

St. Augustine

Former Probe intern Tim Garrett explains that St. Augustine's The City of God and his Confessions reveal not only a brilliant mind, but demonstrate his abiding concern to announce God's righteousness in His dealings with man.

Who Was St. Augustine?

One of the most remarkable things about a close reading of Church history is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. In the New Testament we find that a man who called himself "the chief of sinners" due to his murderous hatred toward Christians was saved when Christ Himself appeared to him on the road to Damascus. What is clear from the account in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts is that it was not Saul who was seeking Christ: instead, it was Christ who was seeking Paul.

In modern times we see a similar situation in the life of C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy*, he recounts the night that he knelt to admit that God was God by calling himself "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." Like the Apostle Paul, we can see that Lewis was perfectly prepared to be an apologist for the faith, but that preparation occurred *before he ever became a Christian!* It is only after the fact that we see how God was actively seeking the sinner.

In this article we will examine another reluctant convert, a man whose life and ministry has been crucial to church history. His name was Aurelius Augustine: we know him as St. Augustine of Hippo. But until his conversion, Augustine was anything but a saint! Born in the year 354 in North Africa, Augustine was raised by a Christian mother and a pagan father. The father's main desire was that his son get a good education, while his mother constantly worried about her son's eternal destiny. Augustine indeed received a first class

education, but his mother was tormented by his indulgent lifestyle. Augustine became involved with a concubine at the age of seventeen, a relationship which lasted thirteen years and produced one son. Recognizing that sexual lust was competing with Christ for his affections, Augustine uttered the famous prayer "Make me chaste Lord . . . but not yet."

While sexual passion ruled his heart, Augustine sought wisdom with his mind. After suffering enormous internal conflicts, Augustine submitted himself to Christ at the age of thirty-two, and soon thereafter became Bishop of Hippo. Augustine became a tireless defender of the faith, diligent in his role as a shepherd to the flock as well as one of the greatest intellects the Church has ever known.

In this look at the life of Augustine we will focus on two of his greatest books—the *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. As we will see, Augustine's life and work is a testimony to the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Augustine's Youth

In a gripping television interview recently broadcast on *60 Minutes*, the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombings spoke of his grievances against the federal government. During the interview, Timothy McVeigh revealed that his lawyers have filed an appeal that maintains that pre-trial publicity prevented him from getting a fair trial. Like many of us, McVeigh seems intent on avoiding the penalty of his actions; but rather than doing so by insisting upon his innocence, he is attempting to have the verdict thrown out due to a technicality.

It was truly disturbing to see an articulate young man such as McVeigh coldly dismiss the mass murder of innocents on the basis of a legal technicality. In many respects, his demeanor reflects the contemporary shift in attitude toward sin and guilt that has had devastating consequences for society. As a

nation, America has seen a shift from a worldview primarily informed by biblical Christianity to one in which the individual is no longer responsible for his actions. Now it is either society or how one is raised that is given emphasis.

Against this cultural backdrop it is truly therapeutic to read Augustine's *Confessions*. Throughout this wonderful book, which is written in the form of a prayer, Augustine freely admits his willful disobedience to God. Augustine's intent is to reveal the perversity of the human heart, but specifically that of his own. But Augustine was not intent on just confessing his sinfulness: this book is also the confession of his faith in Christ as well. Augustine, as he is moved from a state of carnality to one of redemption, marvels at the goodness of God.

One of the most telling incidents in the *Confessions* is Augustine's recollection of a decisive event in his youth. He and an assortment of friends knew of a pear tree not far from his house. Even though the pears on the tree didn't appeal to Augustine, he and his friends were intent on stealing the pears simply for the thrill of it. They had no need of the pears, and in fact ending up throwing them to some pigs. Augustine's account of this thievery reveals a penetrating insight into our dilemma as human beings. Whereas today many want to blame their parents or their environment for their problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: he *enjoyed* his disobedience.

This reflects one of Augustine's major contributions to Christian theology: his emphasis on the perversity of the human will. We would all do well to read Augustine's *Confessions* if only to remind us that evil isn't simply a sickness but a condition of the heart that only Jesus Christ can heal.

Augustine's Search for Wisdom

In his fascinating book entitled *Degenerate Moderns*, author Michael Jones convincingly documents how many of the intellectual gurus of the modern era have conformed truth to their own desires. Jones research reveals how Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent trend-setters intentionally lied in their research in order to justify their own sexual immorality. Sadly, contemporary culture has swallowed their findings, leading many to conclude that sexual immorality is both normal and legitimate.

However, when we turn to Augustine's *Confessions*, we see someone who has subordinated his own desires to the truth. The *Confessions* is an account of how Augustine attempted to satisfy the longings of his heart with professional ambition, entertainment, and sex, yet remained unfulfilled. One of Augustine's most famous prayers is therefore the theme of the whole book: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God." Only by submitting his own desires to the Lordship of Christ did Augustine find the peace that he was seeking.

But that submission did not come easy. Throughout most of his adult life, Augustine had been seeking to discover wisdom. But two questions were especially disturbing for him: What is the source of evil, and How can a Being without physical properties exist? Obviously, this second question was a barrier to his belief in the God of the Bible. In his search for answers, Augustine became involved with a group known as the Manichees, who combined Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato. Plato's philosophy helped convince Augustine that existence did not require physical properties, but he found their answer to the question of evil problematic, and after eight years as a seeker left the Manichees.

Still, the most difficult barrier for Augustine was not intellectual, but a matter of the heart. He eventually came to

the point where he knew he should submit himself to Christ, but was reluctant to do so if it meant giving up his relationship with his concubine. One day, while strolling through a walled garden, Augustine heard from the other side of the wall what sounded like a child's voice, saying "pick up and read, pick up and read." At first he thought it was a children's game. Then, acknowledging what he took to be a command of the Lord, he picked up a nearby Bible, and upon opening it immediately came to Romans 13:13-14, words tailor made for Augustine: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine's search for wisdom was complete, as he acknowledged that wisdom is ultimately a *person*: Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God had satisfied his deepest longings.

Augustine's Philosophy of History: *The City of God*

The United States is currently going through what some call a "culture war." On the one hand there are those who believe in eternal truth and the importance of maintaining traditional morality. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the individual is autonomous and should be free to live as he pleases without anyone telling him what is right or wrong. Until thirty years ago the first group held sway. Today, that same group is considered divisive and extreme by the "politically correct" mainstream culture.

But culture wars are not unique to modern America. In the year 410, mighty Rome was sacked by an invading army of Goths. Soon thereafter, the search was on for a scapegoat. In the year 381 Christianity superceded the ancient religion of the Romans as *the* state religion. This enraged those who favored the old state religion, who claimed that Rome had gained world supremacy due to the favor of the ancient gods. When Rome officially accepted the Christian God and forsook the gods,

the gods were said to have withdrawn their favor and allowed the invading armies to breach the walls of Rome in order to demonstrate their anger at being replaced by the Christian God. Educated Romans found such an argument silly, but an even more serious charge was that Christians were disloyal to the state, since their allegiance was ultimately to God. Therefore, Christianity was blamed for a loss of patriotism since Christians believed themselves to ultimately be citizens of another kingdom³the Kingdom of God.

Augustine responded to these accusations by writing his philosophy of history in a book entitled *The City of God*. Augustine spent thirteen years researching and writing this work, which takes its title from Psalm 87:3: "Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of God." Augustine's main thesis is that there are two cities that place demands on our allegiance. 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.

For anyone interested in the current debate between secularists and the "Religious Right," Augustine's argument is a masterful combination of historical research and literary eloquence. Christians in particular would be well served by studying this important document, since believers are often accused of being divisive and extreme, characteristics considered by some as un-American.

In Augustine's time, it was asserted that the values of Christianity were not consistent with good Roman citizenship. But Augustine's historical investigation revealed that it is sin that is at the root of all our problems: starting with Cain's murder of Abel, the sin of Adam has borne terrible consequences.

Much of Augustine's task was to demonstrate the consequences of a society that loses its moral compass. Augustine took it upon himself to demonstrate the falsity of the assertion that the Christian worldview is incompatible with civic life. Those who maintained that the acceptance of Christian virtues had had a direct bearing on Rome's fall did so primarily from a very limited perspective. The clear implication was that Christianity, a religion that asks its adherents to love their neighbor and pray for their enemies, had fostered a society incapable of defending itself against its more vicious neighbors.

Augustine's response was to demonstrate that Rome had suffered through numerous catastrophes *long* before Christianity ever became the religion of the Romans. Actually, it was due to the respect of the Goths for Christianity that their attack wasn't worse than it was: they relented after only three days. Against those who claimed that Christians could not be loyal citizens due to their higher allegiance to God, Augustine reminded them that the Old and New Testament Scriptures actually *command* obedience to the civil authorities. And any assertion that Christianity had weakened the defense of the empire failed to acknowledge the real cause of Rome's collapse, namely that Rome's moral degeneracy had created a society where justice was no longer valued. Augustine quotes the Roman historians as themselves recognizing the brutality at the very root of the nation, beginning with Romulus' murder of his brother Remus.

Augustine's analysis came to conclude that the virtues of Christianity are most consistent with good citizenship, and then went on to show the biblical distinction between the founding of Rome and that of the City of God. Just as Rome's origins date back to the dispute between Romulus and Remus, the City of God had its origin in the conflict between Cain and Abel. The City of Man and the City of God have intermingled ever since, and only at the final judgment of

Christ will “the tares be separated from the wheat.” For Augustine, the ultimate meaning of history will be borne out only when each one of us acknowledges who it was that we loved most: ourselves, or God.

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What Do I Say Now?

“True for You, But Not For Me”

Since the church began, objections have been raised to the faith. They have varied according to the beliefs and mindset of the day. To be effective in taking a stand for the truth, Christians have had to know the current questions and objections. Maybe youve heard some of the more common objections today such as “Jesus never claimed to be God,” or, “What gives *you* the right to say other peoples morals are wrong?” Or how about, “That might be true for you, but its not true for me.” Sometimes these objections are well thought out, but often they sound more like slogans, catch-phrases the non-believer has heard but to which he or she probably hasnt given much thought.

If objections such as these have brought an abrupt end to any of your conversations because you werent sure how to respond, a book published last year might be just what you need. The title is *“True For You, But Not For Me”: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless*, and it was written by Paul Copan, an associate with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Copans goal in this book is to provide responses for Christians who find themselves stumped by the objections of critics. To that end he deals with objections in such areas

as knowledge of truth, morality, the uniqueness of Christ, and the hope of those who've never heard the Gospel.

In this article, I'll pull out a few of these objections and give brief answers, some from Copan, and some of my own.

Before doing that, however, I need to make an important point. If non-believers are doing nothing more than sloganeering by hurling objections that they really don't understand, rattling off memorized answers that we don't understand, Christians can be guilty of the same behavior of our opponents. Even though the objections might sound recorded, our answers needn't. Thus, I strongly suggest that you get a copy of Copan's book or obtain some other books on apologetics which will fill in the gaps left by our discussion.

Relativism

Let's begin with a brief look at the issue of relativism and what it means for discussions about Christianity.

Relativism shows itself primarily in matters of truth and morality. When we say that truth is relative, we mean that it differs according to the times, or to particular circumstances, or to differing tastes and interests. It is the denial that objective truth exists; that is, truth that applies to all people and for all time. Now, most people will probably agree that there is truth in matters of scientific fact, but with respect to religion and morality, each person is said to have his or her own truth. Such things are matters of opinion at best, and are true only relative to particular individuals.

The implications of this are enormous. Evangelism, or the effort to persuade people to believe that the Gospel is true, is prohibited.^{1} The claim to have *the* truth about a person's relationship with God is considered arrogant or elitist. Tolerance becomes the "cardinal virtue."^{2} The rule seems to

be this: Follow your own heart, and dont interfere with anyone following his or hers.

These are problems which relativism produces in dealing with others. But what about our own Christianity? If truth isnt fixed, maybe I should just drop all this Christian business when it becomes inconvenient.

Relativism with Respect to Knowledge

Lets consider the objection represented in the title of Copans book: that is, “Well, that may be true for *you*, but its not for *me*.” Here the non-believer is essentially saying that its okay for you to adopt Christianity if you choose– that it can be *your* truth. But as far as hes concerned, he has not chosen to believe it– for whatever reasons– so it isnt true for him.

This objection would make better sense if the critic said, “Christianity is *meaningful* for you, but it isnt for me.” Or, “Christianity might *work* for you, but it doesnt for me.” These are reasonable objections and invite serious discussion about the meaning of Christ for every individual and how Christianity “works” in our lives. But the objection voiced is that Christianity is *true* for some people, but not for others. How can that be? Truth is that which is real or statements about what is really the case. “True for you, but not for me” can only be a valid idea if truth is relative to persons, times, circumstances, or places.

The Christian should question the person about this. Does he believe that truth is relative? If so, then hes actually undercutting his own claims. You see, the statement, “It may be true for you, but its not for me,” becomes relative as well. No statement the person makes can be considered a fixed truth that everyone– even the relativist– should believe. So, our first response might be to point out that, based upon his own relativistic views, anything *he* says is relative; its truth-status might change tomorrow. So theres no reason for

anyone to take it seriously.{3}

On a deeper level we can point out that if theres no objective, fixed truth, all meaningful conversation will grind to a halt. If nothing a person says can be taken as true or false in the normal sense, the listener wont know if the speaker really means what he says. What would be the value, for example, of reading the cautions on a bottle of pills if the meaning and truth of the words arent set? Trying to communicate ideas when truth and meaning fluctuate like the stock market is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. Theres no way to get hold of any idea with which to agree or disagree.

The non-believer might object that not all matters are relative, only matters of religion and morality. However, the burden is on the *relativist* to prove that matters of religion and morality *are* relative, for it isnt obvious that this is so. Why should these matters be treated differently with respect to truth than others? The fact that one cant debate morality on the basis of evidences as one would, say, a scientific issue doesnt mean that the truth about it cant be known. More important, however, is the fact that Christianity in particular is tied very tightly to historical events which *are* matters of fact.

Christianity cant be true for one person but not for another. Either it is true— and all should believe— or it isnt— and it should be discarded.

Moral Relativism

Lets turn our attention to objections regarding morality. One objection we hear is similar to one weve already discussed about truth. Non-believers will say, “Your values might be right for you, but they arent for me.”{4}

First, we need to understand the historic Christian view of

morality. According to Scripture, morals are grounded in God. As God is unchanging, so also is His morality. As Paul Copan notes, such morals are discovered, not invented.{5} They are objective; they do not come from within you or me, but are true completely apart from us.

Having abandoned God as the standard for morality and replaced Him with ourselves, some say there is no objective morality. When told that a certain individual believed that morality is a sham, Samuel Johnson responded, "Why sir, if he really believes there is no distinction between virtue and vice, let us count our spoons before he leaves." {6} Johnsons quip doesnt prove that morals are objective, but it indicates how well have to live if they arent. If matters of morality are relative, how can we trust anything another person says about moral issues? For example, if a person says that you can trust him to hold your money for you because he is honest, how do you know whether what he means by "honest" is what *you* mean by it? And how can you be sure he wont decide once he has your money that honesty isnt such a good policy after all? Such a situation would be "existentially (or practically) unworkable." {7}

Paul Copan argues that we know intuitively that some things are wrong for everyone. Ask the non-believer if torture, slave labor, and rape are okay for some people. Ask him if there is a moral distinction between the labors of the late Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler. Or press him even further and ask how he would respond if he were arrested and beaten for no reason, or if someone pounded his car with a sledgehammer. {8} Would he feel better knowing that the perpetrators found personal fulfillment in such activities? Or would he cry "Unfair!"?

Some non-believers are willing to concede that within a given society there must be moral standards in order for people to live together in peace. However, theyll say, differences between *cultures* are legitimate. Thus, theyll complain, "Who

are *you* to say another cultures values are wrong?"[\[9\]](#) One culture has no right to force its morality on another.

But is it true that moral standards are culturally relative? Or perhaps the better question should be, Is it really likely that the non-believer believes this himself? You might recall the Womens Conference in Beijing several years ago. Representatives from all over the world gathered to plan strategies for gaining rights for women who were being oppressed. Could a cultural relativist support such a conference? Its hard to see how. Cultural relativism leaves a society with its hands tied in the face of atrocities committed by people of other cultures. But as we have noted before, we know intuitively that some things are wrong, not just for me or my culture but for all peoples and all cultures. To take a firm stand against the immoral acts of individuals or cultures one needs the foundation of moral absolutes.

Religious Pluralism

Christians today, especially on college campuses, are free to believe as they please and practice their Christianity as they wish . . . as long as they arent foolish enough to actually say out loud that they believe that Jesus is the only way to God. Nothing brings on the wrath of non-believers and invites insults and name- calling like claims for the exclusivity of Christ.

Religious pluralism is in vogue today. Many people believe either that religions are truly different but equally valid since no one really knows the truth about ultimate realities. Others believe that the adherents of at least all the major religions are really worshipping the same "Higher Being;" they just call him (or it) by different names. Religions are superficially different, they believe, but essentially the same.

Lets look at a couple of objections stemming from a pluralistic mindset.

One objection is that "Christianity is arrogant and imperialistic"[{10}](#) for presenting itself as the only way. Of course, Christians can act in an arrogant and imperialistic manner, and in such cases they deserve to be called down. But this objection often arises simply as a response to the claim of exclusivity regardless of the Christians manner. The only way this claim could be arrogant, however, is if there are indeed competing religions or philosophies which are equally valid. So, to make a valid point, the critic needs to prove that Christianity isnt what it claims to be.

As Copan notes, it can just as easily be the *critic* who is arrogant. Pluralists who reinterpret religious beliefs to suit their pluralism are in effect telling Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc., what it is they *really* believe. Like the king of Benares who knows that the blind men are really touching an elephant when they *think* they are touching a wall or a rope or something else, the pluralist believes he or she knows what all the adherents of the major world religions dont. The pluralist must have a view of truth that others dont. *That* is arrogance.[{11}](#)

Youve probably heard this objection to the exclusive claims of Christ: "If you grew up in India, youd be a Hindu."[{12}](#) The assertion is that we only believe what we do because thats the way we were brought up. This argument commits what is called the genetic fallacy. It tries to explain away a belief or idea based upon its source. But as Copan says, "What if we tell a Marxist or a conservative Republican that if he had been raised in Nazi Germany, he would have belonged to the Hitler Youth? He will probably agree but ask what your point is."[{13}](#) The same argument, in fact, could be turned back on the pluralist to explain *his* belief in pluralism! Copan quotes Alvin Plantinga who says, "Pluralism isnt and hasnt been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had

been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldn't have been a pluralist. Does it follow that he shouldn't be a pluralist. . . ?" [\[14\]](#) The pluralist, in today's relativistic climate, is just as apt to be going along with the beliefs of *his* culture. So why should we believe *him*?

The Uniqueness of Christ

The idea that Jesus is the only way to God has always been a stumbling block for non-Christians. Let's consider two specific objections stemming from this claim.

Even people who have made no commitment to Christ as Lord hold Him in very high regard. Jesus is usually at or near the top of lists of the greatest people who ever lived. But as odd as it seems, people find a way to categorize Jesus so that they can regard Him as one of the greatest humans ever to have lived while rejecting His central teachings! Thus, one way to deflect the Christian message isn't so much an outright rejection of the faith as it is a reduction of it. Thus, a slogan often heard is "Jesus is just like any other great religious leader." [\[15\]](#)

One has to wonder, however, how a man can be considered only a great religious teacher (or to have a high level of "God-consciousness", as some say) who made the kinds of claims Jesus did, or who did the works that He did. Consider the claims He made for Himself: that He could forgive sins, that He would judge the world, that He and the Father are one. None of the other great religious teachers made such claims. Furthermore, none of the others rose from the dead to give credence to what He taught.

A favorite objection to arguments for the deity of Christ is that Jesus never said, "I am God". [\[16\]](#) But does the fact that there is no record of Him saying those exact words mean that He didn't see Himself as such?

What reasons do we have for believing Jesus was divine? Here are a few.[{17}](#) He claimed to have a unique relationship to the Father (John 20:17). He accepted the title "The Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" (Mark 14:61-62). He identified Himself with the Son of Man in Daniels prophecies who was understood to be the Messiah, the special one sent from God (Matt. 26:64, Dan. 7:13). He spoke on His own authority as though Gods commands were His own (Mark 1:27). He claimed to forgive sins which is something only God can do (Mark 2:1-12). He called for devotion to *Himself*, not just to God (Matt. 10:34-39). He identified Himself with the "I Am" of the Old Testament (John 8:57-59). As Copan notes, "Jesus didnt need to explicitly assert his divinity because his words and deeds and self-understanding assumed his divine status."[{18}](#)

If this is so, why didnt Jesus plainly say, "I am God"? There are several possible reasons. First, He came to minister to the Jews first. Being so strongly monotheistic, they would have killed Jesus the first time He referred to Himself as God. Second, "God" is a term mostly reserved for the Father. It serves to highlight His authority even over the second Person of the Trinity. Third, Jesus humanity was just as important as His deity. To refer to Himself as God would have caused His deity to overshadow His humanity. Remember that the Incarnation was a new and strange thing. It was something that most people had to be eased into. Conclusion

Although Christians cant be expected to have satisfactory answers to all the possible objections people can throw our way, with a little study we can learn some sound responses to some of the clichéd objections of our day. Phrases little understood and tossed out in a knee-jerk fashion can still have a profound influence upon us. We need to recognize them and defuse them.

If you still think youd like more ammunition, get a copy of Paul Copans book. Youll be glad you did.

Notes

Paul Copan, *"True For You, But Not For Me": Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 21.

1. Ibid., 21.

2. Ibid., 24.

3. Ibid., 44.

4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 47.

8. Ibid., 48.

9. Ibid., 78.

10. Ibid., 80.

11. Ibid., 82.

12. Ibid., 83.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 107-09.

15. Ibid., 115.

16. Ibid., 115-118.

17. Ibid., 119.

Culture Wars

America at (Culture) War

Americans are highly polarized when it comes to issues of morality and social norms. We feel our collective blood pressure rise as we read the daily paper or watch the news on television. We all feel the tension caused by problems like teen pregnancies, abortion, crime, poverty, and political corruption. Factions from across the political spectrum respond with social programs and ideals that, if instituted, they are sure would make America a better place for all to live. However, the problem is that these programs or ideals are often in direct conflict with each other, presupposing very different assumptions about human nature. To highlight these differences, consider the following events.

In the early '90s the American Civil Liberty Union informed members of the California State Assembly's Education Committee that they were opposed to a bill the committee was considering. The bill, which called for traditional values in school curricula, was offensive to the ACLU because it would mandate that students be taught that monogamous, heterosexual relations solely within marriage is a traditional American value. The ACLU argued that this would be an "unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools."¹ They went on to contend that the bill was an obvious violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, a private school in Georgia asked a student to either change his behavior or leave the school. This, in

itself, is not a rare event. However, the student wasn't a discipline problem and he wasn't failing academically. In fact, he was popular and liked by many on campus. The problem was that he was cross-dressing. He dressed and behaved as a woman and was accepted by many students as a female. When the student chose to leave the school instead of changing his attire, the school's drama teacher remarked, "I really think that we all lost something precious that night." {2}

To many Americans, the ACLU's action in the first incident is incomprehensible. It seems reasonable, healthy, and obvious for schools to implement a "traditional values" model for sex education. Those on the side of the ACLU find it just as incomprehensible that anyone would see their position as unreasonable or unusual. Some might find the expulsion of the cross-dressing student to be grossly unfair, while most parents would wonder why the school took so long to act.

Regardless of your perspective, everyone agrees that Americans find themselves with deep differences on a number of fundamental issues that govern our daily affairs. Unfortunately, these deep differences have led some Americans to bomb a government building, shoot abortion doctors, or burn down a mountain top ski resort in order to further their cause.

This article will spotlight the culture war we find ourselves in and consider what a biblical response might be. Although few Christians fail to see the conflict in our society, particularly in our schools, they are far from united as to what our response should be. However, from a historical perspective, times of cultural disruption are often a great opportunity for the church, if it is being all that God desires it to be.

Orthodox vs. Progressive

Leaders of all political persuasions have taken note of the

culture war that is engulfing our nation. To begin clarifying the issue, we will consider the contribution of two books that have helped to define the conflict for many religious and cultural conservatives: James Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* and William Bennett's *The De-Valuing of America*. Bennett argues that the battle over our culture is being fought between what he calls the liberal elite and the rest of society. The elite are "found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media."^{3} He feels that they are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters and opinion makers. Differing from traditional elite groups in American history, Bennett argues that these people reject the traditional bourgeois emphasis on work, frugality, sexual restraint, and self-control."^{4} As evidence for the existence of this elite, he refers to studies done by Stanley Rothman with Robert and Linda Richter. Their work portrays a media aristocracy that votes as a block for liberal candidates and on issues like abortion, gay rights, and the environment.^{5}

Bennett adds that this elite is marked by a wholesale rejection of American ideals, a calling into question of what has been known as the American dream.^{6} Evidence is not as significant as ideology for the elite. Their approach is "one of vindication, not investigation."^{7} If the middle class and the Republicans are for something, this group will instinctively be against it.

Hunter's approach to defining the warring camps is subtler and, I feel, more accurate. He would argue that there is an elite on both sides of the culture war. On the one hand is what he calls the "orthodox" group. They have a commitment to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. From an evangelical perspective this is the God of the Bible. He is a

consistent and unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity. Hunter would also include Jews and others who hold to a definable, unchanging, absolute authority.

Opposing this group are the “progressives.” Progressives are defined by the ideals of modernism, rationalism, and subjectivism. To these people truth is more a process than a constant authority. It is an unfolding reality rather than an unchanging revelation. What is interesting about the progressives is that they often hold on to the religious heritage of the orthodox, but reinterpret its meaning for modern consumption. For instance, to a gay progressive, Christ came not to free us from the penalty of sin, but to free gays from the constraints of society. Although many progressives discard religion altogether, those who claim the Christian tradition have usually adopted a liberation theology, liberating the individual from any obligation other than to love each other in a very vague sense. To love each other seems to mean allowing people do whatever is expedient in their lives.

The real difference between the “orthodox” and the “progressives” is at the faith level. Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian or not is not nearly as important as what kind of reality they place their faith in. Hunter believes that the culture war is a war of worldviews, and that these worldviews cause us to see the world differently. How then should a Christian, one who places his faith in the sacrificial death of Christ as an atoning payment for his sins, respond to this culture war?

The Angry Christian

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the secular world Christians are often seen as angry, intolerant people. At school board meetings, outside abortion clinics, even at the funeral of a homosexual who was murdered because of his lifestyle,

Christians are there to angrily condemn sin and its perpetrators. It is almost as if Christians are surprised by sin and feel that their only response is to point people to the law of God. As a result, many outside the church see Christianity as a religion of law, similar to most other world religions. This is a tragedy.

Although understandable, I don't believe that we are called as Christians to respond to the culture war in anger, especially anger directed at people. Although the wrath of God is evident in both the Old and New Testaments, condemnation of human anger is also present in each. Near the very beginning of human culture, God warns Cain about his anger and downcast face. Instead of seeking to do what was right, Cain was angry with God and his situation (Gen. 4:6-7). The wisdom literature of Proverbs teaches us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," and "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated" (Prov. 14:17, 15:1).

In the New Testament, Paul condemns "hatred" and "fits of rage" immediately before listing the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. James 1:19-20 is fairly straightforward in arguing that, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Jesus set an extraordinarily high standard against anger and hatred in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is speaking to the root cause of much evil in any society: an angry, unforgiving heart.

Some may respond that righteous indignation, or anger against sin is merely emulating Christ. After all, Jesus cleared the

Temple with a whip and violently overturned the moneylender's tables. Are we not allowed the same righteous indignation? I think not, especially if we take seriously God's admonition to let Him be in charge of judgment and vengeance (Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul tells us to feed our enemy if he is hungry, give him drink if he is thirsty, and to overcome evil by doing good (Rom. 12:20-21). The difference between Jesus' righteous indignation and our anger is that Jesus, being God, has the right to judge, and being perfectly righteous His judgment is perfect. He knows the hearts of men and has no bias other than holiness itself. On the other hand, we are often most angry when our personal comfort is disturbed. To the watching world, Christians become the most interested in politics when their personal wealth or comfort is at stake.

I don't believe that God is calling His people to anger in America. We bring a message of grace to the lost, not a message of law.

Apathy

Many Christians have been active in the culture war since the early '80s. With the rise of conservative politics and the family values movement, Christians joined the Republican party in droves and joined numerous organizations in order to help fight against the moral decline of the nation. Given the popularity of the current Democratic President and what appears, in many ways, to be a rejection of the conservative moral agenda, it is tempting for many to simply retreat from activism all together.

Some Christians never did get engaged in a counter-cultural sense. In fact, an early evangelical leader in culture war activity, Francis Schaeffer, warned that most Christians were more concerned with personal peace and affluence than about having an impact in their society.^{8} He was concerned that as the Christian- dominated consensus weakened, these two values would grow in their place. The picture of society we are left

with is one in which people's lives are consumed by things, buying two SUV's and a nice big house in the suburbs, with a nice tall fence, color TV (a big color TV), and remote. These people do not want to know about the suffering in our urban ghettos or about the plight of Christians in other countries. They want their lives to be unimpeded by the turmoil experienced by less affluent people.

Is it wrong to have a nice house and cars? No, it isn't. But neither is it the ultimate purpose to which our Lord has called us. Gathering nice things should not be motivating our daily activities. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He responded that we are to first, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), and second, love our neighbor as ourselves. For Christians, success in this life should be measured against these two goals. The rest of revelation, both the written Word and the life of Christ, gives us a picture of what this means in both the general culture and within the church. Christ gave us the Great Commission, to go into all nations making disciples and teaching what He taught (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul talks about us being living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds so that we will know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

To be indifferent about sin is to not love God; this form of apathy is incompatible with true Christian faith. However, to be indifferent about suffering in the world is equally incompatible with our faith. To ignore oppression and hatred reveals a lack of love for our neighbors. Too often Christians only seem to get excited when their rights, whether property or religious, are threatened. This makes a mockery of our Lord's words when He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Romans 12 Paul talks about blessing those who persecute you, and if it is possible, to be at peace with everyone around you.

Hebrews 12 tells us to throw off everything that entangles us, everything that keeps us from running the race marked out for us by Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Him, who endured the cross because its joyous result would be a redeemed people of God.

Ambassadors For Christ

When thinking about how to respond to the culture war in America, or in any culture, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we are trying to accomplish? In the language of real war, What are our tactical and strategic goals? Some might respond that we are here to fight sin, to rid our society of the evils of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, drug abuse, political corruption, etc. There are Christians who claim that our primary cultural objective is to reinstate the law of Moses by taking control of the government and using its legal authority to impose a moral society on the population. However, this does not appear to be the plan revealed to us in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul details the role we are to play in America or in any country we might live in. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, and our message is one of reconciliation with God. There are many religions pushing a message of law; Islam, Judaism, and most Eastern religions all focus on the works people must do in order to please God or the gods. They focus on how humanity must reform itself to gain God's favor. Christianity's message is grace, and as Christ's ambassadors we proclaim that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ by making "Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God is making the righteousness of Christ available to sinners; salvation is the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our personal account, thus satisfying the judgment of a holy God against our personal sins.

What about social activism, what about politics? Do we just

share the gospel and ignore the problems facing our nation? No, we are to be salt and light in a decaying world. However, our trust is not in politics, which can only change a nations laws and to a lesser degree its peoples behavior. Even if abortion ended tomorrow, if every homosexual became heterosexual, and if drugs and pornography were things of the past, people without Christ would still be lost in their sins.

The role of an ambassador is a complex one. He or she must be intimately familiar with the nature of their sovereign's kingdom. Christians must seek to know God and His message in a way that can be communicated to the culture they live in. Unfortunately, Christians often know the message, but have a difficult time communicating it in a way that the surrounding culture understands, and in a way that answers the questions being asked by that society. Stating the gospel accurately and in a meaningful manner is central to being an effective ambassador for Christ.

If we are to respond to the culture war by being ambassadors for Christ, then the vitality of the church becomes far more important than controlling the White House or Congress. Understanding how to communicate the gospel of Christ becomes infinitely more valuable than having the most potent political strategy. Being faithful to Christ in this way builds Gods kingdom on earth and results in common grace as more and more believers participate in every aspect of our culture.

Notes

1. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 310.
2. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 October 1998, 7A.
3. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994).
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Bennett, 12.

7. Ibid.

8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How then Shall We Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 205.

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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 www.xenos.org.

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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Sexual Purity – A Biblical Worldview Perspective Remains Truth

Dr. Bohlin uses a passage from Proverbs to provide us insight into the importance of sexual purity for our age. This important biblical worldview concept is still valid today even in this age where sexual promiscuity is trumpeted from the media.

Medical Reasons for Sexual Purity

As our society prepares to enter the 21st century, one trend and long-time staple of our culture looms ever larger on the horizon. The places to which one can escape in order to avoid sexual temptation continue to shrink. Children cannot be allowed to roam unsupervised through the neighborhood video stores because of the racks of videos with alluring covers of scantily clad exercisers and playmates of the year. The aisles

of popular new releases contain images from R-rated movies that were only found in skin magazines thirty years ago. A trip to the grocery store can take you past the book aisle with suggestive covers on romance novels which contain graphic descriptions of sexual encounters. Billboards for beer, cars, and movies all use sex to sell. Radio stations readily play songs today that were banned from the airwaves decades ago. A trip to the mall takes you past stores with only sex to sell. Your home is invaded with sexually explicit images over even the free non-cable channels and your home computer. Unwelcome mail enters your home selling well-known sex magazines that continue to earn millions of dollars every year.

From the moment Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness, sexual temptation has been in our midst. But except for brief periods in declining cultures, the temptations had to be sought after. There were places where one could be relatively safe from the sights and sounds which inflame lust and desire. Those days are over. Oh, sure, you can have blocks installed on your computer or phone and the local video store will allow you to put a screen on your children's rentals. But the fact that such systems are necessary and only voluntary should be enough to tell us of the pervasiveness of sex in our society. Sexual purity is a rare and often scorned virtue today. When a Hollywood couple makes it known that they are saving sex for marriage, people ask, "Why would you do that?"

While sex is clearly pervasive in our society, you don't have to look very far to find plenty of reasons to avoid sexual relations outside of marriage. The biblical words for *fornication* or *sexual immorality* refer to all sexual activity outside of marriage, and the Scriptures clearly state that all such activity is forbidden (Lev. 18 & 20; Matt. 15:19; 1 Cor. 6:9-10,18; 1 Thess. 4:3). But a person may rationalize that while sexual activity outside of marriage is sin, "I can always be forgiven for my sin, and as long as I am not found out, who gets hurt?" Paul answers this resoundingly in Romans

6. "May it never be!" cries the apostle. By allowing sin to reign in our hearts we effectively say that Christ's death and resurrection has no power in our life.

If this is not powerful enough, consider the physical consequences of sexual immorality that exist today. In the 1960s there were only two STDs: syphilis and gonorrhea. Today there are over 25, and 1 in 5 Americans between the ages of 15 and 55 has a viral STD. That number is 1 in 4 if bacterial infections are included. There are 12 million new infections every year with 60 percent of these among teenagers.

Chlamydia and gonorrhea can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease which often results in sterility. Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) frequently produces genital warts which can develop into cancer. Rampant HPV infection is the primary reason that women are urged to have Pap smears on a yearly basis. If you are sexually active outside of marriage and "lucky," you may only contract herpes, but even this is an embarrassing, bothersome, incurable infection. But you may get AIDS, which will kill you. Since the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) can lie dormant for years before developing into deadly AIDS, your sex partner may not know that he or she is infected. The fact is, if you are sexually active outside of marriage, it is almost guaranteed that you will contract at least one STD.

But information is not enough. Why is sexual purity within marriage so important to God? And what do we do to avoid falling into sexual sin with so much temptation swirling around our heads? We will now turn to explore some time tested advice from Scripture to see what we must do and why.

The Naturalistic Rejection of the Mystical Nature of Marriage

In his book *Reason in the Balance*, Phillip Johnson brilliantly documents the vise grip of philosophical naturalism in

science, law, and education in the United States. Our populace has been taught for so long that matter, energy, space, and time are all that exists that it has infected every form of cultural discourse, including our sexual behavior. Freedom of choice and personal fulfillment are praised as the ultimate virtues because, for the naturalist, sex is just a physical act that fulfills a basic need and instinct of every person. People should be free to pursue whatever sexual expression they choose to meet that basic physiological need. And this need is only created by our fundamental drive to reproduce and spread our genes into the next generation. In the naturalistic worldview, sex becomes simply a basic need and marriage just a relative cultural expression to satisfy that need for some, but not all people.

That is why so many people, including Christians, look at Scripture's clear statements condemning sex outside of marriage as antiquated and old-fashioned. "Oh," they say, "they applied to the people of that time, but not now. Not as we prepare to enter the 21st century!" But this raises some important questions. First, do the Scriptural injunctions against any sex outside of marriage really apply today? The answer, of course, is, "Yes, they do." We recognize readily what the Bible has to say about sex, and we see all about us the physical, emotional, and relational consequences of sexual immorality. Since God is sovereign, He established these consequences as warning signs not to transgress His principles. But second, just why is sexual fidelity so important to God?

The first reason is because God's intentions for marriage were clearly stated right from the beginning. Genesis 2:18-25 makes it plain that God's design was one man and one woman for life. Jesus used this passage as the basis for His teaching on divorce in Matthew 19: "What God has joined together, let no man break apart." As Creator, God has every right to tell us what He wants.

Second, the Father has used the marriage union as an analogy for His relationship with Israel in the Old Testament and the church's relationship with Jesus in the New Testament. Isaiah 1:21, Jeremiah 2:20, 3:1-10, and especially Ezekiel 16:15-34 accuse Israel of playing the harlot, chasing after other gods and ignoring her rightful "husband." God's union with Israel was to be forever. He was faithful, but Israel was not. The Lord rained down His judgment on the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah. In Ephesians 5 Paul tells husbands that they are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Elsewhere, Jesus is spoken of as the bridegroom and the church as His bride, another relationship that is to be forever. Jesus will be faithful. Will the church? Our marital and sexual relationships are to mirror the Lord's special relationships with Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New. God hates divorce and any sexual relationships outside of marriage, because He hates it when His faithfulness to us is spurned by our turning to other gods. This is true whether they be the pagan gods of old, which are still around, or the modern gods of self, money, power, and sex.

Well, we may know what is right, but knowing what is right is often not the same as doing what is right. Now, I want to look at a passage in Proverbs that instructs its readers concerning dangers, both obvious and subtle, of sexual temptation.

A Young Man Lacking Sense Meets a Harlot

It is hard for some to imagine that the Bible contains explicit advice on how to avoid sexual temptation. But the entire chapter of Proverbs 7 is devoted to exactly that. In the first five verses, Solomon essentially pleads with his son to listen and guard his words carefully concerning the adulteress.

My son, keep my words,
And treasure my commandments within you.

Keep my commandments and live,

(sounds like serious stuff!)

And my teaching as the apple of your eye.

(actually the "pupil" or "little man of your eye." This was meant therefore to be a precious truth to be closely guarded and kept.)

Solomon goes on in verse 3:

Bind them on your fingers;

Write them on the tablet of your heart.

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"

And call understanding your intimate friend.

That they may keep you from an adulteress,

From the foreigner who flatters with her words.

In verses 6-9, King Solomon takes the role of an observer, telling his son what he sees unfolding before him.

For at the window of my house,

I looked out through my lattice,

And I saw among the naive,

I discerned among the youths,

A young man lacking sense.

Passing through the street near her corner;

And he takes the way to her house.

In the twilight, in the evening,

In the middle of the night and in the darkness.

Solomon speaks of one who is young, inexperienced, and lacking judgment. His first clue was that he purposefully walks down her street and actually heads straight to her house in the middle of the night. As Charlie Brown would say, "Good grief!" The young man's intent is probably harmless. He is curious, perhaps hoping for a glimpse of the adulteress plying her

wares to someone else on the street. Sin is probably not on his mind. He just wants to see what the real world is like. That kind of thinking is still heard today. "I just need to know what is out there so I can warn my family and others around me." In reality, our young fool was looking for titillation and was confident that he could withstand the temptation.

This is precisely why Solomon says he is lacking sense. The apostle Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Overconfidence is our worst enemy in the face of temptation. I am reminded of two contrasting characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Boromir and Faramir. Boromir and Faramir were brothers. Boromir, the elder, was renowned for his exploits in war. He was his father's favorite and the principal heir. He was confident, however, that were he to wield the One Ring, the Ring of Power, he would not be corrupted by it and could use it to defeat the armies of the evil Sauron. However, his overconfidence and lust for power lead him to attempt to steal the ring from the designated Ring-bearer. His foolishness caused the Fellowship of the Ring to be split apart under attack and led eventually to his death. He thought he could stand, but he fell.

His brother Faramir, however, had a more realistic picture of his sinful nature. When confronted later with the same opportunity to see and even hold the Ring, he refused. He knew the temptation would be strong and that the best way not to yield to the lust for power was to keep the temptation as far away as possible. Faramir, though perceived to be weaker than his brother, was, in a sense, actually the wiser and stronger of the two. He took heed and did not fall and later played a significant role in the final victory over the forces of evil.

What about you? Do you consider yourself strong enough to resist the temptations presented in movies, books, commercials, etc.? Do you walk into the movie theater blindly,

lacking sense, uninformed as to why this movie is R-rated or even PG-13? Are you a headstrong Boromir, or a wise Faramir who knows his weakness in the face of temptation and avoids it whenever possible?

The Schemes of the Adulteress

As we continue in our walk through Proverbs 7, Solomon now focuses his attention on the schemes of the seductress. Our young man lacking sense is walking down her street, right past her house. Solomon continues in verse 10:

And behold, a woman comes to meet him,
Dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart.

She is boisterous and rebellious;
Her feet do not remain at home;

She is now in the streets, now in the squares,
And lurks by every corner.

Wow! What a surprise! A woman comes to meet him! Can't you just hear Gomer Pyle exclaiming at the top of his lungs, "Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!" Surprise, indeed! This is only what was expected. Her boisterousness lends an air of fun and frivolity. Let's face it, if sin weren't so enjoyable we wouldn't fall prey to it so easily. Solomon next gives the impression that she is everywhere to be found. As I pointed out earlier, that is even more true today. Even a widely proclaimed family movie like *Forrest Gump* surprised many with scenes that were unnecessary and sexually explicit. If you were surprised, you shouldn't have been. Check these things out beforehand. Don't act like a young man lacking sense and wander down the street of temptation unaware. Remember that Jesus extended the moral law from our actions to our thought life. If we simply lust after a woman, we have already committed adultery in our hearts (Matt. 5:27-28).

Solomon next turns to the woman's tactics:

So she seizes him and kisses him,
(Suddenness can put you off your guard unless you have predecided what you would do, whether it is a real seduction, a scene in a movie, TV program, or book. Will you close your eyes, leave, change channels, skip a few pages? What? Know beforehand!)

And with a brazen face she says to him:
"I was due to offer peace offerings;
Today I have paid my vows.
(I'm not such a bad person. See, I do a lot of the same things you do. You're not going to reject and judge me, are you?)

Therefore I have come out to meet you,
To seek your presence earnestly, and I have found you."

Ah, the ultimate weapon with a man: female flattery. Men are suckers when they're told that they are needed. It was he, particularly, that she was waiting for. Not just anybody. If a man senses he is needed, he will be very reluctant to say no. Men usually hate to disappoint.

Solomon continues:

"I have spread my couch with coverings,
With colored linens of Egypt.

I have sprinkled my bed
With myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.

Come, let us drink our fill of love until morning;
Let us delight ourselves with caresses."

As she continues her assault on the male ego by indicating all the trouble she has gone through just for him ("Don't hurt my feelings now," she says), she creates a sensual picture that is meant to arouse him and draw him in. Be realistic. This sounds inviting, even from the pages of Scripture. This should be a loud tornado siren in your ear to tell you: "There, but

for the grace of God, go I!" The adulteress finishes her seduction with the assurance that no one need ever know, in verses 19 and 20. She says:

"For the man is not at home,
He has gone on a long journey;

He has taken a bag of money with him,
At the full moon he will come home."

This rationalization of "no one will know" is true not only of an affair, but also of what we allow into our minds through the privacy of our computer, videos rented when no one else is home, magazines stashed away in a secret place, or visits to parts of town where we certainly don't expect to find anyone we know. But it's a lie. These things cannot be hidden for a lifetime. Either you will slip up sooner or later, or you will poison your mind to such an extent that the outward temptation can no longer be resisted. Moses speaks to Israel in Numbers 32:23 warning them that if they do not obey the Lord, "their sin will find them out."

The Young Man Capitulates and Must Face the Consequences

As we have seen, the young man in Proverbs 7 has walked right into temptation's snare and has been totally mesmerized by the pleas and schemes of the adulteress. I have made many parallels to today as to how prevalent sexual temptation is. Now we will see the young man's demise and the consequences of his actions. Beginning in verse 21:

With her many persuasions she entices him;
With her flattering lips she seduces him.

Suddenly he follows her,
(*probably as if in a trance*)
As an ox goes to the slaughter,

(silently and dumbly)

Or as a stag goes into a trap,

Until an arrow pierces through his liver,

As a bird hastens to the snare,

(again blindly and without knowledge)

So he does not know that it will cost him his life.

He capitulates without a word, mesmerized by her seduction. The analogy to the ox, the deer, and the bird point out that each of them walk blindly, silently, and unknowingly to their death. So it is with the young man lacking sense. While he will not die in a physical sense, though he may if he contracts AIDS, he will die in the sense that his life will never be the same. Not only will the shame and guilt be difficult to overcome, but there will be severed relationships that may never be repaired. There may also be consequences that can never be removed and scars that may never be healed, such as a child out of wedlock or a broken marriage in which children are the real victims. But even if the sin is with pornography, remember your sins will find you out. You may keep up appearances for awhile but your ministry, your family, and your relationship with God will slowly rot from the inside out. Solomon closes with some final warnings and observations:

Now therefore, my sons, listen to me,

And pay attention to the words of my mouth.

Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways,

(do not give your mind opportunity with impure material)

Do not stray into her paths.

For many are the victims she has cast down,

And numerous are all her slain.

Her house is the way to Sheol,

Descending to the chambers of death.

Your best defense is to first realize that none are immune.

Remember Boromir and Faramir from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Boromir, the stronger, older brother, thought he could resist the power of the One Ring and use it to defeat the enemy. In the end, his lust for power drove him to irrationality and eventually to his death. Faramir, however, assessed his weakness correctly and refused to even look at the Ring when the opportunity arose, knowing its seductive power. He not only lived but was used mightily in the battles that followed. No one was capable of totally resisting the power of the Ring. Those who actually gazed upon the Ring, handled it and even used it, resisted only through an extreme exercise of will often aided by the intervention and counsel of others or circumstances (Frodo, Bilbo, and Samwise). Those who totally yielded to it were destroyed by it (Gollum).

Many have faltered before you and many will come after you. Your first mistake would be to think of yourself as above this kind of sin or immune to it. Don't kid yourself. It can ruin you physically! It can ruin you emotionally! It can ruin you spiritually!

Purity affirms who we are; we are made in the image of God. Purity affirms our relationship to Jesus Christ as His bride. Purity affirms women as a treasure God created for us as a companion and helpmate and not as an object for us to conquer.

Pray and ask forgiveness for any involvement in pornography, R- rated movies, and lustful thoughts. Commit to predecide what to do about those sudden temptations, commit to purity, commit to wives and husbands (or future wives and husbands) to be faithful in the power of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther said that you cannot stop birds from flying over your head, but you can certainly stop them from making a nest in your hair. Some temptation is unavoidable, but as far as it depends on you, give it no opportunity to set up residence in your mind.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a politically correct attempt to over-correct cultural bias by elevating all subcultures to equal status.



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

What is Multiculturalism?

A few years ago the campus newspaper of a major university published an essay written by two professors titled *The Statement of the Black Faculty Caucus*.^{1} The purpose of the essay was to define how the University might become a truly multicultural institution. It spoke of empowerment, authority, Western culture, and transformation. The objective of the Black Faculty Caucus was to create a critical mass of empowered “minority people” at all levels of the university system. The essay argued that “Euro-Americans teaching the materials of people of color cannot make the University multicultural because multiculturalism demands empowered people of color as well as empowered areas of knowledge.”^{2} At the end of their essay the authors wrote, “What we are talking about here is no less than transforming the University into a center of multicultural learning: anything less continues a system of education that ultimately reproduces racism and racists.”^{3}

Racial reconciliation should be a top priority for every Christian, of any race or cultural background. But will this demand for a “multicultural center of learning” produce a less prejudiced society? Multiculturalists insist on greater sensitivity towards, and increased inclusion of, racial minorities and women in society. Christians should endorse

both of these goals. But many advocating multiculturalism go beyond these demands for sensitivity and inclusion; here is where Christians must be careful.

One of the difficulties of accommodating multiculturalists is that defining a multicultural society, curriculum, or institution seems to be determined by one's perspective. A commonly held view suggests that being multicultural involves tolerance towards racial and ethnic minorities, mainly in the areas of dress, language, food, religious beliefs, and other cultural manifestations. However, an influential group calling itself NAME, or the National Association for Multicultural Education, includes in its philosophy statement the following: "Xenophobia, discrimination, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are societal phenomena that are inconsistent with the principles of a democracy and lead to the counterproductive reasoning that differences are deficiencies." [\[4\]](#) NAME is a powerful organization composed of educators from around the country, and it has considerable influence on how schools approach the issue of diversity on campus. The fundamental question that the folks at NAME need to answer is, "Is it always counterproductive to reason that some differences might be deficiencies?" In other words, isn't it possible that some of the characteristics of specific culture groups are dangerous or morally flawed (for example, the culture of pedophilia)?

It is not uncommon for advocates of multiculturalism like NAME to begin with the assumption that truth is culturally based. It is argued that a group's language dictates what ideas about God, human nature, and morality are permissible. While Americans may define reality using ideas from its Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian heritage, Asian or African cultures see the world differently based on their traditions. Multiculturalists conclude that since multiple descriptions of reality exist, no one view can be true in any ultimate sense. Furthermore, since truth is a function of language, and all

language is created by humans, all truth is created by humans. This view of truth and language has a spokesperson in Dr. Richard Rorty, humanities professor at the University of Virginia, who argues that truth that transcends culture is not available because “where there are no sentences there is no truth, and sentences and their respective languages are human creations.”[\[5\]](#)

Finally, if all truth is created by humans, it is all equally true. Cultural ideas or institutions, like human sacrifice or welfare systems, are equally valid if they are useful for a given group of people. In other words, we live in a universe that is blind to moral choices. We are the final judges of how we shall live.

As Christians, we believe that ideas do have consequences. While being careful not to promote one set of cultural rules over others simply because we are comfortable with them, we acknowledge that Scripture reveals to us the character and nature of God, humankind, and our need for a savior. These truths can be communicated cross-culturally in a sensitive way, regardless of the people-group involved. If we didn't believe this to be true in a universal sense, then Christianity can't be true in any real way. In other words, in order to be what it claims to be, Christianity must transcend culture in a way that many multiculturalists argue cannot occur.

Language and Sensitivity

In recent years, America has been attracting over one million immigrants annually. This has resulted in a country that is religiously, racially, and linguistically more diverse. Conflict arises, however, over the question of how our nation's institutions should respond to this diversity. Until recently, it was argued that America was a melting pot society, that regardless of an immigrant's origin, given a generation or two, his family would be assimilated into

American culture. Multiculturalists have challenged both the reality and advisability of this view.

Multiculturalists brand our culture as white, Western, male, Christian, middle-class and heterosexual. They declare that our schools have forced on students a curriculum that promotes only that perspective. The books they read, the ideas they consider, the moral and ethical standards they are taught, explicitly or implicitly, tend to be those of dead white European males. The problem, they argue, is that this leaves out the contributions of many people. People of color, women, homosexuals, and various religious traditions are ignored and thus silenced. As a result, they contend, what passes for knowledge on campus is biased. Their goal is to correct this bias.

This charge of bias is not a groundless one. Even though many feel that Western culture has been very open to outside ideas, all majorities—in any society—will tend to seek cultural dominance.

The resulting multiculturalist agenda includes three demands on American society. The first is that the white Americans become more sensitive to minorities. This demand has resulted in what is referred to as “politically correct language.” Speech codes enforcing sensitivity on college campuses have attempted to protect oppressed groups from having to endure words and ideas that might ostracize them. At the center of this issue is the individual’s feelings or self-esteem. The multiculturalists argue that if a person’s self-esteem is damaged, he or she cannot learn in school.

Christians ought to be the most sensitive people in society. If calling people handicapped, Black, or Indian makes them feel diminished in importance or somehow less human, we as Christians need to be empathetic and make changes in our use of language. This sensitivity should grow out of a sense of biblical humility, not for political or economic reasons.

But another question still must be answered. Will the enforced use of certain words really benefit the self-esteem and thus the learning of minority students in schools, as some have suggested? Dr. Paul Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argues that this is a far too simplistic view of human nature.^[6] Self-esteem itself cannot be tied directly to any behavior, positive or negative.

Some contend that enforcing “politically correct speech” is an attempt to redescribe our society in a manner that changes the way we think about issues. If the concepts of personal and family responsibility become labeled as hate speech towards those on welfare, an entire way of looking at the issue is forced out of the dialogue.

Unfortunately, language can also be used to legitimize behavior that Christians believe to be morally wrong. Homosexuality has progressively been referred to as a sin, then a disease, a lifestyle, and now a preference or sexual orientation. Just by re-describing this activity in new terms, an entirely different connotation is given to what homosexuality is. This has not occurred by accident.

Hebrews 12:14 tells us to make every effort to be at peace with all men. As we articulate truth, our language should lean towards gentleness and respect, for the sake of the Gospel. When we believe that every person deserves to be shown respect because we are all created in the image of God, our attitude will result in language and tone that is sensitive and gentle—not because political correctness demands it, but because out of a heart of love flow words of love.

Inclusion and Truth

A second demand being made on our schools and society is in the area of inclusiveness. Multiculturalists contend that marginalized people need to be brought into the curriculum and the marketplace of ideas on campus. No group should ever have

to feel left out. One example is the recent set of standards offered by UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools. As originally offered, the standards greatly increased the voice of both minorities and women in the telling of our nation's history. However, many charge that they denigrated or ignored the contributions of white Americans in order to be inclusive. In fact, some complained that the overall picture of America produced by the standards was of an oppressive, WASPish empire. Even the U.S. Senate denounced the proposed standards by a vote of 99 to 1. One Senator voted against the resolution because it wasn't strong enough.

The standards declared that the U.S. is not a Western-based nation, but the result of three cultures. These cultures—Native American, African-American and European—are not seen as moral equals. In fact, the European contribution was one of oppression, injustice, gender bias and rape of the natural world. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, responded to the standards by saying that “No other nation in the world teaches a national history that leaves its children feeling negative about their own country—this would be the first.”[\[7\]](#)

In fact, U.S. history textbooks have been moving toward inclusion for some time. In order to make up for the neglect of women and people of color in past texts, some historians and publishers have gone a bit overboard in their attempts at finding the right balance. In one text, *The American Nation*, of the 13 religious leaders mentioned in short biographies, only two are non-Hispanic white males—Brigham Young and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[\[8\]](#) Often women and minorities are injected into the text in odd ways. In this book, Senator Margaret Chase Smith is cited for challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy. While she was an early critic of McCarthy, she had little to do with his eventual political demise. Another example is Native American chief George Crum, noted for making the first potato chips in 1853.

The writing of history is a delicate task, and is probably impossible to accomplish without bias. But as Christians, we would prefer that truth—what really happened—at least be the goal, rather than political or racial propaganda, even if this goal will never be perfectly accomplished. This notion of truth demands that students be taught as much U.S. history as feasible. To leave out the experience of Native Americans, African-Americans or women would be a tremendous failure. But writing our entire history from their perspective is unfair as well. One answer to this problem is to have students read more primary historical documents and depend less on history textbooks. Unfortunately, multiculturalists see all texts as primarily political. They argue that only one view prevails: either the empowered majority's or the oppressed minority's. This belief that all knowledge is political results in turning schools into battlegrounds where representatives from every group, from Hispanics to gay rights activists, go over the curriculum with a magnifying glass, looking for the proper amount of inclusion or any derogatory remarks made about their group.

Tolerance as a Worldview

Many multiculturalists insist that we embrace multiculturalism in our schools not just in the way we teach, but in the way we think. Multiculturalists have specific ideas about the notion of truth; paramount is the belief that no truth transcends culture, that no idea or moral concept might be true for every cultural group or every human being. As a result, multiculturalists demand that we give up our beliefs in moral absolutes and become moral relativists.

This worldview model has been the litmus test for college professors on many campuses for quite some time, particularly in the humanities. Evidently, in some programs it is now being applied to college students as well. In 1992, St. Cloud (Minn.) State University made it known that if students were

to be accepted, those who desired to enter the social work program must relinquish specific notions of moral truth. While acknowledging that many students come from religious backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, these very students were required to go beyond "hating the sin and loving the sinner." Students who had predetermined negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians were told to look elsewhere for a major. In other words, one must, at the level of faith commitment, find no moral aversion to homosexuality in order to be admitted to this program. This removes a majority of our population from consideration right off the bat.

Part of the problem with multiculturalism is that it allows for a broad definition of cultural groups. There is both a gay culture and a feminist culture in America. In fact, any group can identify itself as a marginalized culture group. The homeless become a cultural group, as do single mothers on welfare. Should their perspectives get equal treatment in our schools? Are their moral values as valid as all others? The problem is that to be considered multiculturally sensitive, one must be able to place oneself into the perspective of the oppressed group completely, at the metaphysical level, not just to sympathize or even empathize with them. This means that one must be willing to compromise faith-based beliefs about God, human nature, and reality itself. For instance, if the gay community, being an oppressed minority group, believes that being homosexual is natural and every bit as normal as heterosexual relationships, Christians should ignore what they believe to be revealed truth about homosexuality's sinfulness.

Christians are called to have mercy and compassion on the poor and less fortunate, but not at the expense of recognizing that some lifestyles result in the impoverishment of people regardless of their race or cultural heritage. What is being asked of Christians is that we give up our view of a universe governed by a moral God who has established a moral universe,

and replace it with a morally relativistic one. Tolerance becomes the only absolute. To be exclusive about truth, or to argue that some action might be morally wrong for all people all the time, violates this new absolute of tolerance.

Ultimately, this current enforcement of tolerance is really a thinly veiled pursuit of power. The only way certain groups, such as homosexual activists or the more radical feminists, can get recognition and the ability to spread their views, is by establishing tolerance as an absolute. Eventually, they win affirmative action concessions from universities and public schools, which enforces their viewpoint. Recently, the state of Massachusetts passed legislation recognizing the difficulties of gay elementary and secondary students, forcing all public school teachers to be educated and sensitized to their plight. This recognition and re-education of teachers further legitimizes and enhances the power of the gay rights movement.

Without losing sight of our calling to reach out and minister to people caught in lifestyles and cultures that vaunt themselves against the knowledge and standards of God, we cannot become moral relativists in the process.

Justice and Truth

While multiculturalists occasionally refer to justice, it cannot be the foundation of their movement. This is for the simple reason that justice is not possible without truth. In order to claim that someone's actions or words are unjust, one must assume that a moral order really does exist, a moral order that would be true for all cultures and at all times. Injustice implies that justice exists, justice implies that moral laws exist, and moral laws imply that a lawgiver exists.

One college professor, explaining his plan for a liberal ironist utopia, says that a liberal is someone who thinks that being cruel is the worst thing that one can do. He argues that

this moral standard can be used to create a utopia on earth. But he admits, being a good moral relativist, that he cannot give any non-circular arguments for why being cruel is the worst thing one can do. He is inventing a moral law, but admitting that its foundation lies only in his preference for that law.

Even if we accept his moral standard as useful, it leaves us with many questions. The first is, what does it mean to be cruel? Is it cruel to encourage people in their gay lifestyle given the short life span of male homosexuals, even without AIDS?[\[9\]](#) If pain is part of our definition of cruelty, should all operations be banned because even if successful, pain might result? How can he know that being cruel is the worst thing one can do in a morally neutral universe? Without truth, without knowledge of right and wrong, justice is impossible, as is any notion of a good life. The word "cruel" becomes an empty word.

By declaring tolerance an absolute, multiculturalists are consistent with their view of reality. They see all human cultures as morally equal because of their faith in a naturalistic world view. This view argues for a godless universe, and recognizes chance as the only possible cause for what exists. If this is true, absolute tolerance is the best we can hope for. Christians seek sensitivity and inclusion for a much better reason.

We believe that every human being was created in God's image and reflects God's glory and majesty. We were created to have dominion over God's creation as His stewards. Thus, we are to care for others because they are ultimately worthy of our care and concern. We are not to be cruel to others because the Creator of the universe made individuals to have fellowship with Him and He cares for them. This does not discount that people are fallen and in rebellion against God. In fact, if we really care about people we will take 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 seriously. First, that God has made reconciliation with

Himself possible through His Son Jesus Christ, and as verse 20 says, “..he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

True sensitivity and inclusion will not be achieved by making tolerance an absolute. They occur when we take what people believe, and the consequences of those beliefs, seriously. When you think about it, what could be crueler than failing to inform people of the Gospel of redemption through Christ, leaving them to spend eternity separated from the Creator God who loves them?

Notes

1. Berman, Paul. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (NY: Dell Publishing, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 253.
3. Ibid., 257.
4. Francis, Samuel, “The Other Face of Multiculturalism,” *Chronicles*, April, 1998, p. 33.
5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 5.
6. Guinness, Os & Seel, John, ed. *No God But God*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 96.
7. Leo, John “History standards are bunk” *U.S. News & World Report* February 6, 1995, 23.
8. Ibid.
9. Dr. Paul Cameron, *Family Research* (Newsletter of the Family Research

Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of Christianity Ringing True Today

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.



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

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he

says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."[\[1\]](#)

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.[\[2\]](#) Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure.[\[3\]](#) He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full-fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.[\[4\]](#)

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means “thoughts” in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.{5}

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were “May God never abandon me!”{6}

The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal’s apologetics, it’s important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn’t interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God’s image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him."[\[8\]](#) This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.[\[9\]](#)

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. "The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable," he says, "that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances." Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.[\[10\]](#)

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state

after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn't it? But the attitude people take is this:
Just as I do Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me. [{11}](#)

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man's reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last

step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."[{12}](#) Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.[{13}](#) The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.[{14}](#)

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions.[{15}](#) "The two so-called principles of truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions."[{16}](#) Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty[{17}](#), often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."[{18}](#) In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is "the `intuitive' mind" rather than

“the ‘geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”^{19} For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.^{20} Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. “If natural things are beyond [reason],” Pascal said, “what are we to say about supernatural things?”^{21}

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?^{22} Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15^{23}, Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself (“hides” in the sense that He doesn’t speak). One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, “God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will.” God wants to “humble [our] pride.”^{24}

But God doesn’t remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. “If there were no obscurity,” Pascal says, “man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man

could not hope for a cure.”{25}

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. “God is a hidden God,” says Pascal, “ and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him.*”{26} Pascal’s apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn’t mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God’s existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.{27}

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn’t do any good. As Pascal says, “That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty.” A person with this knowledge has not “made much progress toward his salvation.”{28} What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."[\[29\]](#)

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."[\[30\]](#) "By faith we know he exists," he says.[\[31\]](#) "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."[\[32\]](#) Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."[\[33\]](#)

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."[\[34\]](#)

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.[\[35\]](#) He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."[\[36\]](#) He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [*sic*] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the *types* of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the

miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . .” People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn’t the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, “it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe,” he says, “is the cross.” At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: “Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”{43}

The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

Let us then examine the point and say: “Either God exists, or he does not.” But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.{44}

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it’s true, while the losses will be insignificant if it’s false.{45} If it’s true and you have rejected it, you’ve lost everything. However, if it’s false but you have believed it, at least you’ve led a good life and you haven’t lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it’s better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You’re going to live one way or the

other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can't remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?"[\[46\]](#) After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."[\[47\]](#)

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.[\[48\]](#) By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion

that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.

2. Hugh M. Davidson, Blaise Pascal (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.
6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. Ibid., 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 236.
15. Houston, 58.
16. Ibid., 58.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.

28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that

human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and *postmodernism* (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

There is a sense among many people today that the modern era, both in terms of technical and financial prosperity, as well as personal spiritual well-being, is over. There appears to be a general malaise among many people today, and a certain uneasy feeling that the twentieth-century has entered a new phase. Additionally, most believe that this new phase is not a very good one. Many diverse new “communities” such as feminists, gays, pro-choice advocates, pro-life advocates, conservatives, liberals, and various other groups, both religious and non-religious, make up the global village we now live in. These various groups are frequently at odds with one another and more often than not there is a breakdown in communication. This breakdown can be attributed to the lack of a common frame of reference in vocabulary and, more importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Darwinian naturalism has been one of the chief philosophical revolutions that has gripped the world. And, although few at the time had any idea how much Darwin's ideas would permeate the culture, no one today doubts the far reaching results of that revolution. The Christian church was not ready for the Darwinian revolution, and thus this philosophy was able to gain a foothold (and later a death grip) on every aspect of modern life, both in academic and popular circles. For decades after the revolution, many church leaders thought it unimportant to answer Darwin and said little or nothing about the new philosophy. Most Christians were, therefore, not equipped to provide coherent answers and were too late in entering the debate. The result is that most of our public schools and universities, and even our political lives, are dominated by the erroneous assumption that Darwinian naturalism is scientifically true and that creationism is fictitious.

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

Historians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and many others use the terms *modern*, *premodern*, and *postmodern* to help

them navigate through large pieces of time and thought. In order to understand what these very helpful terms are used for, we will try to understand the premodern period first. The term *premodern* is used to describe the period before the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The premodern period is often referred to as the precritical period—a time before the criteria of truth became so stringent. The premodern period ends somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the high part of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The major thing one should remember is that, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, the Western world was changing forever, and this would have far reaching impact on every aspect of life, especially religion.

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and handwritten texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that someone had just told you that the world was created by a being that you could not detect with your five senses and that He had left a written communication about His will for your life. You would look around at the world that you lived in,

and you would decide if the stories that were told to you explained the world and were reasonably believable. This method for determining truth is called the *correspondence method of truth*. If the story being told corresponds to the observable phenomenon in the world, then the story is accepted as truth. There is also a *coherence method of truth* in operation during this period. The coherence theory would add to the correspondence theory the idea that all of the individual stories told over a period of time should not contradict one another. These two forms of determining whether something is true or not were the primary means of evaluation for many centuries.

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

The Advent of the Modern

We must now leave our discussion of the premodern period and turn our attention to the beginning of the modern period. Some see the modern era as beginning in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; others, however, believe it began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A main tenet of *modernism* is that human reason, armed with the scientific method, is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge about the universe. During the Renaissance men began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of

the earth in ever increasing ways. It was a time marked by invention and discovery that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism, or a high confidence in mankind. The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where better telescopes and microscopes allowed men to unlock the secrets of the universe. The unlocking of these secrets led to the initial impression that the universe, and the human body, resembled machines and could be understood in mechanistic terms.

In the eighteenth century the progress of science accelerated so rapidly that it appeared as if science would soon be able to explain everything. Many believed that there were no limits to the power of human reason operating with the data from sense perception. In contrast to the truth of the oral tradition in the premodern era, the modern period accepted as truth only that which could be proven to be true. Many of the philosophers and theologians of the modern period sought to devise a rational religion, a faith that could incorporate all of the considerations and discoveries of the new science.

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence to the belief that science and the scientific method would one day yield a utopian society. It is easy to see how the optimism of this period became almost intoxicating to many. The so-called-truths of religion were quickly being cast aside

in favor of the new, and better, truths found by science. Examples found in advertising may be helpful. A company that wished to sell a car or a pair of tennis shoes would appeal to the scientific truths of their product. That is, a company would attempt to persuade a potential buyer into purchasing its product based on the fact that it was the best item obtainable. Add to this scientific furor, the advancement of Darwinian naturalism, and it is easy to see how religious claims seemed like quaint, antiquated beliefs for many people. The modern period culminated in arrogance concerning human abilities and human reason. It proposed a world created without any assistance from God. The modern period differs from the premodern in its rejection of the supernatural or the transcendent which is based largely on the belief that religious truth claims are different than scientific truth claims. According to many, truth itself had changed.

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all

contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

Modernity may be understood as a time when our best philosophers, theologians, and scientists attempted to make sense out of the world based on the belief in objective reality. One of the central tenets of the era we live in (the postmodern period) is that there is no such thing as objective truth. In fact, the new trend in postmodern thought is to embrace, affirm, and live with philosophical, theological, and even scientific chaos. Earlier we used an example from advertising; suggesting that products were marketed based on their claims to be superior to what a competitor might offer. If we use this example again, postmodern methodology appeals more to a person's feelings than to his or her sense of factual truth. Cars, tennis shoes, and other products are marketed based on image. The best car is not necessarily the one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

Furthermore, Christians are expected to tolerate contradicting truth claims and to look the other way if certain ethical behaviors (abortion, homosexuality, etc.) do not suit their

tastes. The current postmodern condition is only in the early stages of development, not even a half a century old, and yet its devastating effects have penetrated every aspect of our lives. Christians largely responded too late to the threats of Darwinism, and now the destructive effects of that movement are evident to anyone in the Christian community. Postmodernism, and its companion rampant philosophical relativism, should be among the foremost concerns of any Christian who wishes to engage his or her culture and ensure that the gospel of Christ has a fertile context in which it can take root and grow in the future.

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

When she was pressed on her beliefs concerning reality, the inconsistencies of her philosophy were evident. She stated that everything was a matter of opinion or one's personal perspective. When asked if this belief extended to physical reality, she said it did. She said that a person could look at something in such a way as to alter reality.

The example of the existence or nonexistence of her car was raised. She said that if she believed that her car was not in the parking lot and if another person believed that it was, it

could be possible that it actually existed for one person and not for the other. When one first hears something like this, it sounds as if the person who maintains this position is joking, and could not possibly mean for us to take him or her seriously. However, the sad and frightening truth is that this individual is very serious.

This young woman is representative of a large part of our Western culture, men and women who tend to think unsystematically. The result of this way of thinking is that people often hold ideas that are logically inconsistent and contradict each other. The result is that persons professing to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or even atheists are given equal degrees of credibility. Truth has become a function of personal preference, not correspondence to objective reality.

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth

all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God's existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

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How Do You Spell Truth?

What is Truth?

Do you remember the commercial that asked, “How do you spell relief?” To the horror of elementary teachers everywhere, you were supposed to answer “R-O-L-A-I-D-S.” In a similar fashion, today, if you ask someone, “How do you spell truth?” you might be surprised by the response. As a young Christian in college, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I will never forget the impact of his critique of modern culture and his use of the phrase “true truth.” True truth might be thought of as truth with a capital “T” because it is based on the existence of a personal God, the creator of all that exists, and a revealer of Himself via the Bible and the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus. Today, if you ask average men and women how to spell truth, their responses will probably indicate a view that is strictly earthbound truth beginning with a small “t.” God is not in the picture; in fact, belief in God would be seen as a handicap in discerning truth accurately. The methodology of science provides this type of truth and also sets its limits. However, there is another spelling for truth that is finding more and more adherents. Today, especially on college campuses, the question might be answered with C-O-N-S-T-R-U-C-T, as in social construct. Like the Roloids answer above, this response doesn’t seem to fit. In this approach truth is generated by the social group, whether they be white middle-class male Americans or female southeast Asians. What is true for one group may not be true

for another, and there is no such thing as universal truth, something that is true for all people, all the time.

These three conceptions of truth describe three comprehensive systems of thought that are active in Western culture and in the U.S. The first (Truth) portrays Christian theism (what some refer to as a pre-modern view). Although this view is still quite popular, many in our churches function as if they were members of the second group which is often classified as a modernist perspective (truth). The third group (truth as social construct) is a fairly recent arrival, but has become highly influential both in academia and in common culture. It has been called postmodernism. People within these three different perspectives see the world quite differently. Until recently, Christians focused their apologetics, or defense of the faith, mainly at modernists and as a result often attempted to justify belief within a modernist framework of truth. Now we are being called upon to respond to a postmodern view that will require a far different approach. Although postmodernism has many aspects that Christians must reject, it has also revealed just how much Christian thinking has been influenced by the modernist challenge.

In this discussion we will look at modernism and postmodernism in light of Christian evangelism and apologetics. We are now fighting a two-front battle, and we need to develop different tools for each. We also are in need of a vaccine against assuming the presuppositions of either modernism or postmodernism as we attempt to live and think within a biblical framework. Much of this debate revolves around the notion of what is true, or perhaps how we as individuals can know what is true. This may sound like an ivory tower discussion, but it is a vital topic as we attempt to share the truth of the Gospel to those we encounter.

The Modernist View

In their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*^{1}, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh use an interesting metaphor to describe the different views of truth and the ways that we perceive it in our culture. Imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." Each of the umpires may make the same call, but they will be making it for very different reasons. The position of the first ump is known as naive realism. He believes that his calls correspond to something quite real and substantive called balls and strikes. He is also very confident that he can discern what is a ball or a strike with a high degree of accuracy. This confidence is a trademark of modernism. As we will see later, the other two umpires reflect positions that reject such a confidence in knowing what is true. It doesn't mean that they don't make decisions, they just lack the confidence that their decision conforms exactly to what is really "out there."

Modernism grew out of the Enlightenment and matured in the last century to dominate much of European and American thought. Its greatest American advocate has been John Dewey. Writing around the turn of the century, Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism has dominated American educational theory to this day. In his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,^{2} he highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking. First, modernism rejects the reality of supernatural events or beings. It focuses on this world and the secular. Second, it rejects the authority of the church or religion in general and replaces it with the power of individual minds utilizing the methodology of science. Third, it replaces the static world of the middle ages with a belief in progress

towards a future human utopia. Finally, it believes that the patient scientific study of nature will provide the means for this utopia. Humankind is to conquer and control nature for its use.

The implications of modernism were and are profound. Under its umbrella, humans were seen as biological machines just as the universe became understood as an impersonal mechanism needing neither a creator nor a sustainer God. All of human behavior could conceivably be explained biologically, given enough time for science to study the data. As a result, humans are viewed as self-governing beings and free to embrace whatever their rational minds discover. Modernists might be called rationalistic optimists because they are quite confident in their ability to perceive “reality as reality, relatively unaffected by our own bias, distortion, or previous belief system”[\[3\]](#). One’s conclusions can reflect reality outside ourselves, not just thoughts within our own minds.

With the advent of modernism Christianity found itself under the cold calculating eye of science. Modernism tells a story of mankind as its own savior that is, with the help of science, modernism has no need for a savior provided by God. Sin is not in its vocabulary, and redemption is not needed; humans lack only education.

Next, we will look at the arrival of postmodernism and its accompanying challenges.

The Postmodern Condition

We have considered the impact of modernism on the question of what is true. Now we will focus on the postmodern view. Where modernism is very confident that it can discover truth via science, postmodernism is defined by its skepticism that truth of any type can be known. Much of postmodernism is negative response to the confidence of modernism. Yet, postmodernism is a strange combination of a vague romantic optimism that

mankind can solve its social and economic problems, with a dramatic pessimism of ever knowing truth at a universal level. This reflects the strong influence of atheistic existentialism on postmodern thinking. Individuals are told they must stand up and confront an absurd existence and impose meaning and order on to it, all the while admitting that there is no universal truth guiding what they choose to do.

To a postmodern, modernism ended with atomic bombs being dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Modernism led to imperialism and the colonialization of the third world by the supposedly more modern and advanced industrial nations. It led to the destruction of the environment, and it has led to a naive confidence that technology can solve any problem in its path.

Often, postmodernism is known more for what it doesn't believe than for what it does. One author writes that we have come to the point where answers to the "questions of ultimate concern about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant."[4](#)

Let's consider some of the significant themes that postmodernists have written about. The first is the theory that truth is a social construct. This theory would argue, for example, that Western modernity which has come to dominate the globe and define what is rational and normative for human life is not in place because it is any truer than other worldviews. Instead, it is a set of ideas that people have used to manipulate others with in order to gain power over them. Those who are not "scientific" are viewed as primitive and as a result are marginalized and finally oppressed by Western culture. Western culture, then, has not discovered how things really are; instead, it has imposed one view on the world to its advantage. Our basic problem is that all ideas, all concepts, and all truths are communicated via language, and all language is man made. No one can step outside of language

to see whether or not it corresponds with reality. In the words of one postmodernist, all principles (or ultimate truths) are really preferences.

As a result of postmodernist thinking, anyone who claims to know something that is universally true, true for everyone, everywhere, anytime, is accused of marginalizing those who disagree. Once a person or group is marginalized, a justification has been established to oppress them. To postmodernists, a totalizing meta- narrative (a story that claims to answer all the big questions about reality) always results in violence towards those outside the accepted paradigm. They point to Western culture's aptitude towards conquering and destroying other cultures in the name of progress and modernization.

One can easily see that a Christian worldview conflicts with much of what postmodernity teaches. Christianity claims to be true for everyone, everywhere. It is not surprising that postmodern feminists and others have pointed their finger at Christianity for oppressing women, gays, and anyone else who holds to a different construct of reality. How do we as Christians respond to this critique? Do we side with the modernists and join the fight against postmodern influences? Or can we find something helpful in the issues raised by postmodernism?

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen argues that, "When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it." Another has written that modernity has given us "as much terror as we can take."[\[5\]](#) Postmodernists argue that by claiming to know the truth we automatically marginalize and oppress others. It encourages the questioning of everything that modernism has come to accept as natural or good. Capitalism, patriarchy, and liberal humanism are just a few ideas that modernity has left us with and that we have to realize are just social constructs. We are free, according to

postmoderns, to throw off anything that doesn't work since all institutions and social norms are social constructs created by society itself. However, with this freedom comes disorientation. The current social scene in America is a prime example of this effect. Traditions about family, gender roles, economic responsibility, and social norms are being questioned and abandoned. This has left us with a sense of loss, a horrifying loss that acknowledges that there is nothing solid undergirding why we live the way we do. It has left us with an amazing amount of pluralism and a radical multiculturalism that some feel has removed essential buffers to chaos.

The confidence of modern man in rugged individualism has been deconstructed by postmodernism to reveal the inevitability of violence and subjugation. What is left? Many postmodernists argue that not only is the self a construct, that the autonomous self is a myth, but that the self is actually a servant of language. Most people see language as a tool to be used by individuals to express ideas to another person. Many postmodernists see things quite differently. They would argue that our language uses us instead. Another way of thinking of this is that we don't have a language, a language has us. All that we know of reality is given to us by the symbols present in our language. This has created a self-identity problem of dramatic proportions for postmoderns. Many have responded by embracing this lack of rootedness by seeing that life is being in a "state of continuous construction and reconstruction."

Now that we have briefly surveyed both the modern and postmodern positions, let's begin to think about them from a biblical standpoint. We should first acknowledge that when doing apologetics, or defending the faith, we are not merely attempting to win arguments or make others look foolish. Apologetics should always be done in the context of evangelism, the goal of which is to share the gospel in a meaningful way, to convey the truth of special revelation concerning God's plan for salvation with humility and

compassion.

Christians should probably reject both the confidence of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism regarding our ability to know and understand truth. Modernity's dependence on science as the only valid source for truth is too limited and fails to consider the effects of the fall on our ability to know something without bias. We are often sinfully rational, willfully rejecting what is true. On the other hand, the postmodern view leaves us without hope that we can know anything about what is really real. It holds that we are literally a prisoner of the language game played by our culture group, regardless of its social class or race.

Next, we will consider how postmodern thinking should affect evangelism.

A Christian View of Truth

We have been considering the challenges of modern and postmodern thinking to the notion of truth and the communication of the Gospel. Earlier we used the metaphor of umpires who call strikes and balls within different frameworks for knowing. The ump who "calls 'em the way they are" is a naive realist; the second ump who "calls 'em like he sees 'em" represents the critical realist view, and the ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" portrays a radical perspectivist view. The questions before us are, What view should a Christian take? and How does this choice affect the way in which we do apologetics and evangelism?

If we accept the view of the first ump who "calls 'em the way they are," we have adopted a modernist perspective. Unfortunately, experience tells us that the assumptions that come with this view don't seem to hold up. It assumes that common sense and logic will always lead people to the Truth of the Gospel we just need to give people enough evidence. While this approach does work with some, it works mainly because

they already agree with us on a theistic, Western view of reality. However, modernism has also led many to see the universe as a godless machine run by the logical laws of nature as discovered by science. For example, New Agers or Hindus have a common understanding that leads them elsewhere. Their basic assumptions about reality are quite different from ours, and it is much more difficult to find common ground with them. In fact, they have consciously rejected the Western view of reality.

The third ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" sees truth as entirely personal. Although we admit that people do create personal frameworks for interpreting life and reality, there is ultimately only one true reality, one true God. However, we might learn from the perspectivist in order to find common ground when witnessing. One commonality is the notion of an acute consciousness of suffering by marginalized people. Christianity shares this concern yet offers a radically different solution.

The second umpire states that there are balls and strikes, and "I call 'em as I see 'em." This view of truth, called critical realism, recognizes that there is one true reality, but that our ability to perceive it is limited. The Bible teaches that sin has distorted our view. Even as believers we must admit that we don't always understand why God does what He does. This is partially because truth is personal in the sense that it is rooted in a personal God, and we can never know all that there is to know about Him. Even Peter, who walked with Christ, didn't understand God's plans. He rebuked Jesus when Jesus told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and resurrected.

The best evangelistic approach attempts to find common ground with an unbeliever while never relinquishing all that is true of the Christian worldview. If rational, logical arguments are persuasive, use them. If storytelling works, as in the more narratively oriented societies of the Middle East, use it. We

should not be limited to either a modernist or postmodernist view of truth, but work from a distinctively Christian perspective that holds that the God who created the universe wants us to gently instruct others in the hope that He will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 47-49.

3. Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 23-26.

4. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

5. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, p. 35.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 52.

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Truth or Tolerance?

There are terrible implications if truth is relative instead of absolute. Tolerance has become the ultimate virtue,

especially on university campuses. Scott Scruggs provides a Christian response to this alarming trend.

If I were to ask you what our culture deemed more valuable, truth or tolerance, what would you say? To emphasize the purpose for the question, consider the following three illustrations.

Case 1. Recently, I had a conversation with a young man about Christianity. He listened closely to what I had to say about how Jesus Christ had saved me from my sin, but immediately became very defensive when I tried to suggest that he too had that same need for Christ as his Savior. He explained to me that because we live in a pluralistic society, all religions are equally valid roads to God. "You're just being too closed-minded," he said. "Jesus works for you, just like Buddha works for someone else. So if you want people to respect what you have to say, you need to be more tolerant of beliefs unlike your own."

Case 2. Last year, a dean at Stanford University began to pressure evangelical Christian groups on campus to stop the practice of "proselytizing other students." Ironically, what angered the dean was not the content of the message that was being shared, but the practice of sharing itself. He believes that in approaching someone with the Gospel, you are implying that the person's beliefs are inferior to your own. Such an implication is unacceptable because it is self-righteous, biased, and intolerant.

Case 3. Graduate student Jerome Pinn checked into his dormitory at the University of Michigan to discover that the walls of his new room were covered with posters of nude men and that his new roommate was an active homosexual who expected to have partners in the room. Pinn approached the Michigan housing office requesting that he be transferred to another room. Listen to Pinn's own description of what followed: "They were outraged by this [request]. They asked me

what was wrong with me—what *my* problem was. I said that I had a religious and moral objection to homosexual conduct. They were surprised; they couldn't believe it. Finally, they assigned me to another room, but they warned me that if I told anyone of the reason, I would face university charges of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.”[\[1\]](#) In their mind, Jerome had no right to a new room because he was being intolerant.

Notice that in each of these scenarios, Christians are not accused of “false teaching,” but of “false practice.” The young man, the dean, and the housing officials never challenged the *truth* of these moral claims, but the *legitimacy* of making such claims in the first place.[\[2\]](#) Similar situations occur every day in schools, universities, the media, the marketplace, and the halls of government. Consequently, Christians are being silenced, not by superior ideas, but by our culture's impeachment of moral absolutes and inauguration of moral openness.

So what are Christians to do? Are we not called to be confident carriers of the truth of the Gospel? Then how do we voice our belief that Jesus is the *only* way without being intolerant of someone who thinks differently? This is one of the most difficult dilemmas facing Christians today. In this essay we will examine the nature of the tolerance revolution in our culture, expose its strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly, establish a Christian response to the question of truth or tolerance.

Tolerance Under a Microscope

On two different occasions, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, sponsored a campaign to encourage its community to speak out against the excessive amount of violence and sexual promiscuity on television, in the movies, etc. To bolster this drive, they distributed bumper stickers that read, “Speak Up For Decency.” Within days of the arrival

of these stickers, another bumper sticker appeared that looked practically identical to the first one, except it read, "Speak Up For Liberty." The seriousness of this reaction was nailed home when I came to a stop light and counted over ten "Speak Up For Liberty" stickers on the back of the van in front of me; it was as if the driver was protecting freedom from fascism.

After considering the message on each sticker, I found myself at an impasse. On one hand, I agree that there is too much indecency on television, yet on the other hand, I believe that liberty is our nation's most prized resource. Yet after more consideration, I came to the conclusion that this was not a debate over freedom, but a discrepancy over the interpretation of tolerance.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *tolerance* as "the capacity for or practice of recognizing and respecting the options, practices, or behavior of others." First, tolerance demands recognition, which is a legal imperative. Naturally, the Constitution recognizes and protects the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Second, it calls for respect, which is a social imperative. The Declaration of Independence declares that we are all created equal, indicating that we need to respect all men, even when there are differences of opinion.

However, in our culture, tolerance is not being discussed as a legal or social imperative, but a moral one. In response to a survey concerning beliefs about God, a sixteen-year-old girl replied, "In my mind, the only people who are wrong are the people who will not accept different beliefs as being, well, acceptable."[\[3\]](#) This girl believed that the only real sin is to not accept or *tolerate* other people's beliefs. Likewise, openness or "uncritical tolerance" has become our society's moral standard. Consequently, people who seem intolerant are wrong.

But is tolerance a moral virtue? By definition, the function of tolerance is relegated to the legal and social arena in order to *protect* moral issues, not *enforce* them. As a result, talking about tolerance as a moral virtue is a circular argument. Listen to the following statement: “It is morally wrong to say that something is morally wrong.” Is that statement not self-defeating?

In addition, any moral standard necessitates intolerance of anything which violates that standard. Merely using the phrase “a moral standard of tolerance” is a contradiction in terms. In S. D. Gaede’s words, “If you are intolerant of someone who is intolerant, then you have necessarily violated your own principle. But if you tolerate those who are intolerant, you keep your principle, but sacrifice your responsibility to the principle.”^{4} Consequently, a person who is wholly committed to tolerance, must resort to total apathy. Yet putting over ten bumper stickers on a car is hardly apathetic and thus anything but tolerant.

The notion that tolerance is a virtue is a paradox. Nevertheless, it has become the dominant moral guideline for our culture.

What If Truth Is Relative?

Believe it or not, our world is waging a war against truth. Allen Bloom writes, “Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth . . . is the greatest insight of our time.”^{5} The philosophical basis for the uncritical tolerance that is so prevalent in our society is the replacement of truth with relativism.

According to the *Barna Report*, 66% of the entire population believe “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Another poll estimated that 72% of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five also reject the notion of

absolutes.{6} So what do the majority of Americans believe? Well, without absolutes, they are left with moral relativism: the notion that all values are legitimate, and that it is impossible to judge between them. Truth is reduced to personal preference; what's true is what works for you.

The assumption that truth is relative has infiltrated almost every facet of our society: the marketplace, the arts, government, education, family, and even religion. According to a poll, 88% of evangelical Christians claim that the "Bible is the written word of God and is totally accurate in all it teaches," and yet 53% also believe there are no absolutes.{7} Ironical? Not when one considers how powerful and pervasive this philosophical trend really is. Allen Bloom summarizes the logic behind the assumption that truth is relative:

The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.{8}

Bloom is saying that instead of searching for mankind's past faults, the world has condemned our ability to claim to be right at all.

But is the viewpoint that truth is undefinable a plausible philosophical position? Is not the claim, "there are no absolute truths" intrinsically self-contradictory? Gene Edward Veith notices that "[t]hose who argue that 'there is no truth' are putting forth that statement as true."{9}

So to make this claim, there must be at least one truth that is universal. And if there is one universal truth, then the premise that there are no absolutes is false.

Another problem was illustrated by R. C. Sproul. He recalled the Senate hearings over Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court

nomination and the opposing testimonies of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Sproul admitted that he didn't know who was telling the truth. However, what he knew with absolute certainty was that "they both couldn't be telling the truth." In the same way, Christianity claims exclusively that salvation is an unearnable gift from God, whereas Islam claims exclusively that a man must earn his salvation. It is possible that both are not true, but it is impossible for *both* to be true.

Moral relativism is hard-wired into our culture. But let's reclaim the superiority of truth—God's truth—as the solution for the sickness of our culture, a sickness that tolerance and moral relativism cannot cure.

Tolerance and Chapped Lips

I would bet that you are familiar with the dry, burning sensation of chapped lips. With this in mind, what is the almost instinctual reaction when you feel your lips drying out? You lick them, right? For a moment they feel better, but then what happens? They get even drier, don't they? In fact, the more you lick, the worse they get. This is an example of mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution. If moist lips are the desirable end, shouldn't we lick them to make them well again? Of course not, even if it feels right at first. As most people know, the appropriate cure for chapped lips is not licking, it's lip balm.

Well, the same is true in life. We live in a world burdened by injustice, discrimination, and inequality; they are the "chapped lips" of our culture. Many people insist that the best solution is a greater degree of tolerance. In some ways this answer sounds right. But is tolerance the lip balm for our culture or are we just licking our lips? Are we just mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution?

To answer this question, I want to glance at a couple of what

I call "tolerance trends." The first is political correctness. S. D. Gaede notes that the goal of political correctness "is to enforce a universal standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background, or sexual orientation."[\[10\]](#) Thus, the Golden Rule for a politically correct person is to not do, say, or even imply anything that any other individual or group might find offensive.

A second tolerance trend is multiculturalism. Whereas political correctness is more legalistic, the goal of multiculturalism is greater inclusiveness. Schools and universities are not just teaching history from the traditional "dead white male" perspective, but including the experiences of African-Americans, Native Americans, women, and other groups who have been marginalized. Businesses are supporting this movement as well. "Multicultural workshops" are being created to help workers get along in a more culturally diverse business environment.[\[11\]](#)

On one hand, there is much to be praised about these movements. Christians have more reason than anyone to abhor discrimination and prejudice. God hates injustice and loves to liberate the oppressed, and so should we. Therefore, a Christian perspective should transcend cultural, racial, or class distinctions.

At the same time, these tolerance trends are merely impulsive reactions to the problem and not well-thought-out solutions. The reason is simple. If our goal is just more tolerance, then discrimination isn't wrong in a moral sense, it's only offensive. Yet what constitutes "being offensive" changes according to the whims of the ethnic and social group involved. Consequently, a standard of tolerance becomes arbitrary and variable because it is subject to interpretation based on an underlying bias. Ultimately, no matter how legitimate it sounds, how right it feels, or how rigorously it is enforced, tolerance alone can never eliminate prejudice any more than licking can cure chapped lips.

Justice and equality will become realities not by superficially incorporating tolerance, but by embracing absolute truth—a transcendental truth that includes the foundation for both moral law and human value—an unwavering truth which at times may even demand intolerance. It is a truth that only a God who is a righteous Judge and a loving Creator can establish.

Restoring Credibility and Confidence in the Christian Solution

To this point we have examined the short-comings of tolerance and the superiority of truth. But understanding the situation is only half the battle. As Christians, we are called to action. So how do we reach a world that is choking on its own tolerance?

First, we must remind ourselves of the authority and power of God's truth. In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us to "put on the full armor of God" as our defense against the enemy. In verse 14, Paul reminds Christians that first and foremost we are to "stand firm . . . having girded your [our] loins with truth." In a culture that is bearing down on Christians, we must remain steadfast and resist evil. We do so by preparing ourselves for the fight, by girding ourselves with the truth. It is the foundation for everything else. In the words of the late Ray Stedman,

Truth is reality, the way things really are. Therefore it is the explanation of all things. You know you have found the truth when you find something which is wide enough and deep enough and high enough to encompass all things. That is what Jesus Christ does.

The writer of Hebrews wrote that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and yes, forever." The truth of Christ is much more encompassing than anything this world has to offer.

Second, if you are walking in truth, you will discover that there is a time for both tolerance and intolerance. For example, Jesus associated with the sick, the poor, and the dejected. He shared meals with prostitutes, tax collectors, and criminals. Christ doesn't judge us by our skin color or social status, but by the condition of our hearts.

Unfortunately, Christians have a long way to go in matching His standard. All too often, we are hampered by racial differences and social barriers. Perhaps it's time that we began to raise our voice against injustice and not leave it up to the ebbing multiculturalist movement.

Yet as accepting as Jesus was, He was extremely rigid about the exclusiveness of His claims. Of all the choices in life, He tells us there is only one way, one truth, and one life—His. How much more exclusive, even intolerant, can you get? Christians need to remember that loving another person may sometimes mean being respectfully but firmly intolerant of what is not true.

Earlier I told of a conversation I had with a peer about Christianity. After I realized we had actually been disagreeing regarding our assumptions about truth, I started over. I asked him why tolerance was an issue of morality. He thought for a moment. Then I asked him how truth could possibly be relative, and we began questioning his own assumptions about morality. Finally, I shared C. S. Lewis's notion that any moral law, including his claims regarding tolerance, implies the existence of a Moral Law Giver. And by the end of the conversation, he was beginning to consider the possibility of God and his own accountability to Him.

This young man was not ready for a spiritual tract about the Gospel, but he was eager to hear about truth. And there are people everywhere—people you know—who are just like him. Without hearing a verse from Scripture, this man moved one step closer to his Creator. Why? Because, as Paul writes,

“truth is in Jesus.” That means that sharing truth is sharing Christ, no matter what form or fashion it takes.

Notes

1. Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1991}, 8-9.

2. S. D. Gaede, *When Tolerance is No Virtue* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993}, 12.

3. Lynn Minton, “Fresh Voices,” *Parade Magazine*, 11 June 1995, 10.

4. Gaede, 23.

5. Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987}, 26.

6. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994}, 16.

7. Ibid., 16.

8. Bloom, 26.

9. Veith, 59.

10. Gaede, 21.

11. Ibid., 36.

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