all that goes with it is lost.

When same-sex marriage is legalized, the incidences of cohabitation increases. This is not theory but sociological fact. Essentially, Europe has been engaged in a social experiment with same-sex marriage for decades.

Stanley Kurtz has written numerous articles documenting the impact of same-sex marriage on traditional marriage in the Scandinavian countries. When the governments of Sweden and Norway permitted same-sex marriage, he noted a trend away from marriage. According to Kurtz: "Marriage is slowly dying in Scandinavia." A majority of children in Sweden and Norway are born out of wedlock, and sixty percent of first-born children in Denmark have unmarried parents.[{5}](#)

A second consequence of same-sex marriage legalization would be the complete redefinition of marriage and the introduction of a variety of marital relationships. Already we are seeing court cases attempting to legalize polygamy. The most prominent case involved Utah polygamist Tom Green. He and his lawyer used the Supreme Court case of *Lawrence v. Texas* as a legal foundation for his marriage to multiple wives.[{6}](#) It is interesting to note that when the Supreme Court rendered its decision in the *Lawrence* case, Justice Antonin Scalia warned that the decision could lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage and the redefinition of marriage.[{7}](#)

Traditional marriage rests on the foundation of biblical teaching as well as cultural tradition. Theology, legal precedent, and historical experience all support the

traditional definition of marriage. Once you begin to redefine marriage, any sexual relationship can be called marriage.

Third, the redefinition of marriage will ultimately destroy marriage as we know it. For many gay activists, the goal is not to have lots of same-sex marriages. Their goal is to destroy the institution of marriage.

Stanley Kurtz believes that once same-sex marriage is legalized, "marriage will be transformed into a variety of relationship contracts, linking two, three or more individuals (however weakly or temporarily) in every conceivable combination of male and female." [\[8\]](#)

Does Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage Really Affect Families?

Those who oppose same-sex marriage often point to the connection between marriage and family. Traditional marriage provides a moral and legal structure for children. Proponents of gay marriage point out that many marriages do not have children. Thus, the connection is irrelevant.

While it is true that some marriages do not result in children due to choice or infertility, that does not invalidate the public purpose of marriage. Marriage, after all, is a public institution that brings together a father and mother to bring children into the world. Individuals may have all sorts of private reasons for marrying, but there is an established public purpose for marriage.

If couples choose not to have children or are not able to have children, it does not invalidate this public purpose. There is a distinction between purpose and use. Over the years I have written a number of books. I would like to believe that every person who has a copy of one of my books has read it. I know that is not true. Some sit on shelves and some sit in boxes.

Others sit in used bookstores. The fact that some people don't read my books doesn't mean they were not intended to be read.

Likewise, we shouldn't assume that the connection between marriage and family is insignificant simply because some couples do not or cannot have children. One of the public purposes of traditional marriage is procreation.

At the center of every civilization is the family. There may be other social and political structures, but civilizations survive when the family survives. And they fall apart when the family falls apart. Michael Novak, former professor and winner of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, put it this way: "One unforgettable law has been learned through all the oppressions, disasters, and injustices of the last thousand years: if things go well with the family, life is worth living; when the family falters, life falls apart." [\[9\]](#)

Marriage between a man and a woman produce children that allow a civilization to exist and persist. Marriage begins the foundation of a family. Families are the foundation of a civilization.

Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008).
2. J. C. Gutin, "End of the Rainbow," *Discover*, Nov. 1994, 71-75.
3. *Loving v. Virginia*, Supreme Court of U.S., 388 U.S. 1, 1967.
4. Michaelangelo Signorile, "I DO, I DO, I DO, I DO, I DO," *OUT*, May 1996, 30-32.
5. Stanley Kurtz, "The end of marriage in Scandinavia: The conservative case for same-sex marriage collapses," *The Weekly Standard*, 2 February 2004, <http://tinyurl.com/3xpkz>.
6. Alexandria Sage, "Utah polygamy ban is challenged: U.S. Supreme Court' sodomy ruling is cited," *Associated Press*, 26

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7. "The Supreme Court: Excerpts from Supreme Court's decision striking down sodomy laws," *New York Times*, 27 June 2003, A18.

8. Stanley Kurtz, "Beyond gay marriage," *Weekly Standard*, 4 August 2003.

9. Michael Novak, "The family out of favor," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1976, 37-46.

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Bridging to Common Ground: Communicating Christ Across the Cultural Divide

Have you ever felt like an alien in your own culture? What was your reaction to the people in that other group? The other day, mine was negative, then a bit hopeful. It all left me very humbled, but ready once more to build bridges and sow spiritual seed over shared common ground.

Always Ready?

There I was, in a vegetarian restaurant, talking to the Chinese owner about my motivations for patronizing this rare refuge for vegans, vegetarians and other people far removed from my day-to-day world. I just like to eat healthier sometimes, I weakly offered. After all, when I recently found it closed, I had sauntered to the Texas-style barbeque joint in the same shopping center feeling little irony.

Not so for most of the old man's clientele. They just seemed to fit the veggie-eaters mold. I felt conspicuously out of

place as I mingled in the buffet line with pony-tailed guys, gals with their hair in doo-rags, Indian and Chinese immigrants. Yet there I stood, representing white middle-America in my Tommy Bahama knock-off shirt and dress slacks.

I spied a rack of religious booklets promoting an off-beat Asian religious group. Hey, I thought to myself, if you want authentic tofu-based cuisine, you have to mix with the diversity. No problem.

But I wasn't prepared for the group of youths who walked in next, sporting dreadlocks, torn Goth stockings, studded leather boots and T-shirts that would offend the most tough-minded. The "F" word assaulted me in a slogan scrawled across the back of several wearing the official T-shirt for the punk band P*ssChrist.

I have to admit, I wavered between repulsion and compassion, amusement and offense. Then I began to fantasize about striding right up the large table of vegan-gothic-anti-social kids and introducing myself. I imagined chatting, asking about the band their shirts represent, then moving on to the fact that not all Christ-followers are hypocritical haters—see, I'm talking to you!

My two-fold goal in my little daydream, admittedly: to challenge their perception of an establishment-looking right-wing Christian guy like me and to test their own assumed sensibilities regarding acceptance, tolerance and diversity. After all, I judged, can they themselves show tolerance for a fellow who represents a polar opposite worldview and set of values? Or will they be found out as just another brand of bigot? All of this I dreamed up perhaps without even finding out their names! I never went over to their table.

Bad Thinking Means No Bridging or Burned

Bridges

Upon reflection, I saw how off-guard I was spiritually and how deeply my gut reactions represent some questionable thinking, even unbiblical attitudes. I would probably have come off as, well, a hypocritical hater, despite the better intentions I mixed in with my prejudices. That drove me to prayer and back to a book that is still worth reading: *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community—While We Still Can* by Tim Downs.

My response revealed several unhelpful presuppositions about people on the other side of the cultural divide and how to deal with them that still have roots in my soul, although I should know better. My private syllogism went like this:

They're obviously not for us (biblical believers), but against us, so

The best way to deal with such people would be to confront them or ignore them (and I don't prefer the latter).

Although confronting them outright would be wrong, it wouldn't take long for the tolerant approach to necessarily give way to an uncomfortable, confrontational proclamation of truth, so bring it on!

Somebody's got to reach these folks, and it's apparent that sooner is better. These are the last days, after all.[{1}](#)

But building bridges with the eventual goal of sharing the gospel fruitfully—something I've worked at full-time for two decades—requires much more. More thought, compassion, understanding, wisdom and patience. The kind, writes Downs, modeled not by grain harvesters, but rather by fruit growers. This is biblical, but often ignored by Bible-believers.[{2}](#)

As a member of an out-of-balance evangelical Christian

subculture, I have unconsciously bought into a worldview that overvalues the spiritual harvest at the expense of spiritual sowing. In so doing, I am implicated in a scorched-earth mentality that neither tends the spiritually unready nor makes allowance for future crops.[{3}](#) I repent, and not for the first time.

This way of thinking assumes a vast conspiracy of God-haters. Although the caustic, outspoken atheism of Sam Harris and [Richard Dawkins](#) has risen to prominence recently, it is not the norm. Rather a muddled middle of persuadable unbelievers and confused born-again is still a large part of the American scene.[{4}](#) The us vs. them approach tends to be self-fulfilling, writes Downs. If approached as an enemy, defensiveness is understandably generated in those who don't fit cleanly into our community. Even for announced enemies, like the T-shirt-wearing punk rockers, turning the other cheek while engaging with love can be a powerful witness.

Another evangelical myth, according to Downs, is the *certainty* that we're experiencing the final harvest.[{5}](#) Indeed, the coarsening of the culture is a mainstay and we are promised that, in the End Times, things will go from bad to worse. That's sure how it looks, increasingly. Also, we conservative Christians, who shared the heady age of the Moral Majority, are now being blended with every other social group into a stew of diversity where no group is a majority—and we sound like jilted lovers, says Downs. We need to ask, How much of the spiritual fruitlessness in America might we be contributing to by our own perceptions and resultant attitudes?

To act out of such worldview-level angst and fail to prepare to reach future generations is dereliction. Picking low-hanging fruit, if you will, and plowing under the remaining vines is neither loving nor wise. It's certainly not God's way, thankfully.

If I'd waltzed up to that table of vegetarian punkers the other day, I'd have likely displayed the attitude Downs critiques and confesses having owned: I'll proclaim the truth. What they do with it is their business. In other words, 'Id walk away self-justified, ineffective—and likely having done harm rather than God's purposes. My commitment to justice would have overridden my practice of love.{6}

To make any genuine impact for Christ among a crowd so foreign to me as these youths would require more than mere personal chutzpah and a bag of evangelistic and apologetic "tricks." I'd need to wade humbly into their world, eyes wide open and skin toughened, expecting no respect (initially at least), hoping realistically only for long-term results. I could not be effective in my current state—from dress to time commitments to my mindset. To be missional about it long-term, I'd need to be surely called of God and make a monumental life-change, like a missionary I met here in town.

Becoming All Things to All People

I first heard of Dale{7} when he spoke to parents at our kids' Christian school. I marvelled that he and his wife—both in their 40s—along with their three girls would pack up their middle-class home, leave a thriving youth pastorate in a Baptist church and take up residence in the grungiest, hippest part of Dallas, Texas. When I met with Dale down in Deep Ellum, I could feel the gaping divide between my suburban existence and the urban alternative, Bohemian art-music district scene he'd adopted.

When a couple of 20-something chicks interrupted our meal, I was annoyed that he left me hanging for some time. But Dale's apology stopped me short in my own self-absorption. He and his wife had befriended one of the gals, a bartender, and were seeking to slowly, carefully build a relationship with her without scaring her off. And it was working. She had noticed the non-confrontational yet uncompromising difference in this

loving Christian couple and asked about it. Now, when she introduces these Christian friends, she openly initiates conversations about spiritual things with rank unbelievers. There's no threat felt, but plenty of curiosity.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."[{8}](#) To use the hackneyed phrase, "Walk a mile in their shoes"—even if the shoes are foul (some punkers don't do hygiene) or not your style.

When I researched the band with the sacriligious name on the T-shirts, I was introduced to a subculture that not only was foreign to me, but one that actively alienates itself from the larger culture. Part of a movement called *anarcho-crust punk*, this particular band is known for blasphemous rants. Counter-cultural lifestyle, vile language, themes of death, filth and anti-religious, anti-conservative and anti-capitalist identity politics all mark this underworld of dark lostness.

To bridge across cultural canyons—even such a radical one—to begin on common ground with those outside the Christian community, we need to:

adopt a bridging mentality—think of outreach as a process and pass your perspective on

avoid fueling intolerant stereotypes and show genuine, biblical tolerance

don't burn bridges—avoid unnecessary confrontation but rather persuade by modeling uncompromising love and concern along with truth

remember from where you fell and recall who the Enemy really is—our struggle is not against flesh and blood[{9}](#)

cultivate, sow, harvest and begin again. Patiently use art and subtle, effective communications[{10}](#)

relate genuinely: share your own foibles, ask sincerely about

their anger and pain

wait on God's timing, but don't fail to offer the gospel and help them grasp faith

For those called to go native to bridge across cultural divides, one couple reaching out in the London music-arts district serves as a model. In a four-hour conversation with a Londoner deep into the local scene—a definite unbeliever who knew of the couple's Christian commitments—the husband was asked:

What do you think of homosexuality?

After thoughtfully pausing, he deferred, Well, I'd prefer to not share that with you.

Why not?

Because I believe my view on that will offend you and I don't want to do that; you're my friend.[{11}](#)

Compromise? Wimpiness? No. Curiosity caused the non-Christian to ask again some time later, to which the believer responded gently, "As I said, I don't want to offend you, but since you asked again. . ." His reply led to Jesus Christ Himself. His biblical response evoked a thoughtful, "Oh—now I'm glad you warned me. That is very different from my opinion." The message was heard and respected. The relationship, still intact, grew in breadth and depth and led to a fuller witness.

Our London-based missionary took care, as a vinedresser, not to bruise the unripe fruit. His eventual impact with the life-changing good news of Christ was made possible by the patience and love he balanced with the hard truth. He and his wife, an accomplished musician, now have high-level contacts in this London subculture.

I'm taking mental notes and rereading Down's important book for some really useful and specific strategies for bridging to common ground with those alien to me.

Notes

1. *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community...While We Still Can*, Tim Downs, (Moody Press: Chicago, 1999), Chapter 3, "Calling Down Fire," pages 33ff.
2. Ibid, 46.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 44.
5. Ibid, 47. See also: [End Time Anxieties](#).
6. Ibid, 38.
7. Not his real name.
8. I Corinthians 9:22 (NASB).
9. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB).
10. Downs, T., op. cit., 66-71.
11. Based on second-hand account without attempt to check details of the conversation. The meaning was clear: by waiting and building credibility, the door to sharing more opened where none likely would have otherwise.

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**Josh McDowell on Using
Redeeming Darwin With
Expelled: No Intelligence**

Allowed

Over the last 50 years, those with a Christian worldview have been the focus of condescension and exclusion in the academic community. As has happened throughout history, these attitudes from the academic community have gradually permeated our mainstream culture. Today, evangelical-bashing is the accepted standard position for all forms of mass media from news reporting to books and movies. Over the last decade, this trend has accelerated to the point that many people believe Christian principles and beliefs should not be recognized in our public policies and culture. We are all experiencing these efforts to relegate the Christian faith to an irrelevant sidelight of American culture.

One of the root causes of this trend is the teaching of naturalistic Darwinism as dogma within our public education system from grade school through our universities. The reasoning is that educated people know that science has proven there is no evidence for a creator. Therefore, there is no place for religion and moral authority in our public life. This attitude directly affects public policies on abortion, euthanasia, education, sexuality, etc.

Although Darwins theory of life originating and evolving to its current forms strictly through random events and natural selection may have seemed plausible 50 years ago, our current understanding of the nature of the universe and the complexity of even the simplest life forms bring up huge issues for which the current state of evolutionary theory has *no* answers. For example, over 700 scientists at our universities and research institutions have signed a statement expressing their doubt that Darwinism can adequately explain our current understanding of life in this universe (See dissentfromdarwin.org for the current list).

In a desperate attempt to protect the dogma upon which their

naturalistic/humanistic worldview is based, the scientific/educational establishment is systematically and viciously attacking those who would dare to research alternative theories that may better explain the current evidence. They have mounted a public relations campaign to paint any scientific research or publications which expose the issues with Darwinism as not science, but rather religiously based dogmatism or creationism. What is absolutely amazing is that while aggressively pursuing their campaign of persecution and spin-doctoring, the Darwinist community steadfastly denies that they are doing any such thing. Sadly, this campaign has been successful to date in keeping our public education system and most of our scientists captive to this worldview-motivated attempt to defend the dogma of Darwinism in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

[Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed](#) (starring Ben Stein) is a documentary scheduled to be released in April 2008. It exposes the blatant attempts to squelch academic freedom in defense of outdated Darwinist dogma. By chronicling the stories of well-qualified scientists who have dared to question Darwinism as a comprehensive explanation for life and interviewing people on both sides of these events, this documentary presents a strong case for restoring academic freedom allowing scientists to follow the evidence where it leads. Both the content and the involvement of Ben Stein (who is Jewish) make it clear that this documentary was not created to directly promote the teaching of creationism. This documentary calls Americans to stand up for academic freedom and integrity. It says that we should not allow the misguided notion that science and religion must be in conflict to keep scientists from exploring all reasonable hypotheses to explain the latest evidence.

The producers of *Expelled* are making a large financial investment to create a documentary targeted for wide release in thousands of movie theaters. They are taking this risk because they believe that the American public needs to

understand what is really happening. It is only through public awareness and pressure that the current climate of repression and persecution can be changed. *Expelled* is intended to bring this issue to the forefront of public thought. Promoting an open public debate could well lead to unshackling scientific research in this area and opening the door for students to receive more in-depth education in evolutionary theory including those areas where evolutionary theory currently has no viable explanation.

The content of *Expelled* creates a natural opportunity for Christians to discuss the evidence for a creator and the reasons for our faith in Jesus Christ as Creator and Savior. *Expelled* will draw wide public attention to these issues and will create media attention and controversy even among those who do not see it. It would be a shame for believers to miss this opportunity to promote this public discussion and to engage our friends, neighbors and co-workers in making a defense for our hope in Christ.

So how can we go about doing this?

1. Let me encourage you to take the time to review the excellent, cutting-edge materials available through our website and our online store. Make the effort to equip your people with the information and encouragement they need to communicate that the scientific evidence points to a creator and to share the relationship they have with the Creator. Again, this foundational issue is critical and will get more intense in the days ahead. The Redeeming Darwin material from [Probe](#) and [EvanTell](#) is ideal for this purpose.

*2. Make sure that they know that *Expelled* will bring this topic to the forefront in people's conversation whether they have seen the documentary or not. We need to equip believers to look for opportunities to interact intelligently. You may want to make available the Viewers version of *Probes Discovering the Designer* DVD/booklet as a cost effective tool*

for your people to share with others ([found in our Store](#)).

3. Encourage people to see this controversial documentary:

Expelled does not directly promote a Christian view. In fact, it does not even take the position that Intelligent Design has been shown to be a better theory than Darwinism. This helps establish a non-threatening, neutral starting point to engage in a thoughtful discussion. You are not asking people to watch a Christian film. You are encouraging them to become informed on an important issue.

Expelled is a documentary. It is not for entertainment. It will require the audience to think about what they are watching. Although it includes some humor (how could Ben Stein keep from adding humor?), it is a very serious documentary. Be sure people understand that they are attending for the purpose of learning not for a night out at the movies.

After you view the movie, you may want to think about how you could use the DVD version when it is available. If you are showing Expelled in a small group or some other venue, you can better focus peoples expectations.

4. Plan to offer small group opportunities to learn more about this controversy and how it ultimately points us to Christ. Once again, the Redeeming Darwin material is an excellent resource for this purpose.

Myanmar Cyclone Response: Power-Lust and Lost Lives

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.

Corrupted Power

Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives “without enough to eat” on a normal basis.^{1} The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. “Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests.”^{2}

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft

United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems. However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

Failure to Allow Rendered Aid

"The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar's cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food," reports the Associated Press.

It's understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.

Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.

Government demands of businesses in the capital to "donate" aid for victims to be distributed through the central government. [\[3\]](#) So much for central "planning." Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in need the very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling party's priorities.

Global Chorus of Criticism

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.[\[4\]](#)

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.[\[5\]](#)

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country very quickly, we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he

said. {6}

The UN has learned lessons from past dictatorships' abuse of privilege. The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

Some Worldview Implications

The heartlessness of Myanmar's leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldview—neo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for example—would only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or “smart enough” to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dalai Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaigning. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For Burmese monks and adherents alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, “According to Buddhist belief, man is

worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God" [\[7\]](#). While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan's Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism's doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, "Why? From where does this universal reality spring?"

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. "The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand." [\[8\]](#) Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity

"A Christian view of government should...be concerned with human rights...based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but instead acknowledges these rights as always existing." [\[9\]](#)

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be

expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America's reaction to Myanmar's languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world's stance: the ideals of democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I'm sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. America's Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power

"While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil... [{10}](#) Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this tradition inevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike

Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.[\[11\]](#)

Sanctity of Human Life

What officials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestige as in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called

Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that today's outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as God's image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

Biblical Imitation of a Giving God

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive response however incompetent it may have been from the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Church's centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world, that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of

Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

Notes

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