

The World in Our Worship

Choices in Worship

Church historian Bruce Shelley reports on a speaking engagement he had with a group of senior adults about recent changes in evangelical churches. When he mentioned drums in worship, he said, “even the breath-taking surroundings [of the Colorado Rockies] couldn’t suppress the sanctified outrage” he heard. “Like a match dropped on a haystack,” he said, “the room erupted first in a corporate groan, followed by an outburst of laughter.”[\[1\]](#) Clearly such changes don’t sit well with many Christians. Those who appreciate a more traditional approach to worship are concerned that the contemporary style of worship risks diluting the message of the church by modeling itself on the secular entertainment industry in its style, and thus risks the accommodation of the message to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, those who believe the traditional approach has become outdated are accepting contemporary worship widely. For some, the change is simply a matter of taste: they like contemporary music and a relaxed atmosphere. For others, contemporary worship seems like a better approach to reach today’s generations. In his book, *The Second Coming of the Church*, George Barna makes this startling statement: “After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”[\[2\]](#) The church is not effectively speaking to its surrounding culture, he says, and is becoming largely irrelevant. Adapting worship services is one part of addressing this problem.

Still a third worship option for evangelicals who are tired of traditional worship but think the contemporary style is inadequate as well, is that of liturgical worship. Through the

ceremony and ritual of liturgical services conducted in settings with objects rich with symbolism, some Christians look for a special encounter with God. The October 6, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today* had on its cover a picture of a woman with a glazed look in her eyes. Above her head was the question: "Missing God at church?"^[3] A student interviewed in the cover article said this about her church background: "There was no imagination, no mystery, no beauty. It was all preaching and books and application." Another student spoke of the loss of the sense of the divine in worship today. "Gymnasiums and impermanent buildings" have replaced "the splendor and holiness of cathedrals," she said. "Plastic cups and folding chairs aren't enough," she continued. "There has to be an environment that communicates God's holiness to my senses and to my spirit."

A fourth option for worship is one championed by Robert Webber: that of blended worship. This is especially appealing to young people. It reflects, to a degree, postmodern thinking. We are no longer restricted to choosing one style over another. Now that the rigid demands of modernism have broken down, people feel free to choose facets of different styles to form something new.

Some might think that differences between worship services are really merely stylistic. Each person has his or her preferences regarding worship, right? Some prefer one style, some another. But are the differences only stylistic? Is it true that worship style is basically a matter of individual preference? Are there any objective criteria for corporate worship? If there are, then we can look for the necessary elements as we consider a certain style of worship.^[4] On the other hand, we can also look for things to avoid in worship, things that would hinder true worship. Are influences from secular culture coming into the church and adversely affecting our worship?

Let's consider first some goals of corporate worship.

Following that, we'll consider three cultural forces that serve to undermine proper worship.

Three Goals of Worship

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*,[\[5\]](#) Marva Dawn says there are three goals of worship: praising God, building up the community, and nurturing the believer.

Praising God

The obvious answer to the question "Why do we worship?" is, "To give praise and glory to God." Said the Levites, "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!" (Neh. 9:5). In praise we have our focus on God and not ourselves. At least we think we do.

However, too often our thoughts about God center around what He has done for *us*, for *me*. Consider, for example, the songs many of us sing in church. So many of them have *I* as the real subject. God is praised for what He means to *me*.

Is it wrong to praise and thank God for what He has done for me? Not at all! Of course, we should do this. The problem is this: we come to worship God in His *fullness*, but we end up praising Him for what *we've* experienced. The being and work of God is reduced to the limits of our own experience! But we're dealing with the transcendent One here! The One who spoke the stars into existence, who cares for all others in His family the same as He cares for me, and all at the same time! God's project is bigger than I am. God's being is bigger than what I have personally experienced. In addition to praising God for what He has done for us individually, we should be worshiping God for the things He does that have nothing to do with us in particular. By worshiping Him in His fullness we open ourselves up for riches we didn't expect and maybe never even imagined.

Building Up the Body

In worship we also build up the community of faith. We are part of something much bigger than our own church or denomination; we are part of something which began two millennia ago and which will continue to grow until the Lord returns.

What does this have to do with worship? First, when we come together for worship we are a worshipping *community*, not just a bunch of individuals gathered in the same room. When we are together we can turn from our occupation with ourselves and focus on the development of God's people as a body. We are not to mirror our narcissistic and individualistic society, but rather to turn outward to the community. Says Dawn, "Worship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members."[\[6\]](#)

Second, in worship we can also hear from members of the church from generations past through their writings and art. In turn, we nurture and protect that which we have inherited so we can pass it on intact to succeeding generations. Worship aids significantly in this project. Says Dawn, "Worship forms us; all the elements of the service develop the character of believer in us. And worship forms the community if it unites us in common beliefs, traditions, renewal, and goals. Worship schools us in the language of faith as we listen and sing and participate in its rites." She continues: "We can only pass on the faith if it has nurtured our character to be its carriers and if we are part of a community, the Church, that has carried the faith down through the ages."[\[7\]](#)

So, when we sing, for example, do we draw into ourselves and enjoy our own private worship? Or are we purposefully singing *with* other believers, lifting up one sound of praise to God? Do we come to church with our focus on what we hope to get out

of the service? Or are we thinking about how we are going to lift others before the Lord? Are we listening to Christians from ages past who have dealt with some of the same ideas and issues we struggle with? And are we thinking about those who will come after us, about the legacy we will leave behind?

The individualism of our age fights us here. It sets us up to be a lot of little Christian islands in a sanctuary or auditorium. We are not many individuals who just happen to have a religious bond. What we are really is a body made up of many members. Worship that recognizes God as the subject will be worship that builds up His body.

Nurturing Character

Another goal of worship is the nurturing of our character. Worship should transform us as a result of being brought into the presence of the living God. It was entering the sanctuary of God that gave Asaph a right understanding of God and His ways with men, which took away Asaph's bitterness (Ps. 73). Think of Isaiah, who was made whole and prepared to serve after beholding the glory of God and his own sinfulness (Is. 6). This isn't just a matter of growing in faith and going deeper in our prayer life. It's also a matter of becoming good people, people whose character is like that of Jesus!

Too often, however, *our* idea of being transformed is leaving church feeling good! We want to feel better about ourselves, to be lifted up! Yet, we all know in the normal course of life that building up often means tearing down first. This is especially the case when we think about being conformed to the image of Christ. In fact, Marva Dawn says that worship ought to *kill* us. What does she mean by this? She says:

"In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God's Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness . . .

. Once worship kills us, we are born anew to worship God rightly."[{8}](#)

Worship, then, serves to praise God, build up the community, and nurture our character.

Subjectivism: Worship Beginning With Me Rather Than With God

Let's begin looking at three forces, which work to undermine proper worship: subjectivism, self-focused individualism, and dumbing down the message. Our critique will not be focused on any particular worship style. Indeed, these problems can be found across the spectrum.

"Me" As Subject

Let's begin with subjectivism. This is a common attitude today. I find what is true and good within myself. My personal experience is what counts.[{9}](#) Therefore, I am the judge of what is worthwhile in my worship. I expect the sermon to be on my level (none of that heavy theology stuff), the music to suit the tastes I've already developed, and the service time to not be too long. And the service is evaluated by how I feel when it's over. What matters is *my* spiritual experience *now*.

Seeing God As Subject As Well As Object

The problem here is that the center of worship is *I*, not God. Although I might be directing my thoughts toward God, I am patterning my worship so as to satisfy *myself*. The effect is that my understanding of God is restricted to what He has done in my life; my view of God is thus limited by my experience. When *my* experience of God sets the limits, I'll have a shrunken view of God.

The key to getting God fully into the picture is to see Him as the *subject* of worship, and not just the *object*. What do I mean by this? Says theologian Marva Dawn, “The gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence.”[\[10\]](#) The content of our worship *comes* from Him; He is the source. He gives us Himself, tells us His characteristics, and informs us of His plans. Having received this we turn back to God and make Him the *object* of our worship, giving it all back to Him in praise. As one writer puts it, “Worship . . . is an encounter in which God’s glory, Word, and grace are unveiled, and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration.” In our worship, we “recognize a Lord whose majesty evokes strong praise, petition, and transformation.”[\[11\]](#) When we worship, we are reflecting God back to God. In filling our vision with God, we are met by Him. If we engineer our worship to meet *our* needs as we see them, on the other hand, we risk missing out on being touched by God in unexpected but vital ways.

I’d like to make one other point. With God as subject or source of worship, grace once again becomes central, for grace is the theme of His works on our behalf. When we are the subjects, however, *our* actions are the focus making *law* central. This leads to an emphasis on what we must do, rather than what *God* has done.[\[12\]](#)

On Worship Killing Us

With God as the subject of worship, it then becomes a vehicle of transformation in His hands. As I noted earlier, worship ought to *kill* us. It ought to make us see the great distance between God and ourselves. Once in God’s presence our sinful nature is put to death. Then we are ready to be infused with His life.[\[13\]](#)

Worship is a subversive act, Dawn insists. We don’t come before God to get His stamp of approval on our interests and agendas. God intends to turn us upside down. As Dawn says, “If

the Church's worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God's truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it. Worship will turn our values, habits, and ideas upside-down as it forms our character; only then will we be genuinely right-side up eternally."[\[14\]](#)

When we have the attitude that the worship service is provided primarily to fix our individual problems, we get the cart before the horse. We aren't interested in being brought low before God. But it is only in being brought low that we can be lifted up, because it is only then that we both see our real need and surrender ourselves to God to do with as *He* pleases, not as we please.

We thus recognize God as both subject and object of worship, as the One who fills us with Himself, and as the One upon whom we shift our focus for our time of corporate worship.

Self-Focused Individualism: Worship Focused on Me Rather Than on the Body

One of the weaknesses of the church in modern times has been the failure to give due recognition to the fact that we are part of a community of faith. Ours is a narcissistic age; we've been taught to be self-absorbed in our "I did it my way" culture. Marva Dawn notes that in her observation of the church today Christians "rarely . . . think in terms of 'we' instead of 'I'."[\[15\]](#)

The Body Present, Past and Future

We aren't just a bunch of individuals thrown together in some loose confederation. We are a *body* that extends geographically around the world at the present, and which extends back in time 2000 years and forward until the Lord returns.

How can the church address this individualistic attitude? Dawn

believes “that worship which keeps God as subject is the most important key, for God is the Creator of community and the preserver of the Church. . . . [W]orship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members.”[\[16\]](#) In our worship we study Scripture together, we speak the words of the great creeds to each other, we sing as one voice, we agree in prayer. Such things foster in us a sense of oneness, of being part of a unity.

As we are part of the community present in our own day, we are also part of a community that began with the apostles and that will continue until the Lord comes. In our worship services the past can remain a part of the present through the inclusion of the wisdom of our forefathers through their writings, prayers, and liturgies. As I mentioned earlier, there is a new interest in liturgical worship among young people. Ancient writings “are seen as providing needed maturity as well as a connection to the faith of the church historical.”[\[17\]](#) Also, the awareness that we are leaving a legacy for those who come after us provides an encouragement to transmit and maintain a correct understanding of God in our worship. A renewed understanding of the importance of the community of faith, then, gives us a foundation upon which to stand, and makes us aware of our responsibility to others.

Speaking to our Society

There is positive change in this regard in churches attuned to the situation of the younger generations. One of the characteristics of modernism was the psychological isolation it produced. We have been thinking in terms of personal needs and choices rather than in terms of obligations to the group. Against the existential idea that *my* experience *now* is what makes me what I am, leaving me essentially rootless and radically free, Christians find their identity in the enormous body of believers made alive through faith in Christ. Today,

however, young people are crying out for community, and churches are meeting this challenge through various means. This is a key area where the church reveals its eternal relevance to the human situation; to ignore it will impoverish the church body, and will make Christianity seem truly irrelevant to the younger generations.

Dumbing Down the Message

A third problem sometimes found in churches today is that of “dumbing down” the message in an effort to make it understandable to everyone equally, even to non-believers who may be visiting.

While we should welcome nonbelievers into our churches, we have to ask whether keeping our worship on an elementary level is worth the cost of holding believers at the level of nonbelievers or new believers.

We need to remember first of all that the church is . . . well, the *church*. It’s the body of Christ made up of those who have been taken hold of by the Savior. It isn’t *unbelievers*. Worship is the work of believers, and the worship service should be geared toward them. It should not be governed by what the general population finds acceptable. As Martin Marty has said, “To give the whole store away to match what this year’s market says the unchurched want is to have the people who know least about the faith determine most about its expression.”[\[18\]](#)

Bringing People Up Rather than Dumbing the Message Down

Part of the mission of the church is bringing people into the kingdom, and our worship services can be good places to do this. But if in our worship we water down the message, we are robbing the visitor of the full truth he or she needs to hear. If we don’t give visitors an idea of how big God is, in the long run we won’t keep them. Why should they stay if they get

little more than they can get outside the church? Church historian Martin Marty said this:

This writer fears that we are on the verge of seeing happen what happened in the 1950s to mainstream Protestant churches; they retooled for people who were casually attracted and liked big parking lots, spectacle, and low demands; and the people left as easily as they came.[{19}](#)

One of the problems of the liberal church this century was that in its effort to be timely and relevant it “plunged more deeply into the needs and wishes of human beings—or a God sculpted more closely to the image of man.”[{20}](#) The attempt to keep God up-to-date winds up allowing “the world to call the tune for God.” It ignores the complexity of God; it forgets “the tensions that must exist between human’s wishes and the Creator’s intentions.”[{21}](#)

We must relate the message in accessible ways, but we needn’t assume that people can’t learn or aren’t willing to be stretched. The things of God, not the sensibilities of contemporary culture, should be the measure of our worship.

On Christians Getting Their “Meat” Elsewhere

Some might say that Christians can get their real “meat” in Sunday schools or in other separate study time. We forget that we learn about God through all parts of worship, and not just from the didactic teaching of a sermon or Sunday school class. To suggest that Christians get the “meat” of the faith in Sunday school is to reveal a modernistic bias in favor of head knowledge; i.e., the idea that knowing is simply a matter of adding to our mental database. Some might say that we are worshiping in Sunday school when we are being taught facts and ideas. But this is only a part of worship. Corporate worship is a special time for interaction with and getting to know God on multiple levels.

What is lost by not developing our understanding of God in the context of *worship*? Worship takes us beyond mere head knowledge; there is interaction between God and man and between Christians. In Sunday school we listen; in worship we listen and then talk back to God. It is like the difference between reading about someone and talking with him or her.

The goal in all of this is to see God as fully as we can and be touched by Him. We use words and images and whatever else we need to lift us up to God, to let Him speak to us through whatever means are available.

Conclusion

Although someone will be hard pressed to find in Scripture a clear description of a proper worship style, we can find principles of proper worship, which apply whether one uses electric guitars or organs or no instruments at all. Furthermore, we can be careful to weed out of our worship—indeed, out of our thinking generally—ideas and attitudes that do not accord with what Scripture teaches. Subjectivism, individualism, and the dumbing down of the Word of God should not characterize our worship. It is hard to stand against one's culture, especially since we're all influenced by it. But we need to do it, for the health of the body and the individual, and for the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, "Why Does Worship Keep Changing?" *Christian Reader*, December 1996. www.christianitytoday.com/cr/6r6/6r6049.html. This article gives a brief overview of the changes in worship since the Puritans. See also Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 97-101.

2. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
3. Gary Burge, "Missing God at Church," *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1997, 20-27.
4. See Jerry Solomon, "[Worship](#),".
5. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.)
6. Dawn, 133.
7. Dawn, 149.
8. Dawn, 206.
9. See Donald G. Bloesch, "Whatever Happened to God?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 2001, 54-55.
10. Dawn, 80.
11. Burge, 22.
12. Dawn. 236.
13. Dawn, 206.
14. Dawn, 58.
15. Dawn, 131.
16. Dawn, 133.
17. Daniel Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1999.
www.christianitytoday.com/le/912/912037.html on Jan. 11, 2001.
18. Martin E. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot, and the People Will Come (and Go)," *Context* 25, no. 4 (15 Feb. 1993): 3-4. Quoted in Dawn, 258.

19. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot," quoted in Dawn, 258.

20. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 113. Quoted in Dawn, 299.

21. Turner, quoted in Dawn, 300-301.

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5 Lies the Church Tells Women

[Note: This article is taken from J. Lee Grady's book *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women*. I do not subscribe to everything in this book, particularly the author's belief that there are no restrictions to women in the church. I do not agree that the office of pastor and elder are open to women, though I believe God has given many women, including me, the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (which some find easier to receive when it's called "shepherd-teacher"). At Probe, we exhort people to be discerning in what we hear and read. Mr. Grady's book is firmly in the egalitarian camp, but as a complementarian who seeks to be discerning, I can recognize the truth of some of what he says without embracing what I believe is unbiblical. Please see the end of this article for other articles on the role of women I have written for our Web site.]

In this article I look at five lies the church tells women, inspired by the book by J. Lee Grady called *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women*.[\[1\]](#) I'm not saying all churches say all these things, but there are certain pockets of Christianity where these lies are circulated.

Lie #1: God Created Women as Inferior Beings, Destined to Serve Their Husbands.

The first lie is that God created women as inferior beings, destined to serve their husbands. Those looking for Scripture to back up their beliefs point to Genesis 2:18, where God makes a “helpmeet” for Adam. “See?” they say. “Helpers are subordinate to the ones they help, which proves women are here to serve men.” This ignores the times in the Psalms (10:14, 27:9, 118:7) where God is praised as our helper, and He is certainly not inferior or subordinate to us!

Lee Grady points out, “[I]t is a cultural bias, not a spiritual or scientific principle, that women were ‘made’ for the kitchen or laundry room. This is the most common form of male chauvinism, a burden placed on women by selfish men who want someone to wash their dishes.”[\[2\]](#)

This view that women are inferior to men is not biblical, but it has infected the church from the beginning.

The Greek culture into which the early church was born viewed women as “half animal,” unworthy of education, to be kept quiet and kept locked away, obedient to their husbands. In Jewish culture it was considered inappropriate for a man to even speak to a woman in public—including his own wife. A woman speaking to a man who was not her husband was considered to be giving evidence that she had committed adultery with him, and could be divorced. You can imagine the scandal Jesus caused when he regularly sought the company of women and talked to them, and taught them, just as he did men. Or when he allowed prostitutes to talk to him or pour perfume on his feet.[\[3\]](#)

Eve was not created to be Adam’s servant, but his honored and respected wife and co-regent, fashioned to rule over creation with him. We see another picture of God’s intention for the

first Adam and Eve in our future as the church. The bride of the Second Adam, Christ, is created and is being fashioned to reign with Him forever.[{4}](#)

Lee Grady says, “Jesus modeled a revolutionary new paradigm of empowerment by affirming women as co-heirs of God’s grace.”[{5}](#) Paul continued this completely new, respectful view of women by inviting women to share in the ministry of the gospel and the church, and by teaching the equality of husbands and wives in the marriage relationship (although there is a biblical distinction of roles).

When God created woman, He didn’t create an inferior being, He created what He delights to call “the glory of man.”(1 Cor. 11:7)

Lie #2: A Man Needs to “Cover” a Woman in Her Ministry Activities.

The second lie is that a man needs to “cover” a woman in her ministry activities. “In many cases, leaders have innocently twisted various Bible verses to suggest that a woman’s public ministry can be valid only if she is properly ‘covered’ by a male who is present. Often women are told that they cannot even lead women’s Bible studies or prayer meetings unless a pastor, deacon or some other man can provide proper oversight.”[{6}](#)

One woman was told that she could not start a backyard Bible school class in her neighborhood during the summer unless her husband agreed to be present at each session and teach all the Bible lessons. Her church elders said she could plan each day’s crafts and make all the snacks, but a man had to conduct the “spiritual” aspects of the outreach since he is the proper “covering.”[{7}](#)

It is disturbing to think of the implication of this belief. When we, as women, use our spiritual gifts and respond to

God's call to minister in various ways (within the biblical restrictions for women) without a man present, is our ministry less legitimate and valid than a man doing the same work? What if a woman with the spiritual gift of evangelism senses the Holy Spirit directing her to speak to the cashier at the gas station, and there's no man around? On a personal note, when I am speaking at one of Probe's Mind Games conferences, do my lectures lack legitimacy or truth because the male Probe staff members are busy teaching in other rooms?

Ephesians 5:21 says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Out of respect for our own weaknesses and limitations, I believe that all of us who wish to minister to others should pursue an attitude of humble submission to the body of Christ. We need to submit our beliefs and methods (and content, if we're teaching) to trusted believers who can provide support, direction, and, if needed, correction. And anyone engaged in ministry needs prayer support, which some have called a "prayer covering;" although that is not a biblical term.

But there is no verse that says, "If a woman teaches My word, make sure a man is present so she will be covered properly." Paul's instruction that older women teach the younger women doesn't include making sure that someone with a Y chromosome is present! What underlies this erroneous idea that a man's presence somehow validates any woman's ministry is, intentional or not, a profound disrespect and distrust of women.

Lie #3: Women Can't be Fulfilled or Spiritually Effective Without a Husband or Children.

The third lie is that women can't be fulfilled or spiritually effective without a husband or children. Some churches teach that God's perfect plan for every woman is to be a wife and

mother. Period. Sometimes Christian women successful in business or some other professional field are made to feel unwelcome at a church, as if they are an unhealthy influence on “purer” women.

In some places, single women are prevented from leading home fellowship groups because they’re single.[{8}](#) Others have been discouraged from running for political office or pursuing a graduate education because God’s plan was for them to marry and keep house—even when God hadn’t brought a groom into the picture!

Lee Grady says, “We must stop placing a heavy yoke on unmarried and divorced women in the church by suggesting that they are not complete without a man in their lives or that a husband somehow legitimizes their ministries.”[{9}](#)

In some churches, women are routinely taught that the best way for them to serve God is to get married, make their husbands happy, and have children. They think this should be the sole focus of women’s lives. And to be honest, when God has given a woman a husband and children, especially young children, focusing her primary energies and gifting on her family truly *is* the most important way she serves God in that season of her life. Children will not be impressed with how many Bible studies their mother teaches each week. And most husbands will be less than enthusiastic for their wives to go off on several mission trips each year when it means the home is falling apart and everybody’s life is in chaos.

But women, even women with families, are given spiritual gifts that God intends for us to use to build up the body of Christ, both inside and outside our families. When we exercise those spiritual gifts and abilities, God delights to honor us with a sense of fulfillment. And usually that involves ministry in the church or in the world, as long as it’s secondary to our family priorities.

But not all women are called to marriage and motherhood. It is disrespectful to single Christian women to treat them as second-class women because they don't wear a wedding ring. It's heartbreaking and frustrating when a woman would love to be married, but God hasn't brought her to the man of His choice; it just adds unnecessary sorrow for the church to say, "Sorry, honey, without a man you don't have a place here."

Lie #4: Women Should Never Work Outside the Home.

The fourth lie is that women should never work outside the home. Women who take jobs are shamed and judged, because they can't please God if they do anything outside of being a wife and mother.

This is a hurtful lie to many women who don't have a choice about working or not. There are huge numbers of divorced and widowed women in the church who would much rather stay at home with their families, but they're the only breadwinners. And for many two-parent families, they honestly can't survive on the husband's paycheck alone.

This lie comes from a misreading of Paul's exhortation in Titus 2:4 for women to be "workers at home."

Paul wasn't calling them to quit their day jobs to stay home. Women in that culture had no education and usually no opportunities for employment. He was addressing a character issue about being faithful and industrious, not lazy and self-centered. This letter was written to the pastor of a church on Crete, a society known for the laziness and self-indulgence of its people.[{10}](#)

Before the 1800's and the Industrial Revolution, both men and women worked at home, and they worked hard. Whether farming, fishing, animal husbandry, or whatever trade they engaged in, they did it from home. The care and nurture of children was

woven into the day's work and extended families helped care for each other. There was no such thing, except among the very wealthy, as a woman who didn't work.

This lie completely ignores the Proverbs 31 woman, who not only took excellent care of her family, but also had several home-based businesses that required her to leave her home to engage in these businesses. I personally appreciate this biblical pattern because I had a home-based business and a ministry the entire time my children were growing, both of which took me out of the home sometimes. I was able to grow my gifts as my kids were growing, and now that they're both adults, I am able to use those gifts and abilities more fully with my new freedom to leave home.

On the other hand, an equally distressing expectation common to younger people in today's churches is that women should always work, regardless of whether they have children or not. Our culture has so downgraded the importance of focused parenting that many people consider it wasteful for a woman to be "only" a homemaker. It's sexist to say that a woman's only valid contribution to the world or the church is to be a homemaker, but both extremes are wrong and harmful.

Lie #5: Women Must Obediently Submit to Their Husbands in All Situations.

The last lie says that women must obediently submit to their husbands in *all* situations. This lie really grieves me deeply, because it is probably responsible for more pain and abuse than any other lie we've looked at in this article.

In Ephesians 5:22, wives are commanded to submit to our husbands. For some people, this has been twisted to mean the husband is the boss and the wife's job is to obey his every whim. That is a relationship of power, not self-sacrificing love, as this marriage passage actually teaches. The wife is called to serve her husband through submission, and the

husband is called to serve his wife through sacrificial love.

We have no idea how many women have been physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually abused by their husbands wielding the submission verses as a weapon. When they finally tell their pastor about their husband's rage-outs and physical assaults, they are often not believed, and sometimes they are told that if they would learn to submit the violence would stop. Then they are counseled that it would be a sin to separate and hold the husband accountable for what is a crime! Some abused women, who feared for their lives, have actually been told, "Don't worry. Even if you died you would go to be with the Lord. So you win either way. Just keep praying for him. But you are not allowed to leave."[{11}](#)

A comprehensive study on domestic violence in the church in the mid 80's revealed that 26 percent of the pastors counseled an abused wife to keep submitting and trust that God would either stop the abuse or give her the strength to endure it. About a fourth of the pastors believed that abuse is the wife's fault because of her lack of submission! And a majority of the pastors said it is better for wives to endure violence against them than to seek a separation that might end in divorce.[{12}](#) I respectfully suggest that separation *with the goal of reconciliation* is often the only way to motivate an abusive husband to get help.[{13}](#) Just as we cast a broken limb to enable it to heal, separation is like putting a cast on a broken relationship as the first step to enable change and healing. We see in 1 Cor. 5 that God's plan for unrepentant believers is to experience the pain of isolation in separation from friends and loved ones; why would it be unthinkable for the same principle to be effective within an abusive marriage?

All the lies we've looked at in this article are the result of twisting God's word out of a misunderstanding of God's intent for His people. The way to combat the lies is to know the truth—because that's what sets us free.

Notes

1. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2000).
2. Grady, 23.
3. George Byron Koch, "Shall a Woman Keep Silent? Part 1." http://www.resurrection.org/shall_a_woman_part_1.htm.
4. Rev. 22:5, 2 Tim. 2:12.
5. Grady, 21.
6. Grady, 89-90.
7. Grady, 90.
8. Grady, 140.
9. Grady, 143.
10. "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'" (Titus 1:2)
11. Grady, 172.
12. Grady, 174.
13. I especially recommend Dr. Paul Hegstrom of Life Skills Learning Centers. He is a recovered abusive husband and pastor who wrote an excellent book, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse* (Beacon Hill Press, 1999). His Web site is <http://www.lifeskillsintl.org>.

The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

Don Closson looks at the threat materialism poses to the church and proposes ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

One of the most popular rock songs of the seventies begins with the lyrics, "There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to heaven." The words, written by Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones of the group Led Zeppelin, reflects the fashionable message of anti-materialism that pervaded much of rock music in the late sixties and seventies. The notion of dropping out of the rat race and rejecting the corporate mentality of one's parents formed the foundation of many a rock musician's career. Today, one often hears people refer to the entire decade of the eighties as the "me decade" as if during that period of time Americans were somehow more self-centered and money hungry than during any that came before it. One popular newspaper framed the mindset with a poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub is watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake

I pray my Volvo they won't take.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus' life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for money and things. He pleads with us to go beyond concerns for what we will consume and to seek our creator and His will. In Matthew 6:24-25 Jesus taught that "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"

In spite of the fact that materialism is apparently held in low regard by large segments of both popular and religious culture, surveys indicate that it influences the thinking of many Americans. In a recent survey, George Barna found that seventy-two percent of Americans believed that people are blessed by God so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, and fifty-eight percent agreed with the statement that the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment. Eighty-one percent believed that God helps those who help themselves. These responses point to the validity of what has been called our "therapeutic culture." The first commandment of this culture appears to be *do whatever makes you feel good, whatever helps you to cope materially*. When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment He responded by saying we are to love God (not things) with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:30, 31). That kind of love is self-denying and sacrificial.

In this article, I will look at the threat materialism poses to the church and propose ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

In his book *The Gospel and the American Dream*, Bruce Shelley tells the true story of a man who boasted to others that he would be a millionaire by age thirty-five. This young man was known as a really nice guy with a good sense of humor. He was considered bright, thoughtful, and generous to a fault. In 1984 he had acquired many of the appearances of success. He was flying to Dallas from Phoenix weekly on business. He drove a nice company car, and had moved his family into an exclusive neighborhood. He was also doing all the things that wealthy young men should do. He was the program chairman of the local Lions Club, president of the 200-member Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and a board member for the local Boys Club. However, on a Sunday in May 1985, the family missed church for the first time in months. The aspiring millionaire spent the day struggling in vain to scrape together enough cash to salvage his business, his image, and his pride. At 11:30 that night, after the family went to bed, he laid out his insurance policies and then went into the garage. He got into his expensive, company-provided BMW and turned on the ignition. He was dead within minutes.

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man's real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a

few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

The two lives described here depict two different faith systems. The millionaire, claiming to have faith in the God of the Bible, ultimately had placed his faith in things. When he was in danger of losing them, he gave up on life itself. My friend who is renovating the old house is just about out of money. However, he is optimistic and excited about the ministry he is having in the lives of the students living there. He is aware of the financial difficulties that his dream presents, but he is trusting in God to provide even when good business sense may argue against it.

Could it be that many Christians have succumbed to the notion of rugged individualism, placing the building of an earthly empire above the building of God's kingdom? James 5:1-3 holds a severe warning for those tempted by wealth. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." God warns believers against placing their faith in things and treating people as expendable commodities.

The Sources of Materialism

In spite of both secular and religious messages against materialism in our culture, it still seems to have a great deal of influence on the lives of typical Americans. Why is this? I propose that there are two sources of materialism: philosophical materialism and functional materialism.

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the

matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think.”^{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, “We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.”^{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.^{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

Survey after survey reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe that a God exists. If most Americans believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do they act like functional materialists? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? We could blame our modern society. The triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic components, often leaves little room for behavior motivated by a spiritual reality. However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

Every believer experiences a battle between the spirit and the

flesh. In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Further, he warns the Galatians that people whose lives are filled with selfish ambition and envy, among other things, will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is not saying that one will lose his or her salvation, but that a life consumed by materialistic desires is probably devoid of a spiritual dimension. If the Holy Spirit is not evident, there is no regeneration and no salvation.

Jesus’ ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of His ministry is highlighted by His experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt Him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the church, it is significant that at the beginning of Jesus’ short ministry He was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word *tempt* to mean “to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness.”[\[4\]](#) Jesus’ fasting in the desert provides His followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It also provides a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan’s testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan

suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

Satan's temptation is to reduce human nature to what might be called the *will to pleasure* principal, the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the *will to pleasure* view of human nature with a *will to meaning* view. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive. In his personal struggle to survive a Nazi concentration camp, the psychologist Victor Frankl discovered that when men lost meaning they quickly died. Mankind needs a transcendent reason to continue striving against the struggles that life presents. It is the Word of God that provides the only true foundation for this struggle.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for *instant status*. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but He would lose His integrity. Jesus responds by declaring that we are not to put God to the test. We are not to presume that God will accept our plans with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why

not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

A Cuban pastor recently attended a conference in Dallas and noticed how people here often say that they have no time. He said that people in Cuba have relatively few things but rarely run out of time. This brings to mind the idea of opportunity cost. This rule from economics tells us that if we spend our resources on one thing we cannot use them on another. If our focus is on things, and our time is spent buying, using, fixing, and replacing them, do we really have time to build the relationships with people necessary to communicating the Gospel?

In his book *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Dr. Gene Getz suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for believers to be in bondage to things; we cannot serve both things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and the book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians also have to constantly be on guard against self-deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the church at Laodicea imagined itself self-sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

How then do Christians avoid materialism? The apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phil. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God's kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples not to be absorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:34).

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God's will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, "all the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God's kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God

for the same today?

Notes

1. Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan: New York).
2. Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 61.
3. Israel Shenker, "The provocative progress of a pilgrim polymath," *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 128.
4. Graham H. Twelftree, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 821.>

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What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,[\[1\]](#) both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the

fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine.”[\[2\]](#)

When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

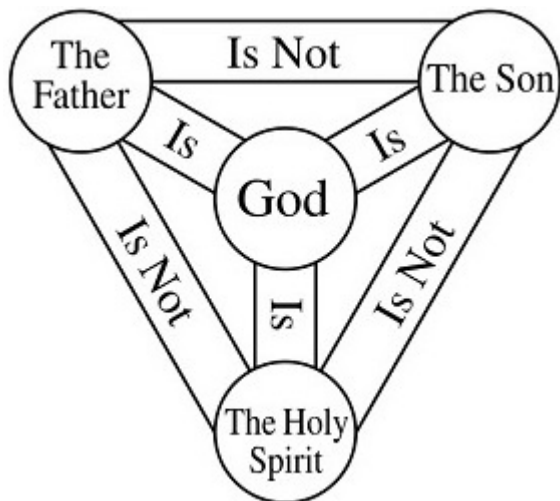
In this article I’ll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we’ll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the “secret handshake” of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that’s a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”[\[3\]](#) This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, “It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.”[\[4\]](#)

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, “God in three persons, Blessed Trinity.” Another handy definition is this, “Although not itself a biblical

term, 'the Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three 'persons' who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God." [\[5\]](#)



Even though it's short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let's settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move

out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? [\[6\]](#) As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this "god with a small g" has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, "When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level."[\[7\]](#)

The pantheist's commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. "Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning."[\[8\]](#)

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate

basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, “Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God.”[\[9\]](#)

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it’s the only view that adequately describes God’s work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of “God in one person” suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, “God is love,” (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, “In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at

least two persons. A mono-personal God is not 'big enough' to be God."[{10}](#)

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, "a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) and God the Father who is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, "[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God's judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious."[{11}](#)

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus' words, "when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He "works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God's absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe."[{12}](#)

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

The Trinity and the "Everydayness" of

Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

Entire sections of the modern church are functionally “non-Trinitarian.” I did not say “anti-Trinitarian,” for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship. [{13}](#)

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He

writes, “Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?”[{14}](#) Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name” (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney’s words, “Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”[{15}](#)—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).[{16}](#)

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let’s consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”[{17}](#) The

foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father."[\[18\]](#)

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see [Worldviews](#) by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy*

Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview (1998), 1.

8. Ibid., 8.

9. Ibid., 8.

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Ibid., 11.

12. Ibid., 12.

13. White, 22.

14. J. Carl Laney, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.

18. Ibid.

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Education: The Three-Legged Stool

In the late 80's when the Communist walls were coming down in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, columnist Jack Anderson commented: "I don't mean to minimize the Soviet danger, but while spending trillions of dollars on the military, we've completely neglected our economic defenses, while the Japanese have been assaulting our economic citadel . . . Japan is a nation of engineers and producers. We're a nation of lawyers and consumers. Japan sacrifices today for tomorrow. And we sacrifice tomorrow for today."

After the Revolutions, the possibility of armed aggression (time will tell) upon the U. S. seems at present even more

remote than Anderson noted. But the second part of his comment focuses upon the present concerns of the Clinton Administration and others with respect to America's flagging educational endeavors. That is, we are told we must upgrade learning at all levels so we might again compete economically with Japan and the European Community and reclaim our "rightful" place as "Number 1" in the world.

Competition is a healthy thing to a point. But I submit that whatever Herculean measures undertaken by educational agencies might actually produce the mathematicians, engineers, and scientists needed to bring us back up to global "par," we would still be woefully short of proper educational goals for the nation. The educational crisis of the 90's has shown to be a supreme failure, as it is driven mostly by economic concerns, ignoring Jesus' reminder that man simply cannot live by bread alone. We must therefore insist that the educational establishment do something beyond cranking out human "hardware"—graduates who perform acceptably in the market place in the production of competitive goods and services, but have chests with no hearts.

It is one thing to teach young Americans how to make a living; it is quite another to teach them how to live. This is the "software" part of the educational process. The tension between intellectual and moral development in educating the young is as old as civilization. Aristotle spoke keenly to this point in the fourth century B.C. when he said,

"Intellectual virtue is for the most part produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit The virtues we acquire by first having practiced them, just as we do the arts. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits, or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance."

The real question educationists must answer was posed by Jack Fraenkel: "It appears important to consider, therefore, whether we want values to develop in students accidentally or whether we intend to deliberately influence their value development in directions we consider desirable." It goes without saying that the "values clarification" approach of today never intends to accomplish the latter, and there is no guarantee that even the former is being achieved among today's young!

Our Founding Fathers faced clearly the necessity of providing an educational experience that encompassed both the cognitive and moral spheres. As early as 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, setting aside land for educational purposes with these words: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

This three-legged stool upon which children could learn and a vibrant, strong society could be built encompassed the inter-relatedness and necessary cooperation of the church, the home, and the school. Sadly, today the "stool" is largely missing a couple of legs. And the third (public education) has assigned to itself (with our increasing encouragement) the task of providing all three! This is neither possible, nor is it desirable. By its very nature, pluralistic public education dictates a methodological approach that of necessity dilutes religious and moral teaching to abstract speculation with no direction or call for personal commitment to a point of view. Rather, the goal is simply that everyone should *have* a point of view! The paralysis of this approach with respect to religion and moral values spills over to the knowledge "leg" as well. Deprived of metaphysical and moral certitude, information proliferates and expands like so much pizza dough; it is swung wildly around classrooms, but it won't stick to anything!

No wonder learning is such a chore, such uninteresting, laborious work for our sons and daughters. Bombarded with information, many youngsters face life on “perpetual overload,” stunted and numbed in the process because they lack the intellectual, skeletal framework upon which they can separate and arrange the truly important from the trivial.

We who have children must increasingly look to ourselves to remedy this situation. And we are in good company. Most of the best education throughout history has not occurred in public educational arenas. It has emerged from the hearts of caring parents who refuse to sacrifice their children upon the altars of popular educational notions and experiments. Dr. Ronald Nash’s penetrating analysis of this struggle in *The Closing of the American Heart* charts a path that you and I can follow in identifying the real roots of the American educational crisis and what to do about it.

“And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”
Deuteronomy 6:6-9

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Church and State

Introduction

Soon after assuming office as president, Thomas Jefferson received a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut containing warm congratulations for his victory. In January of 1802 Jefferson drafted a response of unpredictable importance. The contents of the letter have influenced the shape of the American debate over the place of religion in public affairs ever since. Addressing the Baptists, Jefferson wrote:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinion, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. {1} (emphasis added)

The idea of a “high wall of separation” first entered into our nation’s judicial conscience in the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* case. Although the court decided to allow public funding for the transportation of Catholic school students, it invoked the “high wall” doctrine as a rule for determining the future use of public funds. Justice Hugo Black appealed to Supreme Court precedent as well as the intent of the Founding Fathers in winning his 5-4 decision which included the “high wall” language. Justice Black wrote that our founders “reached the conviction that individual religious liberty could be achieved best under a government which was stripped of all power to tax, to support, or otherwise to assist any or all religions, or to interfere with the beliefs of any religious individual or group.”{2} This 1947 decision became the catalyst for a growing debate in the last half of the 20th century regarding the relationship between faith and

government in America.

The phrase *high wall of separation* has divided Americans into a number of different groups depending upon their theological and political leanings. Some feel that the high court drastically overstepped the original meaning of Jefferson's words, going far beyond his original intent. Others applaud the Court's attempt to separate once and for all this country's bias towards Christianity, especially its Protestant wing. Since the question often revolves around the original intent of the Founding Fathers, many seek to determine whether or not the Founders supported a Christian state, a secular state, or something in between.

All of this points to a few important questions faced by Christians. How should individual believers and the church as a whole relate to the state and its various institutions? What about the role individuals should take in politics, efforts to reform government, and attempts to pass laws that make our society behave more "biblically"? In this article we will look at three different responses to these questions and examine some of the pros and cons of each. Since every believer is limited in both their time and resources, it is important to think carefully about where we focus our efforts in furthering God's kingdom. The purpose of this discussion is not to question anyone's commitment to Christ, but to merely step back and look at some of the underlying assumptions held by each of these three positions.

Anti-Religious Separatists

Americans support the notion of separation of church and state by a small majority.^{3} Just what we mean by *separate* seems to be the real issue. Some go as far as to argue that any position on public policy that is motivated by a religious belief is out of bounds and should not receive a hearing. This group, who might be called "anti-religious separatists," argues that religion is fine as long as it does not invade the

public sphere. Religion must impact only private morality; if it leaks into the public square where policy making actually occurs, it is inappropriate at best. There are many examples of such anti-religious bias. Writing about a speech that Ronald Reagan made that included religious overtones, a *New York Times* article said, "You don't have to be a secular humanist to take offense at that display of what, in America, should be private piety. . . . Americans ask piety in Presidents, not displays of religious preference. Mr. Reagan uttered not just an ecumenical summons to the spirit. He was pandering to the Christian right that helped to propel his national political career." [\[4\]](#) Another presidential candidate wrote, "No president should attempt to transform policy debates into theological disputes." [\[5\]](#) Some believe the separation of church and state to mean a complete separation of religious values from public policy debates.

It's one thing to complain of inappropriate public piety, it is quite another to apply an anti-religious bias to court decisions and other actions that affect all Americans, religious or not. In one of the most important Supreme Court decisions on the separation of church and state in regards to education, Justices William Douglas and Hugo Black concurred that religious schools are by nature harmful. Writing specifically about Catholic schools they said:

The whole education of the child is filled with propaganda. That, of course, is the very purpose of such schools, the very reason for going to all of the work and expense of maintaining a dual school system. Their purpose is not so much to educate, but to indoctrinate and train, not to teach Scripture truths and Americanism, but to make loyal Roman Catholics. The children are regimented, and are told what to wear, what to do, and what to think. [\[6\]](#)

Although this quote refers specifically to Catholic schools, its description could apply to many types of private religious

schools. This caricature of private Christian schools, that they do not teach but indoctrinate, that they fail to convey Americanism (whatever that is), is still a concern of many who have observed and objected to the recent rapid growth in private schooling.

Those who hold an “anti-religious separatist” viewpoint often talk positively of an American civil religion. The idea is that some religion might be better than no religion at all, but it must never actually enter into policy decisions. A thin veneer of religion is all that is needed. An example might be President Dwight Eisenhower urging Americans to spend the first Fourth of July holiday of his administration in prayer and penance. He then proceeded to fish in the morning, go golfing in the afternoon, and play cards all evening.[\[7\]](#)

When Christians advocate such a vague form of public religion, they do great harm to the faith. A lukewarm civil religion does not address the redeeming sacrifice that makes Christianity what it is. Nor does it value the revealed knowledge found in the Bible. The idea of providing America with a non- preferential treatment of religion is legitimate. The danger lies in the promotion of religious activity that waters down the beliefs of the various faiths, both Christian and non-Christian.

Christian America

It is a popular notion among Christians that America was founded as a Christian nation, and that the goal of believers everywhere should be to place our government back into the hands of committed Christians who hold acceptable views on theological and moral issues. As a corollary to this position, it follows that our nation’s institutions, its schools, courts, regulatory commissions, etc, should be established on Christian principles. Various Christian groups use language that supports this view. The Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, and others often present this

perspective. Jerry Falwell has stated, "Any diligent student of American history finds that our great nation was founded by godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation."[\[8\]](#) John Whitehead, in his 1977 book *The Separation Illusion*, wrote, "In recent years Christians and non-Christians alike have been questioning whether America was ever a Christian nation. Without doubt it was, but secular historians have eradicated as much Christian influence as possible from history."[\[9\]](#)

Pat Robertson began the Christian Coalition in response to this perceived conspiracy to purge our history and government from Christianity. Stating its goals, its executive director said, "What Christians have got to do is take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time, and one state at a time, I honestly believe that in my lifetime we will see a country once again governed by Christians . . . and Christian values."[\[10\]](#)

This view has much to commend itself in the actual words used by our Founding Fathers. John Eidsmoe, Peter Marshall, Marshall Foster, and David Barton have provided a wealth of examples in their writings of how the Founders used Christian ideas and terminology to describe their efforts to create a new nation.

Those who hold to this view are comfortable with making Christianity the semi- established religion of America. Everywhere the government is involved in our lives would take on a Christian flavor. Every citizen, regardless of religious affiliation, would be responsible for understanding and adjusting to this ubiquitous Christian culture.

To many, this would be doing to those of other faiths, including atheists, just what we have been accusing them of doing to Christians. Forcing people to separate their public lives from their beliefs and thus denying them their first amendment freedom of religion. Another question that arises

is, What are Christians going to do if they fail to muster the necessary votes to put into place the people and legislation that they desire?

This line of thinking can easily lead to a “whatever it takes” mentality to return the nation to its Christian roots, including armed revolt if necessary. This form of Christian ethnocentricity discounts the importance of Christians in other countries and the possibility that God might use other nations as well as the U.S. to accomplish His purposes.

There is no question that we have been blessed as a nation because our Founding Fathers built our government on Christian principles regarding human nature and a theistic view of reality. We enjoy common grace as a people when our laws conform to God’s standard of justice. The question that we must ask is, Can we as Christians can impose a biblical culture on a majority who no longer acknowledge the authority of Scripture? Since only 32 percent of Americans agree that “The government should take special steps to protect the Judeo-Christian heritage,” this question is more than theoretical.[{11}](#) Perhaps a better goal would be to work for a government based on the concepts of freedom and neutrality with regards to religion.

Positive Neutrality

The idea of positive neutrality begins with the assumption that both religious structures and the state possess a certain degree of sovereignty over their respective domains. Each possess certain rights and responsibilities and should be free to operate without interference from the other. As the Dutch Protestant Abraham Kuyper stated it: “The sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the Church exist side by side, and they mutually limit each other.”[{12}](#) Christians can find support for this view in biblical passages that describe both the church and the state as divinely ordained realities (1 Peter 2 and Romans 13).

Positive neutrality argues that religious organizations have both rights and responsibilities. According to Stephen Monsma, author of *Positive Neutrality*, religious groups have the right to develop and teach their core beliefs, to shape their member's behavior and attitudes, to provide a wide range of services to members and non-members, and to participate in the policy making process of our republic. On the responsibility side, religious organizations must both accept and seek to enhance the authority and legitimacy of the state and encourage its members to obey its lawful decisions. Religious groups should also seek to develop civic virtue that enhances public life and not attempt to take over those things given to the state to perform. This does not mean that religious groups do not have the right to criticize the state; it means that they may not work to remove its legitimacy.

According to the notion of positive neutrality, the state also has certain rights and responsibilities. The government should make decisions that coordinate, protect, encourage, and empower society's various spheres of influence (including the religious sphere) with the goal of promoting justice, the public interest, the common good, or some other similar goal. The state is not to transgress the sovereignty of the other spheres although there are times when it is appropriate for the state to give material aid, in a neutral manner, to organizations in another sphere.

The immediate impact of moving towards a system of positive neutrality would be reflected in three areas. First, our political system would have to tolerate and accommodate a wider range of religious practices. Second, the state would have to protect the right of religious groups to influence public policies. And finally, rather than working only through secularly based groups and programs, the government would fund the activities of both religious and secular groups for the purpose of providing needed social programs. These changes may be possible only by dropping the "secular purpose" part of

what is known as the Lemon test, a three part test for appropriate government spending resulting from the *Lemon v. Kurtzman* Supreme Court case in 1971.

What this means, in effect, is that when the government gives financial aid to schools, homeless shelters, day care, or other agencies, it cannot discriminate against religiously based organizations. To continue to do so shows a bias towards secular organizations, motivations, and ideals.

Conclusion

We have considered three views of how the church and the state should relate to each other. The first was the anti-religious separatists. This group included those who desire what could be called a naked public square, naked of any religious influence. The second was the Christian America perspective; it advocates a sacred public square and the semi-establishment of the Christian religion. The third view is called positive neutrality, which argues for an open public square. The first two positions discriminate against the religious rights of Christians or non-Christians, the last treats all religious groups equally and does not favor secular organizations over religious ones.

Let's look at the specific issue of religion in our schools and see how the notion of positive neutrality might change what we consider to be constitutional and what isn't. Currently the Court uses a three part test to determine constitutionality. First, a program must have a secular purpose. Second, it cannot further a religious effect, and finally, it may not cause excessive entanglement between religion and the state. In its attempt at applying these rules, the Court has created a very unclear line of what is permissible and what isn't. It has forbidden state-composed prayers, Bible reading, reading of the Lord's Prayer, posting the Ten Commandments, a minute of silence for meditation and prayer, mandating the teaching of evidence for creationism,

and certain types of prayers at graduation ceremonies. However, it has permitted release time programs held off campus for religious instruction, teaching about religion, transportation for private school children, a minute of silence for meditation, and voluntary, student-led and -initiated religious clubs.

The obvious result of the Lemon test has been a bias against the religious and for the secular, not neutrality. In trying to account for local religious practices, some justices have argued that prayer and religious celebrations are actually secular and traditional activities rather than acts of worship. This tactic satisfies no one. Positive neutrality argues for a full and free play of all religious groups and of both religion and secularism. True neutrality is achieved by welcoming and encouraging all religions and secular philosophies to participate in the open marketplace of ideas on campus.

True neutrality could be accomplished in our public schools by applying the equal access principle the Court used in *Westside Community Schools v. Mergen*. This decision treated all extracurricular clubs, both religious and secular, with neutrality. This principle could be applied to prayer, the study of origins, and the posting of the Ten Commandments. In effect, this would remove some of the anti-religious bias that pervades public schools.

Neutrality is also enhanced when the government encourages educational choice by funding private schools regardless of their religious or non-religious nature. By allowing vouchers for parents to use to send their children to religious schools of their choice, the government would be treating religious and non-religious schools in a neutral manner.

Positive neutrality insists that religious ideas should never be forced to hide themselves behind secular ones in order to participate in the public square. The government is not being

neutral when it endorses a secular idea over a religious one in our schools or in other social programs. While many Americans are unhappy with the government's current bias against religious beliefs, it remains to be seen if they are ready for real religious freedom that would allow full participation in the public realm by all faiths and philosophies.

Notes

1. Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn On The Altar Of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 99.
2. Wayne House, ed., *Restoring The Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1987), 298.
3. Stephen V. Monsma, *Positive Neutrality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 57.
4. Ibid., 63.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 71.
7. George Will, "Who Put Morality In Politics?" *Newsweek*, 1980.
8. Monsma, 73.
9. John Whitehead, *The Separation Illusion* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1977), 17.
10. Monsma, 73.
11. Ibid., 57.

Churches That Equip

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

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

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

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

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching “postmoderns” for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. “It’s not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture,” he claims, “it’s just more difficult.” Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today’s postmoderns.

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

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

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

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a

gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

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

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

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

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

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

Spreading the Passion

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

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

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

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

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty

who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. "I had no idea how to respond to him," Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah's Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah's Witness members showed up at Jeff's door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. "I was very uncomfortable at first," Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

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

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

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

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus' deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to

spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song's "Jesus Under Fire" class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

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

Issues and Answers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

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Worship

Definitions of Worship

During a 1954 interview A.W. Tozer, a great pastor and editor of the Alliance Witness, was asked what he thought would awaken the church from its complacency. This was his response: "In my opinion, the great single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple. The holy art of worship seems to have passed away like the Shekinah glory from the tabernacle. As a result, we are left to our own devices and forced to make up the lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the attention of the church people." (1) John MacArthur, a more contemporary preacher and writer, wrote this indictment in 1993: "In the past half decade, some of America's largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up the Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church." (2)

These stinging analyses, whether we agree with them or not,

remind us that the biblically based Christian is challenged to consider worship, along with all facets of life, in light of the culture in which he or she lives. Worship should be included in the total worldview of each individual Christian. It is a significant part of a believer's life. With this in mind, we will reflect on the meaning and history of worship, hindrances to worship, and the content of worship. And we will offer our own analyses and suggestions.

As is true with many terms used among Christians, the word "worship" can become a cliché devoid of significant content if we don't stop to consider its meaning. "Our English word means worthship,' denoting the worthiness of an individual to receive special honor in accordance with that worth." (3) The Hebrew and Greek terms found in the Bible "emphasize the act of prostration, the doing of obeisance." (4) Warren Wiersbe offers a broad definition based upon these concepts. He writes, "Worship is the believer's response of all that he is—mind, emotions, will, and body—to all that God is and says and does. This response has its mystical side in subjective experience, and its practical side in objective obedience to God's revealed truth. It is a loving response that is balanced by the fear of the Lord, and it is a deepening response as the believer comes to know God better." (5) A more narrow definition may sound like this: "Worship is pure adoration, the lifting up of the redeemed spirit toward God in contemplation of His holy perfection." (6)

Do these definitions describe worship as you experience it with your gathered church and in your daily life? If so, you are blessed. If not, perhaps you need to evaluate the place of worship in your life. Perhaps you need to consider honestly if you have allowed yourself to become accustomed to traditions that have confused true worship. Perhaps you have approached worship with the idea it applies only on Sunday mornings. Or maybe you have never stopped to consider the importance of worship.

The History of Worship

What comes to mind when you think of worship? Is it a formal occasion? Is it a joyous occasion? Does it contain certain rituals? Are you involved? Are you praising God? Are you learning? Are you hearing from God? Are you in contemplation? Are you singing? Are you praying? Are you alone, or with other people?

Perhaps you can answer some or all of these questions in the affirmative. And you probably can add other elements to what is contained in worship in your experience. But have you ever considered what worship may have looked like when the early church gathered? Were these elements included, or did it look very different? A very brief survey of the history of worship will help us begin to evaluate the purpose and content of worship today. Our ancestors had to wrestle with what worship entails long before our time. We can and should learn from them.

The worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the first Christians. As Robert Webber has written, "It must be remembered that the early Christians came into worship from a different perspective from modern Christians. We accept the Old because we have been informed by the New. But they accepted the New because they had been informed by the Old."⁽⁷⁾ The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Thus Jesus set the stage for the first acts of worship among the early believers by giving new meaning to the ancient ritual of the Passover meal. Acts 2:46 tells us that the earliest form of Christian worship was a meal—"breaking bread in their homes."⁽⁸⁾ Believers were remembering the Last Supper just as the Jews remembered the Passover. Eventually churches became too large to accommodate these shared meals, so a single table with the elements of bread and wine became the focus. Thus "the central act of Christian worship in the history of the church has

always been the Communion.”(9)

By the second century worship began to look more like what most of us include in our churches. Justin Martyr, an apologist and pastor, wrote of two major parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of lessons from the Old and New Testaments, a sermon, prayers, and hymns. The liturgy of the Eucharist included a kiss of peace; offering of bread, wine, and water; prayers and thanksgiving over the bread and wine; remembrance of Christ’s death, including the narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, and a command to continue in it; an Amen, said by all the people; Communion; then the reserved portions were taken by the deacons to those who were absent.(10)

It is unfortunate that by the late medieval period this twofold form of worship was overcome by pomp and ceremony that crowded out its meaning. But even the Reformers of the sixteenth century insisted on maintaining both Word and Sacrament. Their intent was to restore both elements to their primitive simplicity, and in the process the Scriptures were to be given an authoritative place.(11) Most evangelicals attempt to sustain the traditions of the Reformers. But what is the purpose of all this for the gathered church, and the individual believer?

The Purpose of Worship

Why should we worship God? Quite simply, we should worship Him because of who He is—God. In Revelation 4 and 5 we see descriptions that should provide impetus for our worship. He “is the only God, the highest, the Lord God, the heavenly King, the almighty God and Father, the Holy One.”(12) To put it succinctly, “in worship we simply tell God the truth about Himself.”(13) Each day of our lives we tell God the truth about Himself, if we are thinking and living through the grid of a Christian worldview.

I have a good friend who is a physicist. Years ago his job included the consistent use of a sophisticated electron microscope. This impressive device allowed him to take pictures of the microscopic things he was studying. From these pictures he developed a wonderful slide presentation that served to remind us of the order and complexity that exists beyond what we can see with the naked eye. When we viewed these remarkable images, we responded in worship. Why? Because our worldview prompted us to contemplate the One who created such awesome things. We were filled with wonder. In our response we were telling God the truth about Himself. We were worshiping.

After his death friends of the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal, “found stitched into the lining of his doublet a scrap of parchment with a rough drawing of a flaming cross. Around that cross was the following poem,”(14) entitled “Fire”:

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not of the philosophers and the learned.
Certitude. Joy. Certitude. Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world and of all outside of God.
The world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.
Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy.
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated from Thee for ever.(15)

In this unforgettable refrain we hear the heart of a man in worship. Pascal was responding to the very personal presence of God in his life by pouring out his heart. His contemplation led to worship. Jonathan Edwards, the great American philosopher- theologian of the eighteenth century, shared one of his experiences of worship in his *Personal Narrative*, which was published after his death.

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception . . . which continued near as I can judge, about

an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.(16)

The full account of this encounter indicates that Edwards experienced worship during a time of contemplation and prayer. He sought to focus on God, and God responded in a dramatic way, just as was true for Pascal.

Such experiences don't have to be descriptive only of a few. We can apply at least two things from them. First, as with my physicist friend, our lives should include a sense of wonder. And wonder should lead to worship. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye." (17) Second, as with Pascal and Edwards, we need times of contemplation and prayer. Thoughts about God, and prayer to God can lead to a personal encounter with the One we worship.

Some Contemporary Hindrances to Worship

As of July 3, 1997, I will have known my wife for 30 years. During that time my love for her has become enriched through many experiences. If you were to ask me why I love her, I might respond by telling you what I receive from her. Or I might give you analyses of marriage fit for an essay. I might even attempt to persuade you to believe in marriage as I do. None of these responses would be wrong, but they would be incomplete, and they wouldn't focus on the primary subject: my wife, the object of my love. The lover would have hindered true praise of the loved one.

The same can be said frequently of us as we consider worship in our lives. If we aren't careful, we can hinder worship, both individually and corporately, by emphasizing things that may be good, but don't give us a complete picture of what worship entails. There are at least three words that can describe these hindrances: pragmatism, intellectualism, and

evangelism.

Pragmatism as a hindrance to worship. First, pragmatism has led many to find ways of getting what they want, instead of what they need. This means the worship “customer” is sovereign. “The idea is a basic selling principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they don’t want.”(18) Many churches are growing numerically through such strategies, but is worship taking place? It’s my conviction that the answer is “No.” People may be coming, but numbers are not the issue. Worship is done among regenerated Christians who are concentrating on who God is, not on what we want. Paradoxically, what we truly want, communion with God, takes place when we pursue what we truly need.

Intellectualism as a hindrance to worship. Second, intellectualism is not a substitute for worship. Coming from one who believes strongly in the importance of intellect in the Christian life, this may be surprising. But I have come to realize that worship is not a glorified Bible study. This does not mean that the preaching of Scripture is not a key ingredient of worship, but the one who is preaching is responsible to share in light of worship. As Warren Wiersbe has written, “There is much more to preaching than passing along religious information. It must reveal, not mere facts about God, but the Person of God Himself.”(19) Wiersbe continues: “When preaching is an act of worship, the outline is to the text what a prism is to a shaft of sunlight: it breaks it up so that its beauty and wonder are clearly seen.”(20) Such comments also apply to our private times of Bible study. Our minds are to be used in study, but what is studied includes worship of the One who has communicated with us.

Evangelism as a hindrance to worship. Third, evangelism is not the ultimate reason for worship. Non-believers who are in attendance at a time of worship certainly can be touched by

the Spirit, but worship implies the believer's response to God. A non-believer cannot worship the true and living God. Thus an "altar call" should not be the primary focus. Instead, the church should be called to focus on the One who has called them into His family. Then they take what they have heard, seen, and experienced into the surrounding world.

Let's reconsider such hindrances as we seek to worship God, who will be glorified in the process.

The Content of Worship

"I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). "I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Thy wonders. I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High" (Ps. 9:1-2). "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1). "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6).

What do these Scriptures have in common? They are statements of worship; they are inspired statements from men to God. And for the moment it's our hope that they serve to stimulate us to contemplate the content of worship.

One of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship is found in Jesus' well-known encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:23-24). Jesus told her:

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers

shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Earlier (vs. 21) Jesus had told the woman that the place of worship was unimportant. One doesn't worship just on a particular mountain, in Jerusalem, or any other place. We are free to worship God anywhere. So then He told her what is important.

First, the spirit of worship is important. We are to render "such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act." (21) Whether we are in a time of private praise and adoration, or gathered with the church in corporate proclamation, we are to respond to who God is from the spirit, from the whole of our innermost being. Second, we are to do "this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in his Word." (22) The concept of responding to God in spirit can give rise to confusing individual expressions if those expressions are not guided by Scripture. There must be balance between spirit and truth. One without the other is not complete. "As some see it, a humble, spiritual attitude means little. According to others, truth or doctrinal soundness is of no importance. Both are one-sided, unbalanced, and therefore wrong. Genuine worshipers worship in spirit and truth." (23)

These comments began with quotes from biblical writers who wrote their statements of worship. It's striking to note how those statements contain not only the truth of God, but the truth about God. Truth permeates their worship. But it's also striking to note the spirit with which those expressions were shared. They are from the heart. They penetrate our lives; they are alive with true worship. As we read and hear such expressions they should encourage us to worship God in spirit and truth. And thus the content of our worship will be pleasing to Him.

Concluding Suggestions Concerning Corporate Worship Renewal

We have discussed several aspects of worship: its definition, history, purpose, hindrances, and content. To conclude we will focus on five suggestions that can be applied to corporate worship in the contemporary church.

First, consider how time is allotted when the church gathers for worship. As churches grow they tend to break into various times of worship. Thus the available time for worship is decreased. One group needs to be released from the worship center in time for another to enter. As a result, often there is a feeling of being rushed. And this feeling of being rushed is exacerbated because so much of the available time is spent with things that may be good, but are not conducive to worship. Announcements may concern good things, for example, but they take time from the true intent of the gathered church.

Second, consider how much attention is given to worship by the leadership of the church. The pastor, staff, and other leadership should demonstrate that worship has a very high priority. There should not be a question of how much energy has been given to preparation for worship on the part of the leadership.

Third, consider who is the leader of worship and why. It is my conviction that the pastor should be the one who calls the body to worship and leads it by example. Much is communicated to the congregation when the primary earthly leader implores the people to give their undivided attention to the reason for their gathering. In addition, much is communicated when the pastor is involved in worship beyond just the delivery of a sermon, no matter how good it may be. Having served on a church staff for many years, I know some of the time implications of this suggestion. But I believe if the church

makes worship the priority, the pastor should provide the leadership for it. Fourth, consider what has priority in worship. Quite simply, the question is whether or not God has priority. Or do other things tend to crowd the allotted time and distract from the true intention? For example, it may be good to let a visiting relative of a church member sing a solo, but has someone talked with this person in order to discuss the reason for any solos within the time of worship? Remember, worship is to be God-centered, not man-centered.

Fifth, consider the place of style versus substance in worship. It appears to me that the "style" of worship is not the issue as much as the substance. In other words, if the people are called to worship God with integrity and concentration on Him, the style is secondary. This applies regardless of whether the style is liturgical/traditional, contemporary, or something in between. But if the style overshadows substance, true worship may be thwarted. It is a wise church that brings both style and substance together in a manner that pleases God.

These five suggestions and the thoughts that have preceded them have been offered with the hope that you have been stimulated to consider the importance of worship in your life. The worshiping Christian in a worshiping church is a person who is continually empowered to impact the world for the glory of God. May you be among those empowered people!

Notes

1. A.W. Tozer, *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Zondervan, 1957), 87-88.
2. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway, 1993), xvii-xviii.
3. Everett F. Harrison, "Worship," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker, 1960), 560.
4. Ibid.

5. Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, 1986), 27.
6. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 561.
7. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 84.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 86.
10. Ibid., 80-81.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid.
14. Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993),
15. Blaise Pascal, *Fire*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13.
16. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13-14.
17. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard, 1936), 713.
18. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 49.
19. Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 123.
20. Ibid., 124.

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Generation X – How They Fit in the Christian Community

Generation X! Are you familiar with this phrase? It is highly probable that you have heard or read the phrase at least once. What does it bring to your mind? Does it provoke fear, confusion, despair, misunderstandings, or is it just another

in a long line of such expressions used to label youth? Generation X has quickly entered our vocabulary as an easily recognizable moniker for the children of another definable generation: the “baby boomers.” Thus this generation of teenagers also has come to be known as the “baby busters.” “Xers” and “busters” normally don’t elicit positive thoughts about our youth. Is this a legitimate response? Or are we maligning a significant portion of our population with such terms?

In 1991 a Canadian named Douglas Coupland published a novel entitled *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. Coupland’s book “is the first major work to take twentysomethings seriously, even if the book is humorous and fictional.”^{1} Thus he is the originator of the phrase that presently describes a particular generation. But he is just one of many who have given thought to youth culture, both present and past.

A Brief History of American Youth

It seems that youth have always received the attention of adults. Teenagers, as they have come to be called, have been analyzed, diagnosed, and reprimanded because older generations just don’t know what to make of them. “Juvenile delinquents,” “the beat generation,” “hippies,” “yuppies” and numerous other titles have been used to describe certain generational distinctives. “The contemporary youth crisis is only the latest variation on centuries-old problems.”^{2} For example, in the 1730s in New England youth activities such as “night ‘walking’ and ‘company- keeping,’ also known as ‘revels,’ helped produce some of the highest premarital pregnancy rates in American history.”^{3} And during the early nineteenth century, student riots became a tradition on many campuses such as Brown, North Carolina, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. These riots included “boycotting classes, barricading college buildings, breaking windows, trashing the

commons and/or chapel, setting fires around or to college buildings, beating faculty members, and whipping the president or trustees.”{4} Such behavior—almost two hundred years ago—probably reminds us of what took place on many campuses during the Vietnam War years.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, youth became the focus of the burgeoning social sciences. “An intellectual enterprise struggled to redefine what ‘youth’ was or ought to be. That concept was labeled ‘adolescence’ and has prevailed ever since.”{5} It is especially interesting to note that these early social scientists didn’t discover adolescence, they invented it. “Adolescence was essentially a conception of behavior imposed on youth, rather than an empirical assessment of the way in which young people behaved.”{6} This is important when we understand that the world view premises of the social scientists “came from Darwinian recapitulation theory: the individual life-course replicated the evolutionary progress of the entire race. Adolescence was a distinct ‘stage’ through which each person passed on the way from childhood (the ‘primitive’ stage) to adulthood (the ‘civilized’ stage). Adolescence therefore was transitional but essential, its traits dangerous but its labor vital for attaining maturity. Squelching it was just as bad as giving it free rein.”{7} The fruit of such concepts can be seen in the “lifestyles” that are now so ingrained in our cultural fabric.

The Web of Adolescence

What do the “lifestyles” of adults have to do with adolescents? “Since ‘lifestyle’ has come to define not just doing but their very being, adults have now become dependent on the very psychological experts who wove the web of adolescence in the first place. The classic youth tasks of ‘growth,’ ‘finding oneself,’ and preparing for one’s life-work have become the American life-work, even into the golden years’ of retirement.”{8} Thus the concerns we have for our

youth are concerns we have for ourselves. The “web of adolescence” touches all of us. As George Barna has stated, “taking the time to have a positive impact [on our youth] is more than just ‘worth the effort’; it is a vital responsibility of every adult and a contribution to the future of our own existence.”[\[9\]](#) The importance of this cannot be overemphasized as we contemplate the sometimes-puzzling segment of our population called “Generation X.”

Who Are These People?

What is a “Generation Xer” or a “baby buster”? What is the “doofus generation” or “the nowhere generation”? These phrases, and many others, may be used to characterize the present generation of youth. Not very encouraging phrases, are they? More frequently than not, adults always have evaluated youth in pessimistic terms. Even the ancient Greeks were frustrated with their youth.

Today the descriptions are especially derogatory. “Words used to describe them have included: whiny, cynical, angry, perplexed, tuned out, timid, searching, vegged out—the latest lost generation.”[\[10\]](#) Are these terms accurate, or do they reek of hyperbole? As is true with most generalizations of people, there is a measure of truth to them. But we make a grave mistake if we allow them to preclude us from a more complete consideration of this generation. As George Barna has written: “You cannot conduct serious research among teenagers these days without concluding that, contrary to popular assumptions, there is substance to these young people.”[\[11\]](#) Having served among and with youth of this generation for many years, I emphatically concur with Mr. Barna. Generation Xers consist of “41 million Americans born between 1965 and 1976 plus the 3 million more in that age group who have immigrated here.”[\[12\]](#) Most of them are children of the “baby boomers,” who comprise over 77 million of the population. This dramatic decrease in the number of births has left them with the “baby

buster” label. Their parents have left a legacy that has produced a “birth dearth” and its accompanying social consequences. There are at least six contributors to this population decline.

First, the U.S. became the site for the world’s highest divorce rate. Second, birth control became increasingly prominent with the introduction of the pill. Women began to experience more freedom in planning their lives. Third, a college education was more accessible for more people, especially for women who began to take more influential positions in the work force. Fourth, social change, including women’s liberation, encouraged more women to consider careers other than being homemakers. Fifth, abortion reached a rate of over 1.5 million per year. Sixth, the economy led many women to work because they had to, or because they were the sole breadwinner.[{13}](#)

So we can see that this generation has entered a culture enmeshed in dramatic changes, especially regarding the family. These changes have produced certain characteristics, some positive, others negative, that are generally descriptive of contemporary youth.

How Do You Describe a “Buster”?

How do you describe someone who is labeled as a “baby buster”? We may be tempted to answer this question in a despairing tone, especially if we haven’t taken time to see a clear picture of a “buster.” Consider the following characteristics:

First, they are serious about life. For example, the quality of life issues they have inherited have challenged them to give consideration to critical decisions both for the present and future. Second, they are stressed out. School, family, peer pressure, sexuality, techno-stress, finances, crime, and even political correctness contribute to their stressful lives. Third, they are self-reliant. One indicator of this

concerns religious faith; the baby buster believes he alone can make sense of it. Fourth, they are skeptical, which is often a defense against disappointment. Fifth, they are highly spiritual. This doesn't mean they are focusing on Christianity, but it does mean there is a realization that it is important to take spiritual understanding of some kind into daily life. Sixth, they are survivors. This is not apparent to adults who usually share a different worldview concerning progress and motivation. This generation is not "driven" as much as their predecessors. They are realistic, not idealistic.{14}

Do these characteristics match your perceptions? If not, it may be because this generation has received little public attention. And what attention it has received has leaned in a negative direction because of inaccurate observation. The baby busters' parents, the baby boomers, have been the focus of businesses, education, churches, and other institutions simply because of their massive numbers and their market potential. It's time to rectify this if we have the wisdom to see the impact busters will have in the not-too-distant future.

What About the Church and Busters?

Let's survey a few other attributes of Generation X as we attempt to bring this group into sharper focus. These attributes should be especially important to those of us in the Christian community who desire to understand and relate to our youth.

Because of "the loneliness and alienation of splintered family attachments" this generation's strongest desires are acceptance and belonging.{15} Our churches need to become *accepting* places first and *expecting* places second. That is, our youth need to sense that they are not first *expected* to conform or perform. Rather, they are to sense that the church is a place where they can first find *acceptance*. My years of ministry among youth have led me to the conclusion that one of

the consistent shortcomings of our churches is the proverbial “generation gap” that stubbornly *expects* youth to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, socialize in a certain way, etc., without *accepting* them in Christ’s way.

Another important attribute of this generation is how they learn. “They determine truth in a different way: not rationally, but relationally.”[\[16\]](#) Closely aligned with this is the observation that “interaction is their primary way of learning.”[\[17\]](#) In order for the church to respond, it may be necessary to do a great deal of “retooling” on the way we teach.

Lastly, busters are seeking purpose and meaning in life. Of course this search culminates in a relationship with the risen Jesus. It should be obvious that ultimately this is the most important contribution the church can offer. If we fail to respond to this, the greatest need of this generation or any other, surely we should repent and seek the Lord’s guidance.

Listening to Busters

Let’s eavesdrop on a conversation taking place on a college campus between a Generation X student and a pastor:

Pastor: We have a special gathering of college students at our church each Sunday. It would be great to see you there.

Student: No, thanks. I’ve been to things like that before. What’s offered is too superficial. Besides, I don’t trust institutions like churches.

Pastor: Well, I think you’ll find this to be different.

Student: Who’s in charge?

Pastor: Usually it’s me and a group of others from the church.

Student: No students?

Pastor: Well, uh, no, not at the moment.

Student: How can you have a gathering for students and yet the students have nothing to do with what happens?

Pastor: That's a good question. I haven't really thought much about it.

Student: By the way, is there a good ethnic and cultural mix in the group?

Pastor: It's not as good as it could be.

Student: Why is that?

Pastor: I haven't really thought about that, either.

Student: Cliques. I've noticed that a lot of groups like yours are very "cliquish." Is that true at your church?

Pastor: We're trying to rid ourselves of that. But do you spend time with friends?

Student: Of course! But I don't put on a "show of acceptance."

Pastor: I appreciate that! We certainly don't want to do that! We sincerely want to share the truth with anyone.

Student: Truth? I don't think you can be so bold as to say there is any such thing.

Pastor: That's a good point. I can't claim truth, but Jesus can.

Student: I'm sure that's comforting for you, but it's too narrow for anyone to claim such a thing. We all choose our own paths.

Pastor: Jesus didn't have such a broad perspective.

Student: That may be, but he could have been wrong, you know. Look, I'm late for class. Maybe we can talk another time, as

long as you'll listen and not preach to me.

Pastor: That sounds good. I'm here often. I'll look for you. Have a great day!

This fictitious encounter serves to illustrate how baby busters challenge us to find ways of communicating that transcend what may have been the norm just a few years ago.

New Rules

George Barna has gleaned a set of "rules" that define and direct youth of the mid- and late-90s:

Rule #1: Personal relationships count. Institutions don't.

Rule #2: The process is more important than the product.

Rule #3: Aggressively pursue diversity among people.

Rule #4: Enjoying people and life opportunities is more important than productivity, profitability, or achievement.

Rule #5: Change is good.

Rule #6: The development of character is more crucial than achievement.

Rule #7: You can't always count on your family to be there for you, but it is your best hope for emotional support.

Rule #8: Each individual must assume responsibility for his or her own world.

Rule #9: Whenever necessary, gain control and use it wisely.

Rule #10: Don't waste time searching for absolutes. There are none.

Rule #11: One person can make a difference in the world but not much.

Rule #12: Life is hard and then we die; but because it's the only life we've got, we may as well endure it, enhance it, and enjoy it as best we can.

Rule #13: Spiritual truth may take many forms.

Rule #14: Express your rage.

Rule #15: Technology is our natural ally.[{18}](#)

Now let's consider how parents and other adults might best respond to these rules.

What Do They Hear From Us?

Try to put yourself into the mind and body of a contemporary teenager for a moment. Imagine that you've been asked to share the kinds of things you hear most often from your parents or adult leaders. Your list may sound something like this:

- "Do as I say, not as I do."
- "I'm the adult. I'm right."
- "Because I said so, that's why."
- "You want to be *what*?"
- "This room's a pig sty."
- "Can't you do anything right?"
- "Where did you find him?"
- "You did *what*?"
- "Do you mind if we talk about something else?"
- "I'm kind of busy right now. Could you come back later?"

These statements sound rather overwhelming when taken together, don't they? And yet too many of our youth hear similar phrases too frequently. As we conclude our series pertaining to the youth of Generation X, let's focus on how we might better communicate and minister to them. In his book *Ten Mistakes Parents Make With Teenagers*, Jay Kesler has shared wise advice we should take to heart and consistently apply to our lives among youth.[{19}](#)

Advice to Parents and Other Adults

- Be a consistent model. We can't just preach to them and expect them to follow our advice if we don't live what we say. Consistency is crucial in the eyes of a buster.
- Admit when you are wrong. Just because you are the adult and the one with authority doesn't mean you can use your position as a "cop out" for mistakes. Youth will understand sincere repentance and will be encouraged to respond in kind.
- Give honest answers to honest questions. Youth like to ask questions. We need to see this as a positive sign and respond honestly.
- Let teenagers develop a personal identity. Too often youth bare the brunt of their parents' expectations. In particular, parents will sometimes make the mistake of living through their children. Encourage them in their own legitimate endeavors.
- Major on the majors and minor on the minors. In my experience, adults will concentrate on things like appearance to the detriment of character. Our youth need to know that we know what is truly important.
- Communicate approval and acceptance. As we stated earlier in this essay, this generation is under too much stress. Let's make encouragement our goal, not discouragement.
- When possible, approve their friends. This one can be especially difficult for many of us. Be sure to take time to go beyond the surface and really know their friends.
- Give teens the right to fail. We can't protect them all their lives. Remind them that they can learn from mistakes.
- Discuss the uncomfortable. If they don't sense they can talk with you, they will seek someone else who may not share your convictions.
- Spend time with your teens. Do the kinds of things they like to do. Give them your concentration. They'll never forget it.

This generation of youth, and all those to come, need parents and adults who demonstrate these qualities. When youth receive

this kind of attention, our churches will benefit, our schools will benefit, our families will benefit, and our country will benefit. And, most importantly, I believe the Lord will be pleased.

Notes

1. William Dunn, *The Baby Bust: A Generation Comes of Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: American Demographics Books, 1993), 112.
2. Quentin J. Schultze, ed., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.
3. Ibid., 19.
4. Steven J. Novak, *The Rights of Youth: American Colleges and Student Revolt, 1798-1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1977), 17-25. Quoted in Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, 23.
5. Schultze, 33.
6. Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 243. Quoted in Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, 35.
7. Schultze, 35.
8. Ibid., 45.
9. George Barna, *Generation Next: What You Need to Know About Today's Youth* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1995), 11.
10. Dunn, x.
11. Barna, 18.
12. Dunn, x.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. Barna, 18-21.
15. Jan Johnson, "Getting the Gospel to the Baby Busters," *Moody Monthly* (May 1995): 50.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 51.
18. Barna, 108-15.
19. Jay Kesler, *Ten Mistakes Parents Make With Teenagers (And How to Avoid Them)* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988).

Wealth and Poverty – A Biblical Perspective

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

A Biblical View of Wealth

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

Even within the Christian community, believers are bombarded with unbiblical views of wealth. At one extreme are those who preach a prosperity gospel of “health and wealth” for all believers. At the other extreme are radical Christians who condemn all wealth and imply that *rich Christian* is a contradiction in terms.

What, then, is the truly biblical view of wealth? At first glance, the Bible seems to teach that wealth is wrong for Christians. It appears even to condemn the wealthy. After all, both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets preached against materialism and seemed to say at times that true believers

cannot possess wealth. If this is so, then all of us in Western society are in trouble, because we are all wealthy by New Testament standards.

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

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

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

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

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

enjoy their wealth. Even billionaires often reflect on the fact that they cannot really enjoy the wealth that they have. Moreover, Proverbs 28:11 and Jeremiah 9:23 warn that wealth often leads to pride and arrogance.

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

A Biblical View of Poverty

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

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

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

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

the future.

Poverty and Government

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

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

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

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

between those who have legitimate needs and those who need to be admonished in their sin.

Poverty and the Church

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

A Cooperative Effort

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

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

In the New Testament, the church also had a role in helping to meet the needs of the poor. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul talks about a collection that was sent from the churches to the Jerusalem believers. We also find many scriptural admonitions calling for Christians to distribute their resources to others compassionately (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Tim. 5:9-10; 6:18; James 1:27).

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

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

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

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

Here is where the church can provide some answers. First, in the area of capital investment, churches should develop a mercies fund to help those in need. Christians should reach out to those in poverty by distributing their own financial resources and by supporting ministries working in this area. Such an outreach provides churches with a mechanism to meet the physical needs of the poor as well as a context to meet their spiritual needs.

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

remedial reading programs. Businesspeople can impart job skills.

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

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

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

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

The church can help those addicted to alcohol or other drugs to overcome their dependencies. Christians can work to heal broken families. Dealing with these root causes will help solve the poverty problem.

The Christian Lifestyle

What, then, does this biblical view of wealth and poverty have to say about the way Christians should live? A brief survey of Scripture shows godly people living in a variety of different economic situations. For example, Daniel served as secretary

of state in pagan administrations and no doubt lived an upper-middle-class lifestyle. Ezekiel lived outside the city in what might have been considered a middle-class lifestyle. And Jeremiah certainly lived a lower-class lifestyle.

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

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

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

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

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

Here are a few suggestions on how to begin living a simple lifestyle. First, eat sensibly and eat less. This includes not

only good nutrition, but occasional times for prayer and fasting. Use the time saved for prayer and meditation on God's word. Use the money saved for world hunger relief.

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

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

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

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