Voting and Christian Citizenship

Applying a biblical worldview to your voting choices is an important part of your role as a citizen. Byron Barlowe looks at how Christians should exercise their right to vote and make biblically informed decisions in the voting booth.

Summary

It is both a sacred duty and privilege for Christians to serve as citizens who salt (preserve) and light (illumine) our culture. Americans have inherited a government system based solidly on a biblical worldview, but one that also tolerates and protects other viewpoints. Truly humble, tolerant political engagement does not equal spiritual compromise. Christians found out how seductive political power can be in the 1980s and need to resist the pull of compromise. God doesn't take sides; we need to make sure we're on His side.



Although a strongly biblical candidate may be ideal, that's not often a realistic option. Instead, we must use our sanctified minds to prayerfully choose between imperfect candidates—who are *not*, after all, seeking *pastoral* positions. Believers have a duty to vote our values. How else would we vote? Our calling: not to force those values on others in a free society, but to honor the privileges of citizenship, including legitimate political influence, and to vote our convictions.

Christian Citizenship: A Duty and Privilege

One pundit wrote fifteen months before the 2008 election, "If you're not already weary of the 2008 presidential campaign . . . you must be living in a cave…. The campaign began the day after the 2004 election, making this the first non-stop presidential campaign in history. The media, desperate to sustain interest in the horse race, pursue such earth-shattering stories as: 'Which candidate owns the most pets?'"{1}

Then, a new kind of Internet-age debate featured Democratic presidential candidates responding to home-grown videos posted to *YouTube.com* by members of the public. Among them: two Tennesseans dressed like hillbillies and a snowman, ostensibly concerned about global warming!

Hard to take politics seriously given all of the theater, isn't it? But political engagement—including voting—is a God-given, blood-bought right that Christians must take seriously. We are called by the Lord Jesus to be preserving salt and illuminating light in our culture. And it's not just presidential races that matter.

Kerby Anderson, in an article entitled "Politics and Religion," wrote, "Christian obedience goes beyond calling for spiritual renewal. We have often failed to ask the question, 'What do we do if hearts are not changed?' Because government is ordained of God, we need to consider ways to legitimately use governmental power. Christians have a high stake in making sure government acts justly and makes decisions that provide maximum freedom for the furtherance of the gospel."{2} Some believe we have a *cultural mandate* to redeem not only men's souls, but the works of culture including politics.

Yet, Christians remain on the sidelines in alarming numbers.

According to one poll before the 2004 elections, “only a third of evangelical Christians—those who ought to be most concerned with moral values—[said they would] actually vote.” But the Bible says a lot about believers’ duties as citizens. “When Moses commanded the Israelites to appoint God-fearing leaders, he wasn’t just talking to a handful of citizens who felt like getting involved…. And modern Christians are under the same obligation to choose leaders who love justice…. Today, in our modern democracy, free citizens act as God’s agents for choosing leaders, and we do it by voting.”{3}

As believers, we’re citizens of two kingdoms: one temporal and earthly, the other eternal and heavenly. We are called to participate in both the culture and politics of The City of Man, as this world was called by Augustine, while primarily focusing on the Kingdom of God.

The longevity and value of these dual kingdoms ought to serve as crucial guides to how invested we become in them. Eternal issues matter more than temporal ones. To allow politics and social issues to overtake our commitments to the everlasting is to risk idolatry, while losing ground in both realms.

Flipping the usual focus of candidates’ qualifications onto the electorate, one Christian columnist wrote, “Those who make critical decisions for America (its voters, I mean) should come up to some minimal standards before leaving the house on Election Day. Voters should be able to tell the difference between worldviews…. Voters should be free of regionalism and other types of ‘group-think’…. Vocations, unions, ethnic groups and age groups that vote in lockstep are not behaving as free people. Citizens whose consciences are ruled by others should not govern a free nation… Voters should value their vote, but not sell it.” {4}

It didn’t take Albert Einstein to say it, but he did say “It is the duty of every citizen according to his best capacities to give validity to his convictions in political affairs.”{5}

Chuck Colson, convicted Watergate felon, said, “All you have to do is lose the right to vote once, and you would never again find any excuse for not going into the voting booth…. Be a good citizen: Exercise the greatest right a free people have [*sic*].”{6}

God’s will and Kingdom will not be thwarted, and *we* cannot ultimately control outcomes, even as a voting bloc. As Christian citizens in America, we need to offer due diligence in voting and other political activities, trust God with the results, and keep spiritual concerns first.

Puritan Roots, Pluralism & Practical Politics

In 2007, for the first time a Hindu priest opened Senate deliberations with prayer. I asked a group of Christian homeschool parents gathered to discuss America’s political system if they could justify forbidding this, and no one could answer satisfactorily. Pluralism—when a culture supports various ethnic backgrounds, religions and political views—is a practical and, understood correctly, appropriate reality.

Americans—believers and non-believers alike—have inherited a system of governance based solidly on the Bible, but allowing for a plurality of beliefs or even unbelief. The Puritans who first colonized this land “saw themselves as the new Israel, an elect people.”{7}

The architects of our political arrangement, many of them professing Christians, were deeply influenced by the Puritan’s positive cultural impact and the Scriptures to which they appealed. Daniel Webster said, “Our ancestors established their system of government on morality and religious sentiment.”{8} John Quincy Adams said, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the

principles of Christianity." George Washington, a devoted Christian, left room for others: "While just government protects all in their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support."{9}

Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum points out the realism of the founders in mitigating the imperfections of people even as they self-rule. "Again, we can see the genius of the American system. Madison and others realized the futility of trying to remove passions (human sinfulness) from the population. Therefore, he proposed that human nature be set against human nature. This was done by separating various institutional power structures."{10} This was based on a biblical understanding of man, a proper anthropology.

So, how can such a firmly entrenched Judeo-Christian political heritage be reconciled with a culture increasingly full of Mormons, Hindus, Muslims, humanists, and other unbelievers living alongside Christians?

The Constitution and Bill of Rights justly allows for religious and political diversity. Nineteenth-century theologian Charles Hodge of Princeton regarding immigrants said:

> All are welcomed; all are admitted to equal rights and privileges. All are allowed to acquire property, whatever their religious feelings, and to vote in every election, made eligible to all offices and invested with equal influence in all public affairs. All are allowed to worship as they please, or not to worship at all, if they see fit…. No man is required to profess any form of faith…. More than this cannot reasonably be demanded.{11}

Theologian Richard J. Mouw explored the possibility of evangelical politics that doesn't compromise and at the same is time highly tolerant of other views. Not "anything-goes relativism," but rather confidence that comes from God's

guidebook for life, tempered by fair-minded ways of dealing with people. He wrote, “This humility does not exclude Christians advocating social and political policies that conflict with the views and practices of others. It does mean we should do so in a way that encourages reasonable dialogue and mutual respect.”{12}

Believers need to consider the words of Bernard Crick: “Politics is a way of ruling in divided societies without undue violence…. Politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good.” Kenyans victimized by recent mob killings that erupted after disputed elections could testify that when the political process fails it can be devastating.

The founders, even as they envisioned pluralism, did not themselves have to deal deeply with it. It requires a keen worldview for voting and activism in today’s truly pluralistic America. Our nation is based on an unmistakable Christian foundation, but that of course doesn’t mean you *have to* be a Christian or even believe in God to participate.

Political Might and the Religious Right: Does God Take Sides?

Ever since Jimmy Carter ran for President based partly on his evangelical faith in the 1970s, and then the Moral Majority took the nation by storm in the ‘80s, there has been a non-stop discussion in America surrounding faith and politics.

Political power’s seduction blinded believers, claim former movers and shakers like Ed Dobson. “One of the dangers,” he said, “of mixing politics and religion is that you begin to think the only way to transform culture is by passing another law. Most of what we did in the Moral Majority was aimed at getting the right people elected so that we would have enough votes to pass the right laws.”{13}

In those days, Christians seemed to believe they could legislate and administrate God's kingdom into full flower. However, core issues like gay unions and abortion remain largely unchanged or even worse today.

"History has shown us we can't rely totally on laws," continued Dobson.{14} A good example is Prohibition. The harder the government cracked down on alcohol, the more ways people found to get around the law. One result was increased crime. Laws don't change hearts; they are meant to restrain evil.

Sidling up to political power brokers even for commendable causes can prove disillusioning. Recently, conservative Christians hoped for fair and full consideration from the administration of the boldly evangelical George Bush. According to former White House deputy director for faith-based initiatives David Kuo, administration operators used and mocked evangelicals who were trying to do compassionate work partly funded through the government. But as Kuo asks, "What did they expect from politicos?" Good question for all of us. Jeremiah the prophet warned, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man."{15} That would seem to include man's politics.

Committed evangelical Bill Armstrong shared prophetically as a Senator back in 1983, "There is a danger when believers get deeply involved in political activity that they will try to put the mantle of Christ on their cause . . . to deify that cause and say, 'Because I'm motivated to run for office for reasons [of] faith, a vote for me is a vote for Jesus'."{16}

Ed Dobson often joked about God not being a Democrat or Republican—but *certainly not* a Democrat. But, he asked, "Is God the God of the religious and political left with its emphasis on the environment and the poor, or is he the God of the religious and political right with its emphasis on the unborn and the family? Both groups claim to speak for God."{17}

The Lord appeared to Joshua before a battle. He discovered that the issue wasn't whether God was on his side or his enemy's, but whether the people were on *God's* side. The religious and political Left casts itself as champion of the poor and the environment while the Right emphasizes the unborn and the family. Both say they speak for God. Seeking God's priorities and using His wisdom for our particular times is critical. However, "God's side" is not always easy to find.

So what's a Christian citizen's role? Armstrong and others believe Christians have been commanded by Christ to be involved. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" means more than paying taxes. Some basic biblical principles:

- *All political power comes from God;*
- *Government has a God-ordained role to play in society;*
- *Christians have a God-ordained responsibility to that government: to pray, submit to and honor government leaders and, of course, to pay our taxes.{18}*

The late Christian political activist, pastor, and author D. James Kennedy warned in the heady early days of "the Reagan Revolution" not to trust in the man Ronald Reagan but in God. "After victory," he writes, "many people give up the struggle and later discover they had won only a battle, not the war. Are you working less, praying less, giving less, trusting less? Maybe there is a bit of the humanist in all of us."{19} He continues, "The government . . . should be a means to godly ends. Ronald Reagan is but a stone in the sling, and you do not trust in stones; you trust in the living rock, Jesus Christ."{20}

Thus, voters, campaigners *and* officeholders need to heed the humility of experience in a fallen world and the understanding of the Founders that power corrupts and should be divided up, placing final trust in the Almighty.

Should We Elect a Christian When Given the Chance?

Talk show host Larry King asked pastor and author Max Lucado if religion should matter in an election campaign. I love his answer: "Well, genuine religion has to matter. We elect character. We elect a person's worldview. Faith can define that worldview…. [Within the] American population 85 percent of us say that religion matters to us. 72 percent of us say that the religion of a president matters."{21} Polls show that Americans would sooner elect a Muslim or homosexual than an acknowledged atheist.{22}

Philosopher and early church father Augustine dealt with a culture war among the Romans. In his classic book *The City of God* he taught that "The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man."{23} Of course, a Christian will want to vote for a citizen of God's city if there is a clear choice between him and a rank sinner. That choice is seldom so clear in elections. But understanding this dual citizenship of the Christian voter herself in the City of Man and The City of God is essential to dissecting complicated, sometimes competing priorities.

In the tangled vines surrounding campaign messages, it's not so simple to discern a candidate's worldview and decide who best matches our own, but that's what wisdom and good stewardship require (and as recent scandals like Senator Larry Craig's alleged homosexual improprieties shows, a politician's stated views and behavior don't always match). Seems like the Christian citizen's top priority, then, is to have a biblical worldview to start with (something that Probe can help with greatly).

Given that, how does the average Christian voter decide on parties, platforms, and candidates? They do it based on principles of biblical ethics, godly values, simple logic and a discerning ear.

Remember, America is a republic, not a democracy. And in a republic we are to elect representatives who will rise above the passions of the moment. They are to be men and women of character and virtue, who will act responsibly and even nobly as they carry out the best interests of the people. No, we don't want leaders we can love because they remind us of our own darker side. We want leaders we can look up to and respect.{24}

Should we elect a person who claims to be a Christian, like former pastor Mike Huckabee? It depends. Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney received a standing ovation when said, "We need a person of faith to lead the country." A contributor to the blog run by Left-wing evangelical Jim Wallis responded, "But that statement is nearly meaningless, for even Sam Harris is a person of faith. Strident, angry, atheistic faith."{25} Good point: all have faith, but *faith in what or who*?

On the other hand, former Senator Bill Armstrong states, "God was able to make sons of Abraham out of stone. Certainly that means he can make a good legislator out of somebody who isn't necessarily a member of our church or maybe not even a Christian or maybe an atheist. So I don't think we ought to limit God by saying 'only Christians' deserve our support politically."{26}

The politically influential Dr. James Dobson caused a stir when he critiqued one candidate for not regularly attending church. Dr. Richard Land responded that this is not a deciding factor for him. He said that as a Baptist minister he would never have voted for the church-attending Jimmy Carter but did vote twice for the non-attending Ronald Reagan. This, like so

many others, seems to be an issue of individual conscience for voters.

Evangelical Mark DeMoss writes in support of Romney, a devout Mormon. “For years, evangelicals have been keenly interested to know whether a candidate shared their faith. I am now more interested in knowing that a president represents my values than I am that he or she shares my theology.”{27} After all, we’ve worked together on issues like abortion, pornography, and gambling. Can’t we be governed well by someone who shares most of our values, he reasons? As columnist Cal Thomas says, I care less about where the ambulance driver worships than if he knows where the hospital is.

Taking the high road of choosing good candidates, not necessarily ones whose theology one agrees with all down the line, makes voting and party affiliation complex for believers. We’d prefer a clean, easy set of choices. But, it appears that even voting and civic engagement is under the “sweat of the brow” curse of Genesis—nothing comes easy.

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias reminds us that we’re NOT electing a minister or church elder. He said:

> I think as we elect, we go before God and [choose] out of the candidates who will be the best ones to represent [sanctity of life] values and at the same time be a good leader . . . whose first responsibility [is] to protect citizens.
>
> What we want is a politician who will understand the basic Judeo-Christian worldview, and on the basis of that the moral laws of this nation are framed, and then run this country with the excellence of that which is recognized in a pluralistic society: the freedom to believe or to disbelieve, and the moral framework with which this was conducted: the sanctity of every individual life.{28}

Vote your conscience. Many issues are disputable matters, as

the Apostle Paul put it. Avoid the temptation to *unreflectively* limit your view to a few pet issues. If over time you prayerfully believe that stewardship of the environment is critical, balanced against all considerations, vote accordingly. If sanctity of life issues like abortion and stem cell research are paramount to you, by all means vote that way. However, realize that trade-offs are inevitable; there won't be a perfect candidate who falls in line on all our values and priorities.

Politics, Religion, and Values

As the old saw goes, "never talk about politics and religion." That may be wise advice when Uncle Harry is over for Thanksgiving dinner. But as a rule of life, it breeds ignorance and passivity in self-government. "Only if we allow a biblical worldview and a biblically balanced agenda guide our concrete political work can we significantly improve the political order," according to a statement by the National Association of Evangelicals.{29} That means dialogue, and that's not easy.

Some prefer a public square where anything goes *but* religion. That would be wrong. Likewise, a so-called "sacred public square," with religious values imposed on everyone, would be unfair. Christians should support a "*civil* public square" with open, respectful debate.{30}

But, you often hear people make statements like, "Christians shouldn't try to legislate morality." They might simply mean you can't make people good by passing laws. Fair enough. But *all law*, divine and civil, involves imposing right and wrong. Prohibitions against murder and rape are judgments on good and bad. The question is not whether we *should* legislate morality but rather, "*What kind* of morality we should legislate?"{31}

Yet tragically, as *iVoteValues.com* discovered, "many believers

don’t even consider their values when voting,” often choosing candidates whose positions are at odds with their own beliefs, convictions, and values. A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study found that *nearly two-thirds* of Americans say their faith has little to do with their voting decisions!{32} Many believers are missing a chance to be salt and light to the watching world.

What about when the field of candidates offers only “the lesser of two evils”? Like when only one candidate is anti-abortion yet she holds to other troubling positions? That requires thoughtful distinctions. If the reason you vote for candidate X is only to avoid the graver consequences of voting for candidate Y, you’re not formally cooperating with evil. In this case, whatever evil comes from the anti-abortion candidate you helped elect due to your convictions would be unintended. Same as if you were a bank teller and the robber demanded, “Give me all the money or I’ll blow this guy’s brains out.” You cooperate to avoid the greater evil, but your intent was not to enable the robbery.{33} It’s hard to argue against this reasoning in a fallen world where even God allows evil for greater purposes.

What about cases when the field of candidates offers only “the lesser of two evils”? For instance, you can’t decide between the more pro-abortion candidate who’s otherwise highly qualified *and* the anti-abortion person who has some real flaws.

Some believe that if you vote for the pro-abortion person for other important reasons, then you are not responsible for abortions that might result, as briefly illustrated above. Others see a necessary connection—vote for a “pro-abort” and you are guilty. Study and pray hard on such issues as God gives freedom of conscience.

Sometimes it comes down to choices we’d rather not make. Only rarely, perhaps, can we say that to abstain from voting is the

only way. Notable Christian author Mark Noll believes this is such a time for him.{34}

Others warn that this only helps elect the candidates with unbiblical values. One commentator wrote, “Voters should not spend their franchise on empty gestures…. No successful politician is as strong on every issue as we would like. Our own pastors and parents can’t pass this test in their much smaller contexts. Rather than striking a blow for purity, we risk giving up our influence altogether when we follow a man with only one or two ‘perfect’ ideas.”{35}

Hold this kind of issue with an open hand. Many change their minds as they age and lose unrealistic youthful idealism. But if God gives a clear conviction, again, stick with that value or candidate. Only seek the difference between legalism and God’s leading.

Some more left-leaning evangelicals like Ron Sider and Jim Wallis value helping the poor and dispossessed through government, while critics claim that as the Church’s exclusive role. The retort: the Church is failing in its duty and it’s a fulfillment of the Church’s duty to advocate for government intervention. Others focus on sanctity of life issues not only as a higher priority, but as part of the government’s biblically mandated task of protecting its citizenry. What is your conviction? Best be deciding if you don’t know yet.

The purple ink-stained fingers of Iraqi citizens who voted at their own risk for the first time in decades testify to the precious privilege of voting in a free society. Americans gave blood and treasure to free them. Don’t let the same sacrifice made by our ancestors on our behalf go to waste. Inform yourself. “Study to show yourself approved” not only regarding Scripture, but as a citizen of The Cities of Man and of God.

Notes

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27. Mark DeMoss, "Why evangelicals could support this Mormon," *The Politico*, April 24, 2007.

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29. Ronald J. Siders and Diane Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005).

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31. Ibid.

32. "How You Can Have Maximum Patriotic Impact-Brief," *iVoteValues.com*, http://tinyurl.com/2uot68, see point #3.

33. See an insightful application of this line of reasoning in Nathan Schlueter, "Drawing Pro-Life Lines," *First Things*, October 2001, tinyurl.com/6godf.

34. For a defense of his personal decision to abstain from voting in the 2004 major election, see Mark Noll, "None of the above: why I won't be voting for president," Christian Century, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_19_121/ai_n6355192.

35. Gary Ledbetter, "Who should vote?"

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

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

Section Synopsis: *A recent book entitled* unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters *uncovered overwhelmingly negative views of*

evangelicals and born-again Christians, especially among young generations. In some ways these views are warranted, in some ways they are not, but Christians do well to take them as a wake-up call for the sake of those God wants to save and mature.



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

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

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

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

The authors' applications are not always solidly based. They seem a little dismissive of valid objections to their analysis and conclusions. Also, confusion among unchurched respondents

about the meaning of the terms “born again” and “evangelical” leads one to ask, How seriously do we take survey-takers’ critique of Christians if they don’t even know who or what these Christians are? That is, many times the people being surveyed couldn’t clearly define what “born-again” means or what an “evangelical” is, so how much stock should we put in their criticisms?

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

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

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

According to the authors, “Theologically conservative people are increasingly perceived as aloof and unwilling to talk.” But those under 30 “are the ultimate ‘conversation generation’.” Those outside church want to discuss issues, but see Christians as unwilling. Have you recently had a spiritual

dialogue with a young unbeliever? How'd it go?

"Christians Are Hypocritical"

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

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

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

This isn't lost on younger generations. "Like it or not, the term 'hypocritical' has become fused with young peoples' experience of Christianity," say the authors.{4} *Eighty-five percent* of "outsiders" and *half of young churchgoers* say so. The book offers story after painful story of sometimes breathtaking hypocrisy based on lengthy interviews. This adds weight to the conclusions drawn by Kinnaman and Lyons. The research was not simply based on surveys (quantitative) but also on in-depth interviews (qualitative).

There may be a silver lining here. The charge of hypocrisy

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

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

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

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

"Christians Hate Homosexuals"

***Section Synopsis**: Evangelical and born-again Christians today have a well-deserved but understandable reputation as anti-gay, but attitudes can go so far as being gay-hating. Balancing conviction about the broader gay agenda and the personal sin of homosexuality with a humble compassion for gay individuals who are made in God's image is key, especially as*

we model for younger believers.

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

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

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

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

Barna's survey shows just how unbiblical self-identified Christians can be. Over half said homosexuality was a problem, but only two out of six hundred people said anything about

love or “being sympathetic” as a potential solution. A mere one percent say they pray for homosexuals! “We need to downgrade the importance of being antihomosexual as a ‘credential,’” of our commitment to Christ, say the authors.{9} That is, we need to repent if we believe that it’s a spiritual badge of honor to be anti-gay.

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

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

“Christians Are Judgmental”

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

One of the most troubling perceptions that a watching world has of “born agains” and “evangelicals”, especially among the under-thirty crowd, is that we are judgmental. The book *unChristian* cites findings that ninety percent of “outsiders” believe this. More than half of young churchgoers agree!

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

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

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

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

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

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

- A judgmental heart maintains the us-them dichotomy,

keeping people at a distance from us. Holding people in contempt is easier when we lump them into categories.

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

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

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

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

How Can True Christians Constructively Respond?

Section Synopsis: *Repairing a damaged image is a worthy goal*

for Christians so that critics can see Christ instead of negative stereotypes. We can tear down stereotypes by being Christlike and then we have a chance to tear down deeper misconceptions about God, the Bible, and faith.

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

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

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

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

At one point, he proclaimed, "I like to think of God as feminine." I explored his reasons, which included the presence of beauty in the world. I affirmed that observation far as I could and expanded his thinking. I said, "What if God is so big and complete that He embodies perfect femininity *and* masculinity?" The door opened wider. But what if I'd acted

offended by the cuss word on the sticker or been put off by his distorted theology? I'm sure he would have been put off and the conversation would have been aborted.

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

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

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

Notes

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity…And Why it Matters* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
2. David Kinnaman and Lyons, 51
3. Ibid, 49.
4. Ibid, 42. 5. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton/Penguin Group, New York, New York: 2008), 54.
6. Kinnaman and Lyons, 99.
7. Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Homosexuality* (Harvest House: Eugene, Oregon, 2008), 82.
8. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB). See: www.BibleGateway.com.
9. Kinnaman and Lyons, 105.

10. Ibid, 183.
11. Tim Keller, interviewed by Ed Stetzer, researcher, blogger and host of Inside Lifeway, posted April 24, 2008, lifeway.edgeboss.net/download/lifeway/corp/IL_Evangelism_and_Keller.mp3.
12. Kinnaman and Lyons, 182.
13. Josh McDowell, as quoted by Charlie Mack, staff representative of Faculty Commons (Campus Crusade for Christ) in a PowerPoint® presentation presented to professors at Michigan State University, Spring, 2008.
14. Kinnaman and Lyons, 56.
15. Kerby Anderson, 83-84.
16. Keller, "Inside Lifeway" interview.

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"Mistakes Were Made"

If you're the nation's top cop, you know it's a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales' ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We're investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We'll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don't want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I'll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an "astonishingly maladroit…Nixonian…dodge."{1} Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake's press agent announced back then, "I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance."{2} Jackson told a press conference, "If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention."{3} William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: "the past exonerative."{4}

True Confessions

What did Gonzales mean? I don't know; I'm still watching. But the "mistakes were made" flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I'm sorry; please forgive me?

That's seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: "I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician."{5} Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, "Never apologize, never explain."{6} Literary giant Ralph Waldo

Emerson claimed, “No sensible person ever made an apology.”{7}

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he’d ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn’t.”

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

Plastic Buckets

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to … [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.{8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.

Notes

1. “Politics, Pure and Cynical,” (Editorial), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/yvnjyd, accessed March 18, 2007.
2. John M. Broder, “Familiar Fallback for Officials: ‘Mistakes Were Made’,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html, accessed March 18, 2007.
3. Robert J. Bliwise, “We Apologize: The Sorry State of Remorse,” *Duke Magazine* 90:3 May-June 2004; http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/050604/apologize1.html, accessed March 18, 2007.
4. Diane Hartman, “Watching My Language” (Book Review of William Safire’s *Watching My Language*), *Denver Post* Online, “September 14” (no year given); http://extras.denverpost.com/books/book23.htm, accessed March 18, 2007.
5. Bliwise, loc. cit.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. It is unclear from the text whether Munger or Bliwise supplied the Emerson quotation.
8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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