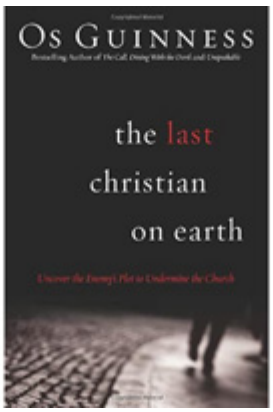
Digging Our Own Grave: The Secular Captivity of the Church



Rick Wade provides an overview of how the Christian church has become captive to the godless values and perspective of the surrounding culture, based on Os Guinness' book The Last Christian on Earth.

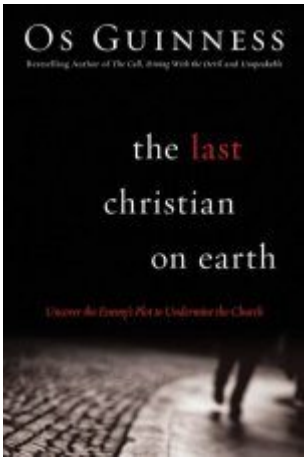
Our Real Enemy



If memory serves me correctly, it was my introduction to such concepts as secularization and pluralization. I'm speaking of the book *The Gravedigger Files* written by Os Guinness in the early 1980s. The subtitle of *The Gravedigger Files* is *Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church.* The book is a fictional dialogue between two members of a council which has as its purpose the undermining of the Christian church. The Deputy Director of the Central Security Council gives one of his subordinates advice on how to accomplish their goal in his area.

In 2010, Guinness published a revised and updated version of *Gravedigger Files.* He gave it the new title *The Last Christian*

on Earth. The titled was inspired in part by Luke 18:8: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"



What Guinness wanted to do in *Gravedigger* and the updated version was to show how the church in America is being undermined from within. We concern ourselves so much about outside enemies without realizing that we are at times our *own* worst enemies. He wrote: "*The Christian faith contributed decisively to the rise of the modern world, but it has been undermined decisively by the modern world it helped to create. The Christian faith has become its own gravedigger.*"{1}

The primary focus of Probe Ministries now is what's been called the cultural captivity of the church. All too many of us are influenced more by our culture than by the Bible. It's impossible to separate oneself from one's surrounding culture, to be sure, but when there is conflict, we are called to follow Christ. Cultural captivity is subtle. It slowly creeps up on us, and, before we know it, it has soaked into our pores and infected much of what we think and do. "Subversion works best when the process is slow and subtle," Guinness's Deputy Director says. "Subtle compromise is always better than sudden captivity."{2}

This book is helpful for seeing ourselves in a clearer light, and for understanding why some of the things we do, which seem so harmless, are really very harmful to our own Christian lives and to the church.

Stages of Subversion

Rather than directly attacking the church, the enemy finds it more profitable to try to undermine it. “Subversion” is the word Os Guinness’s Deputy Director uses in the book *The Last Christian on Earth*. How does this happen?

This process of undermining comes in various stages. Three of them are demoralization, subversion, and defection.{3}

Demoralization is the softening up of the church through such things as hypocrisy and public scandals. Morale drops, and our ability to resist the devil’s advances decreases.

Subversion comes about from winning over key church leaders who begin to trumpet “radical” and “daring” ideas (better words for this, Guinness says, may be “revisionist” and “unfaithful”{4}).

Defection comes when prominent members abandon the church, such as when former fundamentalists publicly deny the divine authority of the Bible.

Faithfulness, which once was understood as being committed to God, now has a new focus. The desire to be “in the world but not of the world” is realigned. The church’s commitment to the world turns into attachment, and worldliness settles in. “Worldliness” is a term once used by fundamentalists to describe being too attached to the world, but it went out of favor because of the excesses of separationism. It was a word to be snickered at by evangelicals who were adept—or thought they were adept—at being in the world without becoming its servant. This snickering, however, doesn’t hide the fact that the evangelical sub-culture exhibits a significant degree of being of the world, or worldly.

Moving through these stages, the Deputy Director says, has led the church deeper and deeper into cultural captivity. The church becomes so identified with the culture that it no

longer can act independently of it. Then it finds itself living with the consequences of its choices. Says the Deputy Director, "Our supreme prize at this level is the complete devastation of the Church by getting the Adversary [or God] to judge her himself. "Here, in a stroke," he continues, "is the beauty of subversion through worldliness and its infinite superiority to persecution. . . . if the Adversary is to judge his own people, who are we to complain?"{5}

Forces of Modernism

In *The Last Christian,* Os Guinness describes three challenges of modernity which aid in the subversion of the church. They are secularization, privatization, and pluralization. These forces work to squeeze us into the mold of modernistic culture. To too great an extent, they have been successful.

Secularization is the process of separating religious ideas and institutions from the public sphere. Guinness's Deputy Director speaks of society being "freed" from religious influence.{6} This is how secularists see the separation. Religion is seen as restrictive and oppressive and harmful, and the public square needs to be free of it. All ideas and beliefs are welcome as long as they aren't explicitly grounded in religious belief. Because of the influence of the public arena in our lives, Guinness points out that "*Secularization ensures that ordinary reality is not just the official reality but also the only reality*. Beyond what modern people can see, touch, taste and smell is quite simply nothing that matters."{7}

If religion is removed from the public square, the immediate result is *privatization*, the restriction of religion to our private worlds. This can be the small communities of our churches or it can mean our own individual lives. Guinness writes that "today, where religion still survives in the modern world, no matter how passionate or committed the

believer, it amounts to little more than a private preference, a spare-time hobby, and a leisure pursuit."{8}

The third force is *pluralization*. With the meeting of many cultures comes the awareness that there are many options with regard to food, dress, relationships, entertainment, religion, and other aspects of life. The number of options multiplies in all areas, "especially," notes Guinness, "at the level of worldviews, faiths and ideologies."{9} Choosing isn't a simple matter anymore since it's so widely believed that there *is* no truth in such matters. In fact, choosing is what counts. Guinness writes, "what matters is no longer good choice or right choice or wise choice, but simply choice."{10}

Some Characteristics of Subversion

What are some characteristics of a subverted church? Os Guinness discusses several in his book *The Last Christian on Earth*.

One result of being pushed into our own private worlds by secularization is that we construct our own sub-culture and attempt to keep a distance. But then we turn around and model our sub-culture after the wider culture. For example, it's no secret that evangelical Christianity is heavily commercialized. Our Christianity becomes our style reflected in plenty of Christian kitsch and in being surrounded by the latest in fashions. The depth of our captivity to things—even Christian-ish things—becomes a measure of the shallowness of our Christianity. Compared to what Jesus and the apostles offered, which included sacrifice and suffering, says Guinness, "today's spiritual diet . . . is refined and processed. All the cost, sacrifice and demand are removed."{11}

Another pitfall is rationalization, when we have to weigh and measure everything in modernistic ways. We're guided by

“measurable outcomes” and “best practices” more than by the leading of the Spirit.{12}

Feeling forced to keep our Christian lives separate from the wider culture—the sacred/secular split, it’s been called—reduces Christianity in size. We don’t know how to apply it to the larger world (apart from excursion-style evangelism). “Many Christians,” Guinness writes, “have so personal a theology and so private a morality that they lack the criteria by which to judge society from a Christian perspective.”{13} Lacking the ability to even make sound judgments about contemporary issues from a distinctly Christian perspective, we’re unable to speak in a way that commands attention. Christianity is thought at best to be “socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging,” as someone said.{14}

A really sad result of the reshaping of Christianity is that people wonder why they should want it at all. The church is the pillar of truth, Paul says (1 Tim. 3:15). The plausibility of Christianity rises and falls with the condition of the church. If the church is weak, Christianity will seem weak. Is this the message we want to convey?

A Wrong Way to Respond

In the face of the pressures of the modern world on us, the conservative church has responded in varying ways in the wider culture.

Os Guinness describes what he calls the *push* and *pull* phases of public involvement by conservatives. The push phase comes when conservatives realize how much influence they have lost. For much of the nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity was dominant in public life. Over the last century that has been stripped away, and conservatives have seen what they held near and dear taken away. This loss of respect and position in

our society has resulted in insecurity.{15}

In response, conservative Christians push for power by means of political action and influence in education and the mass media. “But, since the drive for power is born of social impotence rather than spiritual authority,” Guinness writes, “the final result will be compromise and disillusionment.” They fall “for the delusion of power without authority.”{16}

When they recognize the loss of purity and principles in their actions, they begin to pull back and disentangle themselves from the centers of power. There is a return to the authority of the gospel without, however, a sense of the *power* of the gospel. Standing on the outside, as it were, they resort to “theologies stressing prophetic detachment, not constructive involvement.”{17} This is the phase of “hypercritical separatism.”

Then comes a third phase, the enemies’ coup de grâce. Standing back to view all this, some Christians experience what Guinness’s Deputy Director gloatingly describes as “a fleeting moment when they feel so isolated in their inner judgments that they wonder if they are the last Christian left.” There is left “a residue of part self-pity, part discouragement, and part shame that unnerves the best of them.”{18} But these are the few. The many are simply kept asleep, the Director is happy to report, unaware of what has happened.

This article has given only a taste of Os Guinness’s message to us. The hope for the church is a return to the gospel in all its purity and power. I invite you to read *The Last Christian on Earth* and get a fuller picture of the situation and what we can do to bring about change.

Notes

1. Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2010), 11.

2. Ibid., 51, 52.
3. Ibid., 28.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 32-34.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Ibid., 72.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid., 97.
11. Ibid., 159.
12. Ibid., 138.
13. Ibid., 155.
14. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday, 1973,), 449; quoted in Guinness, *Last Christian*, 79.
15. Guinness, *Last Christian*, 166.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Ibid.

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unChristian: Is Christianity's Image Hurting Christ's Image?

Byron Barlowe reviews the book unChristian*, based on research on what young people think of evangelicals and born-again Christians: that they're hypocritical, judgmental, too political, exclusive. He calls out Christians to improve the reality behind the image to better reflect Christ.*

Section Synopsis: *A recent book entitled* unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters *uncovered overwhelmingly negative views of evangelicals and born-again Christians, especially among young generations. In some ways these views are warranted, in some ways they are not, but Christians do well to take them as a wake-up call for the sake of those God wants to save and mature.*



The meaning of *gospel* is literally "good news." The book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*{1} is a book of bad news—that half of those outside the church have a negative perception of Christianity. And that's even true of many young people inside the church.

Evangelical Christians by definition consider Jesus' charge to present the biblical gospel message to the world a mandate. Yet many of the very people who they reach out to are rejecting the messengers. Researchers with the Barna Group found that a majority today believe that evangelical and born-again Christians are sheltered from the real world, are judgmental, way too political, anti-homosexual (to the point of being gay-hating), and hypocritical.

These are widespread perceptions, especially among sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, even those who go to church. To many people, perception *is* ninety percent of reality. So whatever your opinion of the study, this is the feeling out there.

Barna's survey results and commentary have been making a stir through *unChristian* since its release in 2007. It's not a deep theological or philosophical book. It contains statistical interpretation broken up by commentary from every stripe of evangelical Christian. It *is* a sobering cultural assessment that calls out believers to be more Christlike.

The authors' applications are not always solidly based. They seem a little dismissive of valid objections to their analysis and conclusions. Also, confusion among unchurched respondents about the meaning of the terms "born again" and "evangelical" leads one to ask, How seriously do we take survey-takers' critique of Christians if they don't even know who or what these Christians are? That is, many times the people being surveyed couldn't clearly define what "born-again" means or what an "evangelical" is, so how much stock should we put in their criticisms?

Yet, the stats are stark enough to be alarming: of those outside the church, fully half had a bad impression of evangelicals. Only three percent had a good impression! Are Christians so bent on moral persuasion that we're alienating the lost with a lovelessness that really is unChristian? Or is this just a case of the unsaved experiencing the gospel as a stumbling block, as Jesus said would happen? The authors say it's mainly Christians' fault; I agree but suspect there's more to it.

Here's a modest proposal: even if respondents were biased or misled, why don't we in the church humble ourselves, listen, and change where we need to? In the spirit of King David, when Shimei cursed him loudly, we may need to simply say, "Let them critique. The Lord told them to."

Some question whether perceptions of outsiders should shape the church's behavior. Co-authors Kinnaman and Lyons make the case that the church needs to be thoughtful about our responses to homosexuals, *less* trusting of political action as the way to change culture, and *more humble* and open to people who have not yet experienced grace. If outsiders feel that we are running a club they're not invited to, where is Christ in that? they ask.

According to the authors, "Theologically conservative people are increasingly perceived as aloof and unwilling to talk."

But those under 30 “are the ultimate ‘conversation generation’.” Those outside church want to discuss issues, but see Christians as unwilling. Have you recently had a spiritual dialogue with a young unbeliever? How’d it go?

“Christians Are Hypocritical”

Section Synopsis: unChristian *documents a heavy bias against Christians as hypocritical, a charge which is in part true, admit many. But it’s also an unavoidable reality of a grace-based religion, which if explained, goes a long way towards mitigating the charge and explaining the gospel message.*

One overwhelming opinion among the survey group is that Christians are *hypocrites* and this keeps people away from church.

In fact, the survey on which the book is based reveals blatant legalism among believers, that the top priority of born-again Christians is, “doing the right thing, being good, and not sinning.” This do-your-best value topped biblical values like “relationships, evangelism, service and family faith.” In another survey, four out of five churchgoers said that “the Christian life is well described as, ‘trying hard to do what God commands’.” {2} Such a primary focus on *lifestyle* and sin-management as a measure of spirituality leads to what they call a “false pretense of holiness,” that is, hypocrisy.{3} It’s often like we Christians are living for others’ approval and forgetting about grace.

This isn’t lost on younger generations. “Like it or not, the term ‘hypocritical’ has become fused with young peoples’ experience of Christianity,” say the authors.{4} *Eighty-five percent* of “outsiders” and *half of young churchgoers* say so. The book offers story after painful story of sometimes breathtaking hypocrisy based on lengthy interviews. This adds weight to the conclusions drawn by Kinnaman and Lyons. The

research was not simply based on surveys (quantitative) but also on in-depth interviews (qualitative).

There may be a silver lining here. The charge of hypocrisy offers a handy starting point for turning around negative perceptions and explaining grace. Pastor and author Tim Keller admits that we Christians actually *are* often hypocritical and need to be humble about it. Unrepentant hypocrites don't admit mistakes, so we immediately challenge a perception by owning up to it.

But the other unavoidable fact is that non-Christians assume we are *trying* to live like Jesus to *get into* heaven, like the good-works motivation of other religions and cults. So, when they find out we're not perfect people, they critique us as hypocrites. In contrast, an old saying captures the biblical worldview: "The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints."{5} Unbelievers simply cannot understand this; we have to be patient with that, says Keller.

You could respond to the accusation of hypocrisy like this: "I have a relationship with Christ not because I'm good but precisely because I am not good. He rescued me from myself and the ruin I was causing. But He's changing me. I'm still a mess, but I'm God's mess."

In an age of Internet image-making and advertising, young outsiders are cynical about finding anybody who's genuine. Christians need to genuinely repent of hypocrisy. Meanwhile, we can explain that grace means our imperfections are covered by God during the process of spiritual transformation. Maybe outsiders will opt for grace once they see more of it.

"Christians Hate Homosexuals"

***Section Synopsis**: Evangelical and born-again Christians today have a well-deserved but understandable reputation as anti-gay, but attitudes can go so far as being gay-hating.*

Balancing conviction about the broader gay agenda and the personal sin of homosexuality with a humble compassion for gay individuals who are made in God's image is key, especially as we model for younger believers.

The guys in my Bible study group were discussing gay marriage and the upcoming elections. The lively banter stopped when I dropped a bomb. "You know," I said, "when most non-Christians under thirty-years-old find out we're evangelicals, we may as well be wearing a sandwich board emblazoned with 'God hates gays.'" I'd been reading *unChristian,* and it was sobering.

According to the authors, if we're raising kids to "shun their peers who are 'different,' we are actually limiting their . . . spiritual influence" and may lead them to question their own faith.{6} Why? Because they'll probably have friends who identify as gay and other sexual identities. As Probe colleague Kerby Anderson says, "One of the biggest challenges for churches and individual Christians who reach out to homosexuals is keeping two principles in proper tension: biblical convictions and biblical compassion."{7}

An emerging adult generation accepts homosexuality, often without thinking, even those who grew up in church. Only one-third of churched young people believe homosexuality to be a "major problem."

And, only a small percentage of young adults "want to resist homosexual initiatives" in society. This is alarming, given America's softening of sexual morals, mainstreaming of gay culture and the redefinition of marriage. But the issue addressed in *unChristian* is that in our battle against a few agenda-driven radicals, we've regularly forgotten that our fight is not with same-sex strugglers, but with unbiblical ideas.{8} We're called to love, not condemn, the people made in God's image who are caught up in sin, even while we stand up as Christian citizens.

Barna's survey shows just how unbiblical self-identified Christians can be. Over half said homosexuality was a problem, but only two out of six hundred people said anything about love or "being sympathetic" as a potential solution. A mere one percent say they pray for homosexuals! "We need to downgrade the importance of being antihomosexual as a 'credential,'" of our commitment to Christ, say the authors.{9} That is, we need to repent if we believe that it's a spiritual badge of honor to be anti-gay.

If a certain brand of sin is disgusting to us, why should that get in the way of communicating the love of a forgiving God? We need to keep in mind that *all* sin is disgusting to God, even our pet sins. This is the kind of challenge the book *unChristian* does well. Yet, scant mention is made of the greater consequences of sexual sins, including sickness and the desperate need for repentance and recovery among same-sex practitioners. Perhaps that would have been off-point for this book.

Kinnaman observes that younger generations are "hard-wired for relational connections" and view the church's lack of spiritual solutions as uncaring and insincere. If we lose our audience due to heartlessness it won't matter how much truth we proclaim.

"Christians Are Judgmental"

***Section Synopsis**: "Christians are judgmental" is an accusation coming from young people inside and outside the Church today. Believers need to learn to retain the biblical mandate to judge the fruits of ideas and behaviors while going out of our way not to condemn people who've never (or seldom) experienced God's grace.*

One of the most troubling perceptions that a watching world has of "born agains" and "evangelicals", especially among the

under-thirty crowd, is that we are judgmental. The book *unChristian* cites findings that ninety percent of "outsiders" believe this. More than half of young churchgoers agree!

It's not compromise to graciously work with disagreements. Sometimes the need to be right and "stay right" cancels out the truth we're trying to defend. To use the old saying, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." This seems to be the main finding the research revealed.

The authors credit young generations with insightfulness into peoples' *motives* since they've been endlessly targeted by marketing, lectures, and sermons. (Most have spent time in church, by the way.) They don't want unsolicited advice, say the authors. But that makes them resistant, *not* unreachable. Another factor is that younger generations reject black-and-white views. "They esteem context, ambiguity, and tension. . . . *How* we communicate [to them] is just as important as *what* we communicate," according to the book. {10} One popular author is seeing fruit among younger people by focusing on God Himself as the original community, the Trinity, and giving credence to our need for community.{11}

Well, aren't unbelievers the ones judging believers? Aren't Christians just standing up to sin? In-depth interviews showed that many respondents "believe Christians are trying . . . to justify feelings of moral and spiritual superiority."{12} My opinion is this: If we think we're better, we need to revisit Amazing Grace! Arrogance is the charge; are you guilty of it? I know I've been.

What does it mean to be judgmental? People are stumbling over stuff like this:

- Judgmentalism doesn't stop to ask why people do the things they do and why they are the way they are. That is, it just doesn't care.

- Judgmental minds see everything in terms of rules kept or rules broken.

- A judgmental heart maintains the us-them dichotomy, keeping people at a distance from us. Holding people in contempt is easier when we lump them into categories.

- The core belief of a judgmental spirit is, "I'm right and I'm better."

It's true, the worldview of young generations in America has shifted in recent years to include a "do-it-yourself" morality and this is deeply troubling. Youth apologist Josh McDowell notes that seniors have the emotional maturity of freshmen today. Many suffer from broken families.{13} Still, an entire generation—churched and many formerly-churched—doubts our motives. Yes, they are judging us! But if our attitudes truly are stiff-arming people, shouldn't we start sympathetically inviting them into God's fellowship?

Christ-followers have a very hard time distinguishing between judging *people* and judging *what they do*. Scripture teaches us clearly not to condemn people to hell. Paul the Apostle taught that he didn't even judge himself, much less outsiders. Yet we are told to judge fruits, which consist of what people do. That way, we know if we're dealing with an unbelieving person, a confused believer or a mature disciple of Christ. If an unbeliever commits sin, we can see from it how to minister to them.

We church folks say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." Those studied said they experience hate of the sin *and* the sinner. Much of church peoples' discomfort and judgmentality stems from cultural and generational sources. If something like tattoos gets in the way of a Christlike response, maybe we need to take a fresh look at our attitudes.

How Can True Christians Constructively Respond?

Section Synopsis: *Repairing a damaged image is a worthy goal for Christians so that critics can see Christ instead of negative stereotypes. We can tear down stereotypes by being Christlike and then we have a chance to tear down deeper misconceptions about God, the Bible, and faith.*

The panhandler touched Dave's heart with his honest appeal. "I just want a burger." Throughout the meal, Dave talked with him, finding out about his life and views. He didn't try to cram the gospel in or argue. Dave later overheard the man say to his homeless companion, "Hey that guy's a Christian and we actually had a conversation." Dave wondered what kind of negative interactions with Christians from the past prompted that response!

The authors of *unChristian* uncovered a low public opinion of evangelicals and born-again Christians among outsiders. They may be biased, but it's helpful to know what people think.

One of the most important ministries you can have these days is to tear down negative stereotypes of Christ-followers simply by being Christlike. That may set the stage for tearing down myths and lies about God, the Bible, and Christianity.

We need to seek common ground to begin a dialogue with those outside the faith. We all respond to agreement better than arguments, so affirming is a good start towards persuading. I recently saw a bumper sticker on the truck of a worker. It said in effect, "Jesus loves you but I think you're a jerk", although in more colorful language! After I chuckled about how God loves "jerks" like me, we spent forty-five minutes discussing his views, mostly on God and religion.

At one point, he proclaimed, "I like to think of God as feminine." I explored his reasons, which included the presence

of beauty in the world. I affirmed that observation far as I could and expanded his thinking. I said, “What if God is so big and complete that He embodies perfect femininity *and* masculinity?” The door opened wider. But what if I’d acted offended by the cuss word on the sticker or been put off by his distorted theology? I’m sure he would have been put off and the conversation would have been aborted.

Again, we also need to admit mistakes and problems, say the authors. Youth today emphasize “keepin’ it real,” being genuine. “Transparency disarms an image-is-everything generation.”{14}

Lastly, the authors urge us to respond with truth *and* love to gays and their friends. Speaking out against homosexual sin and harmful politics may be our role. At the same time, Kerby Anderson points out that Christians “should lovingly welcome those who struggle with homosexual temptations and dedicate [ourselves] to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of” homosexual strugglers.{15}

Our tone of voice, demeanor and facial expression are much more important than we think. As Tim Keller says, “You actually have to embody a different kind of Christian than the ones that they’ve known in the past or they’re simply not going to listen to what you’re saying.”{16}

Notes

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity…And Why it Matters* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
2. David Kinnaman and Lyons, 51
3. Ibid, 49.
4. Ibid, 42. 5. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton/Penguin Group, New York, New York: 2008), 54.
6. Kinnaman and Lyons, 99.

7. Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality* (Harvest House: Eugene, Oregon, 2008), 82.
8. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB). See: www.BibleGateway.com.
9. Kinnaman and Lyons, 105.
10. Ibid, 183.
11. Tim Keller, interviewed by Ed Stetzer, researcher, blogger and host of Inside Lifeway, posted April 24, 2008, lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL_Evangelism_and_Keller.mp3.
12. Kinnaman and Lyons, 182.
13. Josh McDowell, as quoted by Charlie Mack, staff representative of Faculty Commons (Campus Crusade for Christ) in a PowerPoint® presentation presented to professors at Michigan State University, Spring, 2008.
14. Kinnaman and Lyons, 56.
15. Kerby Anderson, 83-84.
16. Keller, "Inside Lifeway" interview.

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Globalization and the Internet – A Christian Considers the Impact

Kerby Anderson looks at the growth and role of the Internet through a Christian worldview perspective. It is important that we continue to understand its capabilities and its dangers.

Introduction

More than one billion people use the Internet and benefit from

the vast amount of information that is available to anyone who connects. But any assessment of the Internet will show that it has provided both surprising virtues and unavoidable vices.

Contrary to the oft-repeated joke, Al Gore did not invent the Internet. It was the creation of the Department of Defense that built it in case of a nuclear attack, but its primary use has been during peace. The Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency created a primitive version of the Internet known as ARPAnet. It allowed researchers at various universities to collaborate on projects and conduct research without having to be in the same place.

The first area network was operational in the 1980s, and the Internet gained great popularity in the 1990s because of the availability of web browsers. Today, due to web browsers and search engines, Internet users in every country in the world have access to vast amounts of online information.

The Internet has certainly changed our lives. Thomas Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat*, talks about some of these changes.{1} For example, we used to go to the post office to send mail; now most of us also send digitized mail over the Internet known as e-mail. We used to go to bookstores to browse and buy books; now we also browse digitally. We used to buy a CD to listen to music; now many of us obtain our digitized music off the Internet and download it to an MP3 player.

Friedman also talks about how the Internet has been the great equalizer. A good example of that is Google. Whether you are a university professor with a high speed Internet connection or a poor kid in Asia with access to an Internet café, you have the same basic access to research information. The Internet puts an enormous amount of information at our fingertips. Essentially, all of the information on the Internet is available to anyone, anywhere, at anytime.

The Internet (and the accompanying digital tools developed to use it) has even changed our language. In the past, if you left a message asking when your friend was going to arrive at the airport, usually you would receive a complete sentence. Today the message would be something like: AA 635 @ 7:42 PM DFW. Tell a joke in a chat room, and you will receive responses like LOL ("laughing out loud") or ROFL ("rolling on the floor laughing"). As people leave the chat room, they may type BBL ("be back later"). Such abbreviations and computer language are a relatively new phenomenon and were spawned by the growth of the Internet.

I want to take a look at some of the challenges of the Internet as well as the attempt by government to control aspects of it. While the Internet has certainly provided information to anyone, anywhere, at any time, there are still limits to what the Internet can do in the global world.

The Challenge of the Internet

The Internet has provided an opportunity to build a global information infrastructure that would link together the world's telecommunications and computer networks. But futurists and governmental leaders also believed that this interconnectedness would also bring friendship and cooperation, and that goal seems elusive.

In a speech given over a decade ago, Vice-President Al Gore said, "Let us build a global community in which the people of neighboring countries view each other not as potential enemies, but as potential partners, as members of the same family in the vast, increasingly interconnected human family."{2}

Maybe peace and harmony are just over the horizon because of the Internet, but I have my doubts. The information superhighway certainly has connected the world together into

one large global network, but highways don't bring peace. Highways connected the various countries in Europe for centuries, yet war was common and peace was not. An information superhighway connects us with countries all over the world, but global cooperation hasn't been the result, at least not yet.

The information superhighway also has some dark back alleys. At the top of the list is pornography. The Internet has made the distribution of pornography much easier. It used to be that someone wanting to view this material had to leave their home and go to the other side of town. The Internet has become the ultimate brown wrapper. Hard core images that used to be difficult to obtain are now only a mouse click away.

Children see pornography at a much younger age than just a decade ago. The average age of first Internet exposure to pornography is eleven years old.{3} Sometimes this exposure is intentional, usually it is accidental. Schools, libraries, and homes using filters often are one step behind those trying to expose more and more people to pornography.

But the influence of the Internet on pornography is only one part of a larger story. In my writing on personal and social ethics, I have found that the Internet has made existing social problems worse. When I wrote my book *Moral Dilemmas* back in 1998, I dealt with such problems as drugs, gambling, and pornography. Seven years later when I was writing my new book, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, I noticed that every moral issue I discussed was made worse by the Internet. Now my chapter on pornography had a section on cyberporn. My chapter on gambling had a section dealing with online gambling. My chapter on adultery also dealt with online affairs.

Internet Regulation

All of these concerns lead to the obvious question: Who will

regulate the Internet? In the early day of the Internet, proponents saw it as the cyber-frontier that would be self-regulating. The Internet was to liberate us forever from government, borders, and even our physical selves. One writer said we should "look without illusion upon the present possibilities for building, in the on-line spaces of this world, societies more decent and free than those mapped onto dirt and concrete and capital."{4}

And for a time, the self-government of the Internet worked fairly well. Internet pioneers were even successful in fighting off the Communications Decency Act which punished the transmission of "indecent" sexual communications or images on the Internet.{5} But soon national governments began to exercise their authority.

Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, in their book, *Who Controls the Internet?*, describe the various ways foreign governments have exercised their authority.{6}

- France requires Yahoo to block Internet surfers from France so they cannot purchase Nazi memorabilia.{7}

- The People's Republic of China requires Yahoo to filter materials that might be harmful or threatening to Party rule. Yahoo is essentially an Internet censor for the Communist party.{8}

- The Chinese version of Google is much slower than the American version because the company cooperates with the Chinese government by blocking search words the Party finds offensive (words like Tibet or democracy).

Even more disturbing is the revelation that Yahoo provided information to the Chinese government that led to the imprisonment of Chinese journalists and pro-democracy leaders. Reporters Without Borders found that Yahoo has been implicated in the cases of most of the people they were defending.{9}

Columnist Clarence Page points out that "Microsoft cooperates in censoring or deleting blogs that offend the Chinese government's sensibilities. Cisco provides the hardware that gives China the best Internet-blocking and user-tracking technology on the planet."{10}

All of this censorship and cooperation with foreign governments is disturbing, but it also underscores an important point. For years, proponents of the Internet have argued that we can't (or shouldn't) block Internet pornography or that we can't regulate what pedophiles do on the Internet. These recent revelations about Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft show that they can and do block information.

The book *Who Controls the Internet?* argues that the last decade has led to the quiet rediscovery of the functions and justification for territorial government. The Internet has not replaced the legitimate structure of government with a self-regulated cyber-frontier. The Internet may change the way some of these territorial states govern, but it will not diminish their important role in regulating free societies.

Government and Intermediaries

Governments have been able to exercise control over the Internet in various ways. This should not be too surprising. The book *Who Controls the Internet?* points out that while some stores in New York's Chinatown sell counterfeit Gucci bags and Rolex watches, you don't find these same products in local stores. That is because the "most important targets of the laws against counterfeits—trademark laws—are local retailers."{11}

The U.S. government might not be able to go after manufacturers in China or Thailand that produce these counterfeits, but they certainly can go after retail stores. That's why you won't find these counterfeit goods in a Wal-

Mart store. And while it is true that by controlling Wal-Mart or Sears doesn't eliminate counterfeit goods, government still can adequately control the flow of these goods by focusing on these intermediaries.

Governments often control behavior through intermediaries. "Pharmacists and doctors are made into gatekeepers charged with preventing certain forms of drug abuse. Bartenders are responsible for preventing their customers from driving drunk."{12}

As the Internet has grown, there has also been an increase in new intermediaries. These would include Internet Service Providers (ISPs), search engines, browsers, etc. In a sense, the Internet has made the network itself the intermediary. And this has made it possible for governments to exert their control over the Internet. "Sometimes the government-controlled intermediary is Wal-Mart preventing consumer access to counterfeit products, sometimes it is the bartender enforcing drinking age laws, and sometimes it is an ISP blocking access to illegal information."{13}

More than a decade ago, the German government raided the Bavarian offices of Compuserve because they failed to prevent the distribution of child pornography even though it originated outside of Germany.{14} In 2001, the British government threatened certain sites with criminal prosecution for distributing illegal adoption sites. The British ISPs agreed to block the sites so that British citizens could not access them.{15}

Internet Service Providers, therefore, are the obvious target for governmental control. In a sense, they are the most important gatekeepers to the Internet.{16}

Governmental control over the Internet is not perfect nor is it complete. But the control over intermediaries has allowed territorial governments to exercise much great control and

regulation of the Internet than many of the pioneers of cyberspace would have imagined.

Globalization and Government

In previous articles we have addressed the issue of globalization and have recognized that technology (including the Internet) has made it much easier to move information around the world. There is no doubt that the Internet has accelerated the speed of transmission and thus made the world smaller. It is much easier for people around the world to access information and share it with others in this global information infrastructure.

Those who address the issue of globalization also believe that it diminishes the relevance of borders, territorial governments, and geography. Thomas Friedman believes that the Internet and other technologies are flattening the world "without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language."{17}

In one sense, this is true. The lower costs of moving information and the sheer amount of information exchanged on the Internet have made it more difficult for governments to suppress information they do not like. The explosive growth of blogs and web pages have provided a necessary outlet for opinion and information.

It is also true that there has been some self-governing behavior on the Internet. Friedman, for example, describes eBay as a "self-governing nation-state—the V.R.e., the Virtual Republic of eBay." The CEO of eBay even says, "People will say that eBay restored my faith in humanity—contrary to a world where people are cheating and don't give people the benefit of the doubt."{18}

But it also true that territorial governments work with eBay to arrest and prosecute those who are cheaters or who use the

website in illegal ways. And it also relies on a banking system and the potential of governmental prosecution of fraud.

We have also seen in this article that governments have also been able to exert their influence and authority over the Internet. They have been able to use the political process to alter or block information coming into their country and have been able to shape the Internet in ways that the early pioneers of the Internet did not foresee.

Goldsmith and Wu believe that those talking about the force of globalization often naively believe that countries will be powerless in the face of globalization and the Internet. "When globalization enthusiasts miss these points, it is usually because they are in the grips of a strange technological determinism that views the Internet as an unstoppable juggernaut that will overrun the old and outdated determinants of human organization."{19}

There is still a legitimate function for government (Romans 13:1-7) even in this new world of cyberspace. Contrary to the perceived assumption that the Internet will shape governments and move us quickly toward globalization, there is good evidence to suggest that governments will in many ways shape the Internet.

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Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese answers a common question of a Christian view of politics and government: How would a biblical worldview inform us on being in the world of politics but not of it? "Dr. T" models a critical yet engaged distance in assessing the beliefs of Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.

Christian Government

During each new election season Christians ask, "What is a biblical view of government?" Does it teach Theocracy, Communism or maybe Democracy? The Old Testament does teach theocracy, which means the Priests ruled the people through the Mosaic Law. Later in its history Israel became a monarchy by its own decision under King Saul—a choice God was not very pleased with, but He accommodated Israel's demand (I Samuel 8).

The New Testament does not adopt theocracy because it applied only to the chosen nation of Israel; it gives no endorsement of any one form of government, but instead offers the Church a special role as a prophetic voice engaging any and all forms of government. There is no such thing as *Christian (civil) Government*, only *Christians in government*. Instead of creating a new system, the Church brings biblical principles to bear on all governments.{1} This position allows the Church everywhere to be actively involved in its particular political situation through maintaining its witness to Christ.

Israel and the Church

The role of Israel and the Church are often conflated in Christian minds, especially during the political season. Many still believe that Christians should create laws or vote for candidates that will bring us closer to a “Christian America” ideal. This is a revised version of an old notion of Christendom that joins church and state going back to the Constantinian Church which espoused a Christian Roman Empire. Some of our Puritan forebears held that America was the New Jerusalem. America as a nation replaces Israel as the people of God and the Church becomes a political entity like Israel.

In approaching politics, it is essential that we keep in mind the differences between Israel and the Church. Israel was a national people with its own civil law and identity. It was closed to the rest of the world and had to live in strict separation from the Gentile nations. Their call was to isolation, to establish Theocracy and to drive the Gentiles out from Canaan, a goal they were never really successful at accomplishing (Judges 1: 19, 28, 32). Israel was one civil nation among many civil nations and it was usually at war with those neighbors.

Israel foreshadowed the Church. They prepared the world for the coming of the messiah and the Church. Their history and law serves as an example or model of instruction for the Church (Romans 15: 4 and I Corinthians 10: 6), but the Church is not obligated to adopt Israel’s civil identity because this would violate her broader mission to reach all people (Acts 1: 8). The Church is called to political and cultural engagement with all systems and all people, not isolation. When the Church becomes a political or cultural system, it loses its message of grace through faith and reverts back to Law (Galatians 3). Faith cannot be legislated.

The Church could not be true to its universal calling if it was a political power like Israel because this turns its

mission into one of war and conquest, such as the Crusades in the middle ages, rather than conversion through faith (John 18: 36). Islam is a good example of a religion that does follow Israel's kind of political identity in the establishment of Sharia Law. The Church is not one nation, but one people among many nations, cultures and systems. It cannot afford to be a nation with its own civil law and government, which sets itself against other governments and other people. When the Church establishes itself as a political power it compromises its prophetic mission and loses its unique contribution to politics. Instead the Church has a more complex role in any system it finds itself in.

In The World but Not of It

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Jesus prayed that his followers will not be taken out of the world, but that they be sent into the world and kept from its evil (John 17: 15). The Apostle Paul argued similarly that we must maintain our association with people in the world, even immoral people—and not to isolate ourselves (I Corinthians 5: 9, 10). He says, "the form of this world is passing away," an awareness that creates in us an "undistracted devotion to the Lord" in every area of life. We are to participate in the world, but not get too attached to it. We "should be as those who buy, but do not possess…and those who make use of the world as though they did not make full use of it" (I Corinthians 7: 31-35). We bring awareness of the temporal nature of the world.

The Prophetic Role of the Church

The Apostle Peter states that the Church is a unique people of God, "a people for God's own possession" or a "peculiar people" as the King James Version says, called to proclaim the truth. He exhorts Christians to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness…" and to keep our "behavior

excellent” in the world. (I Peter 2: 9- 12).

The Church lives differently in society by setting an example. As God’s special people, the Church is called to witness His truth to the world, including to the government structures. This means that the Church works within various systems, something Paul accomplished effectively in his use of Roman Citizenship and with his appeal to Caesar (Matthew 17: 24-27; I Peter 2: 13-20, Romans 13: 1-7, Acts 16: 35-39; 23: 11; 24 and 25).

In preaching the Word the Church acts as prophet to “the world,” the societal structures arrayed against God (Romans 12: 2). This includes all political systems under satanic control (Luke 4: 5-8). A prophet brings a timely and meaningful message of relevance. He has insight to speak to a particular situation. For example when Nathan the prophet spoke the Word of the Lord to King David in confronting David’s sin of murder he held him accountable for his behavior (2 Samuel 12: 1-15). The Bible teaches us through this example that the political powers are not absolute. *The king is not God*, a radical statement in ancient times.

Prophets call people back to obedience to God. They were the conscience of the nation. Likewise, the Church acts as prophet through active participation, but with an attitude of critical distance.

Critical Distance

Critical distance does not mean isolation or withdrawal where we go live in the woods and wait for the world to die. It means involvement in everything the world offers, especially politics, but with an approach from a *different perspective*, an eternal perspective. Criticism means Christians work from within society and offer a perpetual challenge to the status quo that reflects a Christian conscience; it never arrives at a final form of society in which it is completely comfortable.

This is an important, albeit an uncomfortable, role to play. It can never endorse any system uncritically because this acceptance negates the fact of the inherent evil of the world and announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Church then is swallowed in the world's identity. This reflects what happened in the Christian Roman Empire and in the Christian America ideal, which is often the ideology behind so called "Christian Conservative" political activism. The United States is identified with Christendom as "a Christian country." Criticism in this sense does not simply entail a good word of advice, but active participation guided by an ethic of love (Matthew 5: 43-48; Romans 13: 8-10). This may manifest in working to repeal an unjust law or establishing a new law that meets certain needs in society, but especially the needs of the weakest members of society, who cannot speak for themselves and are powerless. This reflects a Christian conscience of concern for others, rather than just ourselves. Laws must protect those who need the most protection, rather than empower those who make it. Law is the enforcement of the personal morality of its makers (hence, when people say you "cannot legislate morality," that's an absurdity).

Perhaps the greatest example in recent times of the Church's prophetic voice in American politics was in bringing attention to the cause of the unborn in its efforts to stem the tide of abortion, both in its political activism and through nonpolitical work of advocating adoption as an alternative to abortion. Another good example was the American Civil Rights Movement when it spoke against racism and the unjust social structures in American society.

Just as the Old Testament prophets held the king accountable to the Law of God—*the king is not God*—so the Church reminds the world of its limitations, that its systems have flaws and must allow for improvement. *The world is not yet in the kingdom of God.* There is no perfect system any more than there

are perfect people. There is always room for growth and change. Only in the kingdom of God does change and growth cease because it is no longer necessary in the final state of perfection (Revelation 21).

Democracy offers a better system for Christians than Communism or Theocracy because it reflects an ideal of freedom, the basis of love and faith. But it has flaws, such as the tyranny of the majority (de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*). Nor is democracy "the end of history," a popular idea after the Cold War, arguing that democracy has emerged from the ideological struggles of history to become the greatest and final system. Nothing will succeed it. The post–Cold War world has reached the end of history, or the end of struggle and the end of change.{2}

There is every reason to consider that democracy will perish from the earth if its people grow complacent and do not defend it or practice it and any idea to suggest that it cannot perish on the basis of a metaphysical law of history will only contribute to that complacency. There is never a final system of society in which the Church refuses to adjure and criticize toward change because that entity would then be equal to the kingdom of God.

Romney vs. Obama

We apply the same standard of *critical distance* in voting for our favorite candidate or party. Voting is often the choice of the lesser of two evils. This popular maxim expresses the same idea of critical distance as long as we understand that the choice of the lesser evil is still a far less than perfect choice. Critical distance includes self-criticism.

Most people choose a candidate who comes closest to their own position and then largely ignore their differences. Critical distance will not dismiss the differences because through it we hold ourselves accountable by seeing our blind spots and

recognizing potential problems. We show humility and responsibility through admitting the limits of our own position and choices.

Many contrasts exist between Governor Romney and President Obama, not least of which is personal religious belief. Ironically, Evangelical Christians largely ignore this issue, though each candidate's views represent a serious difference as compared to biblical Christianity. In the past, Evangelicals have stressed the importance of personal belief. After all, most people hold to a particular political and economic view because of their religious views, not despite them.

President Obama reflects Liberation Theology in his belief that government must act as champion of the people. This should be done, in his view, by elevating the condition of the disenfranchised into the middle class, mainly through economic redistribution, but also through religious pluralism, toleration of minorities, woman's rights and gay rights. Liberation Theology adapts Christianity to a socialist political agenda that uses government as a tool to free people from oppressive social structures such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy. There is a strong emphasis on social justice, radical equality and group sin, meaning the structure of a society is to blame for its problems rather than the individual, who is a victim.

Governor Romney styles himself as a stalwart defender of free enterprise informed by Mormon beliefs that reflect traditional American values of family, faith, and work ethic. Government must protect those values from its own encroachment in order to maintain the middle class. Although Mormonism is radically different from Evangelical Christianity in its doctrinal formulation, it accepts similar social values, which stress personal responsibility and initiative.

Although, no election can be reduced to one issue or to

personal beliefs, these considerations' potential impact cannot be disregarded. Behind Obama stands a Liberation Christianity that has and will continue to benefit from his re-election. A Romney victory will lift the cultural status of Mormons in America from outsiders to the mainstream. In the past, the election to the Presidency of a member from a group struggling for recognition in mainstream America received a stamp of approval at the highest level of political office that gave them increased cultural recognition and cache . The election of one of your own to the Presidency is a sign of arrival. President Kennedy's election to office brought American mainstream acceptance to Roman Catholics, just as President Carter brought it to Evangelicals and President Obama brought the full acceptance of African-Americans, so a "President Romney" will create a greater cultural awareness and acceptance of Mormons.

The contemporary political logic of the American system says put your criticism out there during the primaries, but put it away once a candidate for your party is chosen. You're supposed to fall in line behind him or her. Christians often follow the same logic and refuse to entertain criticism of our chosen candidate because it suggests a preference for the opposing side. The lack of criticism generally continues through our chosen candidate's administration. Problems and faults are usually blamed on the other side and Christians become as politically polarized as the parties. This surrenders any critical distance gained and the Church loses its unique contribution for political advantage. It's like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25: 27-34). We can in good conscience choose a candidate that we do not completely agree with *if* we retain our criticism of him. We should participate, yet with reservations.

Critical distance can tolerate voting for someone of a different faith if he is a better choice than the alternative, but it cannot live with softening its differences in order to

win an election or modifying its convictions for political gain. Evangelicals are faced with a difficult choice, not between Liberation Theology or Mormonism, but whether or not they will retain their doctrinal critique and rejection of Mormonism, when those differences threaten its economic and political interests.

Recently, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association dropped Mormonism from its cult list. And the language of "values" between Christians and Mormons grows indistinguishable, so that now "Christian values" are somehow equated with "Mormon values" and a vote for a Mormon is a vote for "biblical values." The greatest "value" for Christians is the deity of Jesus Christ, which most Mormons do not accept. Evangelicals and Mormons share a similar political agenda in preserving the free enterprise system and in protecting the traditional American family ideal, which they both consider preferable to the creeping socialism of the Obama administration. There is no need to drop the hard and fast differences between Christianity and Mormonism; Christians can work with anyone if we effectively practice *critical distance* at the same time.

So, it comes down to retaining our prophetic role as members of Christ's Body—not as much who we vote for, but why and how.

Notes

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2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). The idea of the end of history here is really a Hegelian version of Christian America, just as the idea of progress, the foundation of Fukuyama's argument, reflects a secularization of the older notion of the idea of providence that founded "Christian America." Both identify

either Christendom or the Western World with the kingdom of God, the final form of society. One is traditionally religious in its conception and the other secular.

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the unfit ones

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

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

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

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

When the Church Is More

Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

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

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

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

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

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

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is

conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

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

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

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

Traps for all:
Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is probably a problem for both sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my

individual rights and my private life… and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

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

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

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

Good question!

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

Mapping America

Jan. 18, 2011

A new study verifies what many of us have known for some time. Children who grow up in an intact family and attend religious services do better than children who do not. Dr. Patrick Fagan at the Family Research Council documents this in *Mapping America*. He uses the data collected by Drs. Nicholas Zill and Philip Fletcher from the National Survey of Children's Health.

They found a significant discrepancy between children who grew up in intact families (with both biological parents) and those who came from broken homes. They also found a similar discrepancy between those who attend religious services weekly and those who worship less frequently. They found that children in the former groups were five times less likely to repeat a grade, less likely to have behavior problems at home and school, and more likely to be cooperative and understanding of others' feelings.

The benefits not only accrued to the children, but also had an impact on the parents. For example, parents of kids from intact families who worship regularly were much less likely (21 percent) to be contacted by the child's school about behavior or achievement problems compared to parents (53 percent) whose kids were not living with both parents and not attending church services regularly. Parents of the children in the first group also report less stress, healthier parent-child relationships, and few concerns about their children's achievement.

Even more surprising in the study was the these differences held true even after controlling for family income and poverty as well as for the parents' education level, race, and

ethnicity. In essence, the study suggests that the best prescription for society is a stable family and family worship. In this environment, children thrive emotionally and achieve academically. They become the foundation for the next generation of leaders and citizens.

In a sense, this study is the flip side of studies that were published years ago about the impact of divorce on children. In my book, Christian Ethics in Plain Language, I document the three e's of negative impact of divorce (emotional impact, educational impact, and economic impact). Whether you look at these positive studies or the earlier negative studies, you can see the importance of family and worship. I'm Kerby Anderson, and that is my point of view.

Church, Marriage and Family

Does going to church strengthen marriage and family? I would think that any Christian would agree with that statement. But I find it exciting that even secular researchers would agree that church and religious activities are good for marriage and family.

On a regular basis, the Heritage Foundation posts the latest findings from researchers. This month their "Top Ten" related to religion and family. Here are some of the findings they summarized.

Researchers have found that couples who believe that marriage has spiritual significance tend to adjust more easily to marriage and experience lower levels of conflict. They have found that marriages in which both the husband and wife frequently attend church services are less likely to end in

divorce than marriages in which neither spouse attends frequently. On average, wives who attend church weekly with their husbands experience higher level of marital happiness than peers in marriages in which neither spouse attends church weekly.

Adolescents who attend church more frequently and report that religion is important in their lives are more likely to marry and less likely to cohabit than peers who are less religious. Adolescents who consider religion to be important in their lives tend to have a higher expectation of getting married than their peers. Young adults who attended religious services frequently during adolescence are more likely to disapprove of premarital sex and cohabitation than peers who had not attended services frequently.

Research even found that urban mothers who give birth out of wedlock are more likely to become married within a year of their children's birth if they attend religious services. Men and women who attend religious services weekly are less likely to commit an act of domestic violence than peers who seldom attend.

Many years ago, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher wrote the book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*. At the time, they documented the benefits of marriage. These findings not only show the benefits of marriage, but the benefits of church attendance to marriage and family. I'm Kerby Anderson, and that's my point of view.

July 22, 2010

Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

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

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

- No sex
- No secular music
- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model
- Don’t doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible
- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back

- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

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

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

Reveling in God's love for me
Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy
Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

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

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

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

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

Leaving Christianity

Last week (August 3, 2010), writer Anne Rice—author of *The Vampire Chronicles*—publicly renounced Christianity, but not Christ, on her Facebook page. In 2004 she had come back to her Roman Catholic roots after a foray in atheism, during which time she wrote her vampire books. She later identified these books as reflecting her quest for meaning in a world without God. Embracing Jesus as her Savior, Anne announced that she would henceforth "write only for the Lord." Her next two books were *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* and *Christ the Lord: Road to Cana*, chronicling the life of Jesus.

But now she's had enough of the church:

> "For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else."

A few hours later, she followed up her post with this:

> "As I said below, I quit being a Christian. I'm out. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

She reaffirmed her faith in Christ with a lack of faith in

Christianity an hour or so later with the following post:

> "My faith in Christ is central to my life. My conversion from a pessimistic atheist lost in a world I didn't understand, to an optimistic believer in a universe created and sustained by a loving God is crucial to me. But following Christ does not mean following His followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or might become."

This breaks my heart, for several reasons.

First, she has a valid point about what "Christianity" has been shaped to look like in many churches and in many individuals: that it's more what we're *against* than what we're *for*. See the book *unChristian: What a New Generations Really Thinks About Christianity. . . And Why it Matters*. Shallow discipleship has created an ugly characterization of what the Church, and Christians, are supposed to look like.

Second, she doesn't understand that while Christ is the Head, the Church is His Body. No one can take themselves out of the Body of Christ without harm, just as a physical body is harmed if one hand chops off the other. Christianity is about Jesus, not the unfortunate misunderstandings of what it means to follow Him. But God calls us to do life in community, not on our own. Maybe Anne needs to find a different faith community than the one she's been in.

Third, in a battle between her cherished beliefs and values and the Bible's, hers are winning. Spiritual maturity means we submit ourselves to the authority and power of the Scriptures and of the Holy Spirit, resulting in our transformation. And that includes changing the way we think when our thoughts and desires collide with what God has revealed as truth. No one wins, in the end, when we refuse to be informed and formed by what God says, but Anne Rice cherishes her beliefs more than

those of the Jesus she wants to follow. That is tragic.

I’m praying for her eyes to be open on several levels. I invite you to pray for her as well.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/leaving_christianity on August 3, 2010.