

Life in a Secular Culture – Christian Worldview Living in a Secular World

Rick Wade looks at the similarities and the differences between the views offered by our secular culture and a Christian, biblical worldview. Understanding the significant differences will help us choose to think biblically about situations we face in our secular society.

We get our cues about how to live from the society in which we live. Maybe I should say the societies in which we live since, in this day and age, we can find ourselves moving back and forth between very different worlds. Christians belong to the mini-societies of our churches which might extend beyond the walls of our church to define our friendships, our social lives. We also live and work and play in a secular society which is sending us messages constantly about how to live, how to talk, what to wear; in short, what is important in life.

Secular means that which is defined apart from anything religious. Peter Berger, a sociologist, put it this way: By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols... It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation. In other words, secularism works its fingers into all of life, including the ideas we hold. Secularization also refers the consciousness of individuals who decreasingly view the world with a religious perspective. So the influence of religion declines in society and in us individually as we think about life with lessor with no reference to God. [\[1\]](#)

Without God shaping its vision, what does our society teach us about how to think and act? Think about it. How are we shaped

by the culture in which we live? Just identifying a few things can be a start to combating the corrosive effects of secularism in our lives.

Here are a few things that come to mind.

My society tells me that *my* experience and *my* opinion are all-important (and it thinks of opinion as a purely subjective thing). No one else has the right to set the rules for me. And, if there's a God (and most Americans believe there is), He (or She or It) pretty much leaves us to make our own choices. So I am supposed to refer first to my own tastes and desires when making choices. And that's what really happens when I'm not thinking about it. Vocation, where I live, what music I listen to, what church I attend—it's all up to me. Yes, I know that there are a number of legitimate reasons we make choices that are different from those others make. The point is, should our individual tastes and desires be our primary criteria?

I noted that my society tells me my own experience and opinion is all-important. It's interesting, though, that it wants to decide what choices I can have! We'll see that in some of the next examples.

My society tells me how to dress. We're told that we should express ourselves, our own individuality, in how we dress. The result? People wearing spandex or spandex-tight clothes who have no business doing so; young men wearing their pants down around their thighs; young women showing us all the contours of their bodies. And we're supposed to be expressing ourselves? Looks like a whole lot of conformity to me. Even worse, while we're told to express ourselves, clothes designers and stores are the ones who decide what our choices are. I hear this most often from young women. Their choice in clothing is either sexy or dressing like mom.

My society tells me that I *deserve* good things, so I spend

money on things I might not even *want*, much less really *deserve*. Gratitude for what we have isn't high on the list of virtues these days. Gimme more . . . because I *deserve* it (and I'll go into debt to get it)!

My society teaches me what is funny. The greatest influences on my sense of humor were Bill Cosby and Robin Williams. Who else remembers Cosby talking about smearing Jell-O on the floor of his house to protect him from the monster, or about having his tonsils removed? And when *Mork and Mindy* was all the rage in the 70s, I'd gather with my friends each week to get another dose of Williams's crazy performances.

Now understand that I'm not saying it's necessarily wrong to model our humor on others, even on people who aren't Christians. But what is the character of our humor today? The humor I see routinely on TV and movies is sarcastic put-downs. That's become so much the norm that if anyone objects to it, they're made fun of for being so touchy!

My society also tells me my religion isn't all that important. It has its place, of course, but that place shouldn't be public, at least not until there's some horrible disaster and prayer becomes acceptable. So religion is to stay out of politics and social issues, but is permitted in tragedies such as the recent mine disaster in Utah. To *whom* we pray is irrelevant, of course. You have your God and I have mine.

One place where I see the insignificance of religion in our cultural attitude is on web sites that ask for information about me including my vocation. Religion isn't typically an option (and I'm being generous in saying typically; I can't remember *any* giving me that option). My only choice is Other. The result is that in public I tend to fall into line and keep my religious convictions out of the conversation. Even in our *private* lives religion should mind its manners. One shouldn't be fanatical, you know.

Unfortunately, polls indicate that Christian beliefs are apparently insignificant to *Christians* as well with respect to how they live. The polls I read indicate that people claiming to be born-again don't live any differently than their non-Christian neighbors. We've let the segmenters win. Keep your religion in your church, we're told, and we do just that.

My society tells me that economics is all-important. I wonder if there's anyone else out there who wishes that in a State of the Union address a president would say something like, Our economy is strong, but morally we're in rough shape. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for that! It's the economy, stupid, was a phrase heard often in Bill Clinton's campaign against President Bush in 92. Well, the economy is important, of course. But is it the *most* important thing in individual and social life? Is the U.S. doing just fine as long as the economy is strong?

My society tells us we're free to do what we want in our sexual relationships, that we aren't to be instructed by archaic religious notions. But then, of course, we're told what is expected by society. We've been taught well that a kiss is followed immediately by a romp in the bed. How many times have you seen on TV or in the movies where a man and woman fall into that first embrace and *don't* immediately fall onto the couch or bed or floor? I think of the scene in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* where a woman is astonished to hear that a man and woman have decided to wait till marriage to have sex. Yes, we're free to do whatever we please (the church has nothing to say about such things—that is, as long as what we please doesn't include abstaining and we don't champion monogamy as loudly as homosexuals champion their, um, lifestyle.

My society tells me what constitutes success. Although you can often see stories through the media about the great things average people do, you also are kept up-to-date on the life and times of Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and soccer star

David Beckman. In minute detail. Day after day. Do I really *care* about the latest entry in Rosie O'Donnell's blog? No disrespect intended, but I'm not sure why Ms. O'Donnell's opinions and comings and goings are important enough to make the headlines. Success is doing one's best to accomplish the tasks God has given or those clearly in keeping with the commands and wisdom of God.

My society tells me that objections to crudeness are puritanical; that manners are relics of a by-gone era (since life is all about *me*, while manners are about *others*).

It tells women that the notion of being under a man's headship or devoting herself to her children above her own interests is a throw-back to oppressive days.

It tells parents that they need to let their children determine their own values.

I could go on and on. My point in all this isn't mainly to bemoan the state of our society, but to consider how our secular society tells *us* how to live, and how much of its instruction we swallow and follow without even realizing it. We are definitely going to be shaped by our society, but that shaping shouldn't be mindless.

A few decades ago Christian writers made much of the idea that there shouldn't be a division between the sacred and the secular, that all of life should be infused with the sacred. Our society works against that. And quite frankly, I think the message has been lost to a significant extent in the church. We like our things, so without even thinking about it, we conform our notions of the sacred to the secular. We make Christianity relevant by adjusting it to our circumstances and desires.

Rather than seeing the secular world, the world we can see and touch, through a sacred lens, we're more apt to look at the sacred through a secular lens. May God help us to see all of

life—including our clothes, our humor, our entertainment, our vocation, our relationships, and all the rest—through the eyes of God, as belonging to Him, and give us the resolve to bring them under His lordship.

Note

1. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 107-108.

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Abuse and Domestic Violence

Abuse and domestic violence affects our lives, our homes, and our society. Kerby Andersons looks at the problem of abuse and what the church can do to help victims of abuse.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Each year the lives of women (and men) are altered or destroyed by someone who abuses them. The resulting emotional scars, physical scars, and destruction are evident in social and crime statistics.

Although abuse is significantly under-reported, current crime statistics at least begin to tell the story. The FBI's Uniform Crime Report routinely lists domestic violence as the leading cause of injury to women ages 15 to 44 in the United States. These injuries are more than those from car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.

Abuse may be open, flagrant, and in-your-face. But abuse can also be subtle and devious. It may explode on the scene or gradually creep into a relationship. Although women are the

primary victims of abuse, men may be victims, also, of abuse.

One of the first steps in dealing with abuse is to identify it. Identifying it is often difficult because it can manifest itself in different forms. Here is a brief survey of the different types of abuse.

- *Emotional abuse* is the use of mental strategies or mind games. This would include such things as anger, aggression, humiliation, intimidation, stalking, fear, power, and control. The goal is to inflict emotional damage on the other person.
- *Physical abuse* would include the use of body parts or weapons to threaten, punish, dominate, restrain, control, or injure another person.
- *Sexual abuse* is the use of forced sexual actions which may dominate, manipulate, threaten, injure, corrupt, or control another person.
- *Social abuse* involves other forms of abuse to dominate, manipulate or control another person's social relationships.
- *Financial abuse* is the use of money or financially-related matters to dominate, threaten or control. This may be done to inflict damage on another person or take financial advantage of that person.
- *Spiritual abuse* is the controlling of another person's religious interests or practices. Spiritual damage may be inflicted by criticizing a person's religious convictions or misstating them for religious purposes.

Although abuse may take various forms, there are often common elements. For example, there often is the tendency to blame the victim of abuse. A woman may be told to "submit" or "pray harder for her marriage" by a pastor or church members. And often women go back into abusive relationships, leaving many to wonder.

In this article, we will try to provide some answers and perspective on this important issue. (And I might note that we

already have articles on the Probe Web site dealing with such issues as [verbal abuse](#) and [spiritual abuse](#).)

Types of Abusers

Although abuse and domestic violence are one of the most pressing social problems of our time, most of society (including churches) still view the crisis as a private matter. Abused women are often advised by pastors and members of a congregation to “pray harder” or “try to become a better wife.”

Abuse has not only been ignored by the church but often by the medical profession. In their study of abuse, Evan Stark and Ann Flitcraft found that out of one million women who sought medical treatment for injuries sustained by husbands and boyfriends, doctors correctly identified the injuries as a result of battering only four percent of the time.[\[1\]](#)

Frequently child abuse and domestic violence go hand in hand. Men who abuse their wives will often also abuse their children. Research shows that in homes where domestic violence occurs, children are abused at a rate 1500 percent higher than the normal average.[\[2\]](#)

Often this abuse begins even before a child is born. One study of 1200 white, Latino, and African-American pregnant women, found that one in six reported physical abuse during pregnancy.[\[3\]](#)

Researchers now conclude that there are two types of abusers. Neil Jacobson and John Gottman document this in their book, *When Men Batter Women*.[\[4\]](#) Their study of more than 200 couples in dangerous relationships helped shatter myths and shed new light on abusive relationships.

They describe two types of batterers: Cobras and Pit Bulls. The Cobras are more severely violent of the two. They strike swiftly and ferociously, always remaining in control and

feeling entitled to whatever they want.

Pit Bulls are violent because they are insecure. They are more likely to lose control, letting their emotions burn slowly until they explode in anger.

Jacobson and Gottman intensively studied about 60 of the 200 couples by watching videotapes of non-violent arguments of severe batterers and their spouses. To eliminate some of the subjectivity, they also monitored the vital signs (heart rate, sweat flow) of the couples.

They found that Cobras resemble the snake for which they are named. They become still and focused just before striking their victim. They become internally calm during abuse. While the heart rates of Pit Bulls increase during abuse, the Cobras' heart rates actually decrease.

Pit Bulls are driven by deep insecurity and often have an unhealthy dependence on the mates they abuse. They are afraid of losing their wives and therefore try to control them through physical and emotional abuse. Cobras have often been physically or sexually abused themselves (frequently in childhood) and tend to see violence as an unavoidable part of life.

Boundaries

Often victims of abuse feel they deserve the abuse they receive. They have been convinced (by their partner or perhaps by society in general) that the abuse is their fault. It is not. To reinforce this claim, here are eight things that no one deserves:[{5}](#)

- No one deserves to be pushed, slapped, bruised, or kicked. No excuse makes such actions justifiable, whether drugs, alcohol, financial problems or family problems.
- No one deserves to be verbally abused. No one should

be called names or yelled at for no apparent reason.

- No one deserves to have possessions damaged (dishes thrown, clothes torn) or gifts destroyed. These things don't automatically become "his" just because he paid for them from a joint checking account.
- No one deserves to be interfered with in coming and going. You do not need to be told when you can or cannot leave the house, go shopping, or go to school.
- No one deserves to be followed, harassed, or spied upon. As an adult, you have the right to go where you want, and spend time the way you choose.
- No one deserves to be ridiculed, put down, made fun of, or belittled. This applies both at home and in public.
- No one deserves to be emotionally starved. Everyone has emotional needs: to love, to be loved, to care and be cared for, to need others and to be needed by others. This involves more than just one person who is demanding your time and attention.
- No one deserves to be isolated. You deserve to have a community of people around you rather than just a spouse who dominates your life.

Each person has rights that should be asserted to prevent abuse from taking place. Here is a short list of those rights:

- You have the right to be treated with respect. All are created in the image of God (Gen. 2:26-27) and have value and dignity. You deserve respect regardless of your economic status, race, religion, or sex.
- You have the right to be heard. You have ideas and opinions and should be free to express them.
- You have the right to have a support system. You shouldn't have to depend on one person in your life to provide all your emotional needs and who cuts you off from the rest of society.

- You have the right to come and go as you please. You should be able to make choices about what you do with your free time.
- You have the right to have privacy and space of your own. You don't give up those rights when you get married or when you begin to have children.
- You have the right to maintain a separate identity.

Each of these rights are important in establishing boundaries in a relationship. These are key components in preventing abuse.

Myths of Abuse

Let's turn now to some of the myths of abuse.[{6}](#)

One myth is that victims of abuse come from lower-income families with little education. In reality, victims of domestic violence come from all walks of life. Race, religion, socio-economic background are no predictor of abuse. Victims of abuse may be well-educated or uneducated, professionals or common laborers.

A second myth is that victims stay in abusive relationships because they like being abused. That is simply not true. Many have been conditioned to accept beatings because they are blamed by their abusers, but they do not like being beaten. Many victims actually "accept abuse as common in relationships."[{7}](#)

So, why don't victims leave? The answer to that is often quite complex. Many women believe they cannot leave because "He can't live without me." They may fear he will have a nervous breakdown, commit suicide, or lose his job.

She may believe that the children need a father, rationalizing that an abusive father is better than no father at all. And she may think she cannot make it alone in the job market.

Many women fear they will be killed if they leave an abusive relationship. And that fear may be justified. Studies show that battered women are more likely to be killed *after* leaving an abusive relationship.[{8}](#)

Abuse victims also convince themselves that things are going to get better. Hope springs eternal, and there is always the hope that with the right changes and hard work, abuse will go away. Sadly, it does not.

A third myth is that violence happens mostly between strangers. Contrary to popular belief, a woman's greatest risk of assault is from an intimate partner. Statistics from the Department of Justice indicate that women are attacked seven times more often by offenders with whom they have an intimate relationship than are male victims of violence.[{9}](#)

A fourth myth is that abuse is not a major problem. Domestic violence is one of the most serious health problems today. As we have mentioned, it affects every socioeconomic segment of society. "Federal officials estimate that domestic violence costs U.S. firms \$4 billion a year in lower productivity, staff turnover, absenteeism, and excessive use of medical benefits."[{10}](#)

What the Church Can Do

Domestic violence is pervasive in our society and crosses all socioeconomic levels, religious belief, and cultural backgrounds. Abuse affects our lives, our homes, and our society. Is there anything the church can do to deal with this important issue? Here are a few suggestions.[{11}](#)

First, pastors and church members should be aware of the extent of the problem. I have provided some social statistics to demonstrate how pervasive abuse is within our society. It isn't a problem to be ignored or addressed through simple clichés.

Second, pastors and counselors need to help abuse victims set boundaries in their lives. Battered women often find it difficult to make choices because someone else has been making decisions for them. Many women who live in violent homes went from their father's house straight to their abuser's house. They never have had much experience in making their own personal choices.

If you are seeking to help an abuse victim, you should encourage her to make her own decisions. Resist the temptation to rescue and take over her life. She needs to feel empowered not helpless. At the same time, you can provide suggestions about finding a family counselor or a domestic violence agency.

Third, if you are a pastor, a counselor, or just a caring friend, you can provide counsel and comfort. She needs to hear from you that she doesn't deserve to be abused. Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, and don't let her convince herself that the abuse will go away.

Fourth, be prepared for crisis intervention. Quick action may be necessary to protect her and her children. Ask her to describe the circumstances of the last two or three beatings. What preceded his attack (drugs, alcohol, argument)? Where is her relationship right now?

A pastor or counselor who receives a crisis call only has a few moments to discern the extent of the threat and appropriate actions that should be taken. Can she find her way to a safe place immediately? Do you have a place for her to go, if necessary?

Sometimes the crisis arrives at your office or home. A pastor, counselor, or caring friend may need to arrange for medical attention and a safe place away from the abuser.

If the couple is separated, she may be stalked by her abuser. She needs to know who can protect her and how to contact legal

services.

Fifth, the church should address this important issue of domestic abuse. By speaking to this issue, we break the silence surrounding abuse and confront it with biblical principles. The church should hold batterers responsible for their actions. Intervention, confrontation, and tough love should be tools used to fight abuse in our communities.

If the batterer is a member of the church, then Matthew 18 provides a model for confronting “offenders” within the church. Galatians 5:22-25 talks about the fruit of the Spirit which includes kindness, gentleness, and self-control. These and many other verses provide a model for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Christians have an important role in dealing with abuse within our society.

Notes

1. Evan Stark and Ann Flitcraft, “Medical Therapy as Repression: The Case of the Battered Woman,” *Health and Medicine*, 1982, 29-32.
2. Maria Roy, “Children in the Crossfire,” *Health Communications*, 1988.
3. Judith McFarlane, “Abuse During Pregnancy: A Cross-Cultural Study of Frequency and Severity of Injuries,” *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Fact Sheet* (Denver, 1994).
4. Neil Jacobson and John Gottman, *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
5. A more detailed list can be found in Mary Marecek, *Breaking Free from Partner Abuse* (Buena Park, Calif: Morning Glory Press, 1999).
6. Andrea Lissette and Richard Kraus, *Free Yourself from an Abusive Relationship* (Alameda, Calif: Hunter House, 2000).
7. Eve Buzawa and Carl Buzawa, *Domestic Violence: The Criminal Justice Response* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications,

1996).

8. Mary Ann Dutton, "The Dynamics of Domestic Violence: Understanding the Response from Battered Women," *The Florida Bar Journal*, October 1994.

9. "Violence Against Women: Estimates from the Redesigned Survey, August 1995," *Report from the U.S. Justice Department* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1996).

10. Ibid.

11. Patricia Riddle Gaddis, *Battered But Not Broken* (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press, 1996).

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