Kingdom Living in Our Culture

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LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 1

The Kingdom and Our Culture

How can Christians live for eternity without ignoring the present?

When Michael S. Horton looks at American evangelicalism, he sees a tradition whose global positioning system is out of whack. “Instead of being in the world but not of it,” he writes, “we easily become of the world but not in it.” As a result of this error, the church, society, and, especially, the children of believers suffer.

What is God’s kingdom supposed to look like? How does the kingdom come into being? Where do children fit in? These are the questions we’ll explore in this study.

Lesson #1

Scripture:

Based on:
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “How the Kingdom Comes” from Christianity Today magazine (included at the end of this study).

When Horton points out the incongruity of singing both “This World Is Not My Home” and “This Is My Father’s World,” he taps into a long-running discussion among Christians around the world: How should the church interact with surrounding society? The hymns suggest two answers, but the Christian tradition offers even more possibilities.

In 1949, historian and theologian H. Richard Niebuhr published a now-classic book on this subject, Christ and Culture. He posited five general Christian approaches to the church-society question, each with historical exemplars and scriptural warrants, and each with strengths as well as weaknesses. The first two describe church and society in either-or terms, and the last three aim at some version of both-and. In broad outline, the five approaches are:

1. Christ against culture: Christians should withdraw as much as possible from society to practice their own purity and stand as a witness.
2. Christ of culture: There should be no conflicts between Christianity and society, or between faith and rationality. If apparent conflicts arise, religion needs to be reinterpreted.
3. Christ above culture: Christians can honor Christ and culture together, as long as they keep Christ preeminent.
4. Christ and culture in paradox: Because we live under law and grace, Christians have different, though never completely conflicting, obligations inside and outside the church.
5. Christ the transformer of culture: Christians have a responsibility to extend Christ’s lordship to all sectors of society.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Which approach best describes the church in which you grew up? The church you attend now? Which approaches seem most and least promising to you, and why?

[Q] Which approach does Horton favor? How can you tell?

Optional activity: Fill in a chart with Scriptures, figures from church history, and current religious thinkers and trends that fit each of Niebuhr’s five approaches. (Christ and Culture gives several examples for each, if you want suggestions to start your thinking.)
PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Though God never changes, his kingdom on earth looks different in various times and places.

As Horton notes, God has not always given his people the same directions for relating to the rest of the world. Joshua 23:1–13 and Jeremiah 29:4–14 describe two different Old Testament scenarios. Jesus offered three additional glimpses of the kingdom in Matthew 13:24–33. Read all three passages.

[Q] Referring back to Niebuhr's five approaches, which does God instruct the Israelites to take in the Joshua passage? In the Jeremiah passage? Does Israel's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world change from Jeremiah 29:4–7 to Jeremiah 29:10–14?

[Q] What aspects of Israel's mission seem to change from Joshua to Jeremiah? What aspects stay the same? What might account for the differences?

[Q] Referring again to Niebuhr's five approaches, which correspond to Jesus' parables of the weeds, the mustard seed, and the yeast?

[Q] What aspects of the church's mission seem different in the three parables? What aspects stay the same?

[Q] How is the kingdom of God today like a man who sowed good seed in his field (note that the passage compares the kingdom to the sower, not to the good seed), like a mustard seed, and like yeast? Does the modern kingdom fulfill some of these roles better than others? Is it possible to pursue all of them at the same time?

Teaching point two: The kingdom is not something we create, but something we receive.

Horton writes, “The kingdom of God is never something that we bring into being, but something that we are receiving. Cultural advances occur by concentrated and collective effort, while the kingdom of God comes to us through baptism, preaching, teaching, Eucharist, prayer, and fellowship.” He draws this insight from Hebrews 12:28–29, which is worth examining in context (verses 14–29), along with one of the Old Testament passages it references (Exodus 19:10–13). Read both passages.

[Q] Both the Hebrews and the Exodus passages contain a mixture of activity and passivity on the part of God's people. What did God command the Israelites to do at Mount Sinai? What did God command Christians to do through the writer of Hebrews? In both instances, how does human activity relate to God's activity (i.e., does human activity cause God's activity, allow God's activity, make no difference, etc.)?

[Q] What is the relationship of human beings to a mountain (Hebrews 12:18–21)?
What is their relationship to, or role within, a city (Hebrews 12:22–24)? Do the contrasting images indicate fundamental differences between the old covenant and the new?

What does the author of Hebrews mean by writing that the kingdom “cannot be shaken”? By contrast, what elements of our churches and culture can be shaken?

In the same section of his article from which the above quotation is drawn, Horton writes of a “holy commonwealth” and a “pseudo-Christian subculture,” then notes that “the church is not really a culture.”

What are the differences between a commonwealth, a subculture, and a culture? Which do individuals have the greatest role in building? Which do individuals have the least role in building?

Why does Horton prefer the idea of a “holy commonwealth”? Do you agree with him?

Teaching point three: The health of a kingdom depends on its next generation.

As dangerous as it is for Christian adults to get distracted by the trappings of suburb and subculture, Horton writes, the peril for Christian youth is even greater. “The ‘pumped-up’ teens in our youth groups today are often tomorrow’s skeptics and burnouts,” he warns. He links his statements to Acts 2:39. Matthew 19:13–15 and Mark 9:42–50 give additional insights about the significance of children in the kingdom.

What is “the promise” of which Peter speaks in Acts 2:38–39? How is this promise related to the kingdom? How do children (and “all who are far off”) participate in the promise and, by extension, the kingdom?

What does Jesus mean in Matthew 19:14, when he says the kingdom “belongs to such as these [little children]”? Might this statement have multiple meanings? Why do you think the disciples resisted or misunderstood Jesus on this point?

Mark 9:42–50 contains some grim statements. Why is causing “one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” such a terrible error?

At the end of the Mark passage, Jesus disdains salt that has lost its saltiness. How does Horton express similar disdain for the evangelical subculture?

If consuming “hip Christian slogans,” “wholesome novels with Christian heroes,” and so forth does not make (young) Christians “salty,” what does?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

“Can churches be a counterculture amidst anonymous neighborhoods and tourist destinations, the apotheoses of individual choice, niche demographics, and marketing?” Horton asks. Though he believes the answer is yes, the challenge is obviously daunting. And though
mobilizing a counterculture takes massive communal effort, even nudges in the right direction can make a difference.

[Q] How could the flourishing of God’s kingdom reshape your “anonymous neighborhood”? Where do you see hints of the kingdom, and how can you help them grow?

[Q] Do you focus more on creating for God or receiving from him? Do you think God is calling you to be more active or more passive in his kingdom?

[Q] Horton suggests that much contemporary youth ministry, by attempting to cater to a specific demographic, actually hinders children’s participation in the kingdom. Has this been your experience, or the experience of your children? What could your church do to help bridge generational divides?

[Q] The next time you pray the Lord’s Prayer, what image or idea will you bring to mind upon reciting the phrase, “thy kingdom come”?

Optional activity: Pray the Lord’s Prayer as a group, pausing after the phrase “thy kingdom come” to allow each group member to add a personal reflection on the kingdom, silently or aloud.

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY

Recommended Resources

ChristianBibleStudies.com
- Church and State
- Government and Law
- Defining Our Role in Politics


The Gospel of the Kingdom, George Eldon Ladd (Eerdmans, 1959; ISBN 0802812805)


ARTICLE

How the Kingdom Comes

The church becomes countercultural not by what it gives, but by what it gets.

By Michael S. Horton, for the study, “The Kingdom and Our Culture”

It was confusing to grow up singing both “This World Is Not My Home” and “This Is My Father’s World.” Those hymns embody two common and seemingly contradictory Christian responses to culture. One sees this world as a wasteland of godlessness, with which the Christian should have as little as possible to do. The other regards cultural transformation as virtually identical to “kingdom activity.”

Certainly the answer does not lie in any intrinsic opposition of heaven and earth. After all, Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Rather, the answer is to be sought in understanding the particular moment in redemptive history where God has placed us. We are not yet in the Promised Land, where the kingdom of God may be directly identified with earthly kingdoms and cultural pursuits. Yet we are no longer in Egypt. We are pilgrims in between, on the way.

In Babylon, God commanded the exiles to “build houses and settle down,” pursuing the good of their conquering neighbors (Jer. 29). At the same time, he prophesied a new city, an everlasting empire, as the true homeland that would surpass anything Israel had experienced in Canaan.

So both of my childhood hymns tell the truth in their own way: We are pilgrims and strangers in this age, but we “pass through” to the age to come (not some ethereal state of spiritual bliss), which, even now in this present evil age, is dawning.

The challenge is to know what time it is: what the kingdom is, how it comes, and where we should find it right now.

Is Christianity a Culture?

In the Old Covenant, the kingdom of God was identified with the nation of Israel, anticipating the Last Day by executing on a small scale the judgment and blessings that will come one day to the whole world. Yet Jesus introduced a different polity with
the New Covenant. Instead of calling on God's people to drive out the Canaanites in holy war, Jesus pointed out that God blesses both believers and unbelievers. He expects his people to love and serve rather than judge and condemn their neighbors, even their enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; see also Matt. 7:1–6). The wheat and the weeds are to be allowed to grow together, separated only at the final harvest (Matt. 13:24–30). The kingdom at present is hidden under suffering and the Cross, conquering through Word and sacrament, yet one day it will be consummated as a kingdom of glory and power. First the Cross, weakness, and suffering; then glory, power, and the announcement that the kingdoms of this world have been made the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 11:15; see also Heb. 2:5–18).

So what is the relationship of Christians to culture in this time between the times? Is Jesus Christ Lord over secular powers and principalities? At least in Reformed theology, the answer is yes, though he is Lord in different ways over the world and the church. God presently rules the world through providence and common grace, while he rules the church through Word, sacrament, and covenantal nurture.

This means that there is no difference between Christians and non-Christians with respect to their vocations. "We urge you, brothers, to [love one another] more and more," Paul writes. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thess. 4:10–12). There are no calls in the New Testament either to withdraw into a private ghetto or to "take back" the realms of cultural and political activity. Rather, we find exhortations, like Paul's, to the inauspicious yet crucial task of loving and serving our neighbors with excellence. Until Christ returns, believers will share with unbelievers in pain and pleasure, poverty and wealth, hurricanes and holidays. A believer, however, will not be anxious about the future and will not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope," as Paul adds (1 Thess. 4:13), but will be energized in the most mundane daily pursuits by the knowledge that God will raise the dead and set everything right (1 Thess. 4:14–18). We groan inwardly for that final redemption with the whole of creation, precisely because we already have within us the Spirit as a down payment and guarantee (Rom. 8:18–25).

The earthly citizenship to which Jesus, Paul, and Peter referred is therefore a common sphere for believers and unbelievers. The second-century Epistle to Diognetus offers a self-portrait of the early Christian community:

For Christians are distinguished from the rest of men neither by country nor by language nor by customs. For nowhere do they dwell in cities of their own; they do not use any strange form of speech. ... But while they dwell in both Greek and barbarian cities, each as his lot was cast, and follow the customs of the land in dress and food and other matters of living, they show forth the remarkable and admittedly strange order of their own citizenship. They live in fatherlands of their own, but as aliens. They
share all things as citizens and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land. ... They pass their days on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven.

So Christians are not called to make holy apparel, speak an odd dialect of spiritual jargon, or transform their workplace, neighborhood, or nation into the kingdom of Christ. Rather, they are called to belong to a holy commonwealth that is distinct from the regimes of this age (Phil. 3:20–21) and to contribute as citizens and neighbors in temporal affairs. "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). The church, therefore, as the communion of saints gathered by God for preaching, teaching, sacrament, prayer, and fellowship (Acts 2:46–47), is distinct from the broader cultural activities to which Christians are called in love and service to their neighbors. In our day, this pattern is often reversed, creating a pseudo-Christian subculture that fails to take either calling seriously. Instead of being in the world but not of it, we easily become of the world but not in it.

But the church is not really a culture. The kingdom of God is never something that we bring into being, but something that we are receiving. Cultural advances occur by concentrated and collective effort, while the kingdom of God comes to us through baptism, preaching, teaching, Eucharist, prayer, and fellowship. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire' " (Heb. 12:28–29). There is nothing more important for the church than to receive and proclaim the kingdom in joyful assembly, raising children in the covenant of grace. They are heirs with us of that future place for those "who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age"—a holy land "which drinks in the rain often falling on it" and is "farmed" so that it reaps its Sabbath blessing (Heb. 6:4–8).

A Counterculture?

If the church is not to be identified with culture, is it necessarily a counterculture? If Christians as well as non-Christians participate in the common curse and common grace of this age in secular affairs, then there is no "Christian politics" or "Christian art" or "Christian literature," any more than there is "Christian plumbing." The church has no authority to bind Christian (much less non-Christian) consciences beyond Scripture. When it does, the church as "counterculture" is really just another subculture, an auxiliary of one faction of the current culture wars, distracted from its proper ministry of witnessing to Christ and the new society that he is forming around himself (Gal. 3:26–29). This new society neither ignores nor is consumed by the cultural conflicts of the day.

Recently, an older pastor told me that during the Vietnam era, two of his parishioners, one a war protestor and the other a veteran, were embroiled in a debate
in the parking lot, but then joined each other at the Communion rail with their arms around each other. Here was a witness to the Sabbath rest that awaits us, realizing that we still have, for the time being, vineyards to plant and wars to be for or against as citizens.

Too often, of course, the contemporary church simply mirrors the culture. Increasingly, we are less a holy city drawn together around Christ and more a part of the suburban sprawl that celebrates individual autonomy, choice, entertainment, and pragmatic efficiency. These are values that can build highways and commerce, but they cannot sustain significant bonds across cultural divides and between generations. Capitulating to niche demographics and marketing, churches that once nurtured the young, middle-aged, and elderly together, with all of the indispensable gifts that each one brings to the body of Christ, often now contribute to the rending of this intergenerational fabric. If this is a worrisome trend in the social sphere, it is all the more troubling for a body that is constituted by its Lord as a covenantal community.

To be truly countercultural, the church must first receive and then witness to Peter’s claim in Acts 2:39: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." The promise is not only for us, but also for our children. According to recent studies by sociologists like Christian Smith, evangelical teens are only slightly less likely than their unchurched friends to adopt a working creed of "moralistic, therapeutic deism." As the diet in our churches is increasingly determined by the spirit of the age, and as youth are treated as borderline cases to be cajoled into thinking God is cool, the church risks abandoning that promise. The "pumped-up" teens in our youth groups today are often tomorrow's skeptics and burnouts. They don't need more hip Christian slogans, T-shirts, and other subcultural distractions, but the means of grace for maturing into co-heirs with Christ.

Recently, CNN reporter Anderson Cooper was asked, "Do you think part of your job is to appeal to younger viewers?" "I've never been in a meeting where people said to bring in younger people," he replied. "I think the notion of telling stories differently to appeal to younger people is a mistake. Young people want the same kind of thing older viewers do: interesting, well-told, compelling stories. If you're somehow altering what you're doing because you want to get young viewers, that's a little bit like when your parents go out to buy 'cool' clothes for you." In our culture, relevance is determined—in fact, created—by publicity. But the Word creates its own publicity as it is preached, as the story is told. It creates its own relevance, and as a result, a community that spans the generations.

The promise is not only for us and for our children, Peter says, but "for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). And how does he call them? Through the preaching of the gospel. Peter's promise, in fact, is part of such a sermon, proclaiming Christ as the center of Scripture. Refusing to set a covenantal
church ("you and your children") against a missional church ("all who are far off"), the apostolic community stuck to its calling and became both an outpost and lightning rod for God’s saving activity in the world.

If ours is to truly be a countercultural community, it must begin with the rejection of any notion of self-founding, either in creation or redemption. It is God’s choice, not ours; God’s "planned community," not ours; God’s means of grace, not our ambitious programs, plans, or achievements that extend the kingdom. Being "countercultural" today often amounts to superficial moralism about sex and suvs, or perhaps creating wholesome novels with Christian heroes, removing offensive language from music lyrics, and encouraging positive values. Beyond that, many of the churches with which I am familiar are captivated by the same obsessions as our culture: religion as individual spirituality, therapy, and sentimentalism. It all serves to keep us turned in on ourselves, like a kid at a carnival instead of a pilgrim en route.

Describing the rapid decline of rural areas that are surrendering to strip malls and homogeneous multinational corporations, Wendell Berry argues, "We must learn to grow like a tree, not like a fire." Berry notes that we are losing our ability to take any place seriously, since this demands patience, love, study, and hard work—in other words, roots. Some use the word "seekers" to describe those we are trying to reach in this culture. But the truth is that they and we are more like tourists than seekers, let alone pilgrims, flying from place to place to consume experiences.

Can churches be a counterculture amidst anonymous neighborhoods and tourist destinations, the apotheoses of individual choice, niche demographics, and marketing? Yes. The church can exist amidst suburban sprawl as easily as in cities or small towns, precisely because its existence is determined by the realities of the age to come—by God’s work, rather than by the narrow possibilities of our work in this present age under sin and death. After all, this is our Father’s world, even though, for the moment, we are just passing through.

LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 2

Justice for All, One at a Time
Won’t you be a neighbor?

Perhaps your church has regular requests to stock food pantries or provide coats and mittens for needy families. These are good things, but it makes one think deeper about these people’s needs. Rudy Carrasco, an inner-city worker in Southern California, writes in a CHRISTIANITY TODAY article: “Now it’s the rare church that doesn’t engage in works of mercy and justice...While I celebrate this development, I worry that we are perilously weak at walking alongside the poor...I’ve found that it’s relatively easy to raise a voice in protest, and unfathomably hard to invest in a life.”

So, what is God’s view of people in need? What model does he give for ministry to the marginalized? How can we help at-risk people toward wholeness? This study will explore these issues.

Lesson #2

Scripture:

Based on:
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article from magazine (included at the end of this study).

Author and scholar Jonathon Kozol said, “We should try to remember that the challenge of the Scriptures, Old Testament and New Testament alike, was not to make a tax-deductible contribution once a year so that our own souls feel clean; it was a mandate to essential justice” (CHRISTIANITY TODAY, June 12, 2000).

Despite living in a culture rife with charities, social services, and experts, the number of hurting people around us continues to be overwhelming. Some groups talk about this problem as an issue of the poor needing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, while other groups point the finger at an unjust and oppressive system. Whatever our political stance, God doesn’t let us off the hook. His Word continues to challenge us on our responsibility to the poor and needy around us. As we look closely at Scripture, we can sense God’s heart for people in need, and we can see that heart behind his actions. The two come together in the Incarnation. God modeled for us in that act what he now commands: love your neighbor. As we live out that simple yet demanding call, we will see people through to wholeness. Rudy Carrasco echoes this by concluding his CHRISTIANITY TODAY article, “…The best way to get closer to doing justice for the poor is, quite simply, to get closer.”

Discussion starters:

[Q] How has your church been involved in ministry to people in need? How have you been involved?

[Q] Who are the needy people in your community?

[Q] Have you ever been in need? Who helped you in the midst of your need?

[Q] What, in your mind, is the solution to poverty?

[Q] What’s a good definition of poverty? Mercy? Justice?

PART 2
Discovering Biblical Principles

Teaching point one: God’s heart beats for people in need.

Dr. Amy Sherman, an urban ministries advisor, writes in her book Sharing God’s Heart for the Poor, “God requires us to worship him as he describes himself. We don’t have the right to construct our own picture of him. We must take him as he is. And he clearly wants us to know that a central, irreducible component of his self-identity is his love for the poor.”
We need to make sure we align our hearts with God’s heart. Read Psalm 68:4–5 and Proverbs 14:31.

[Q] What do these passages tell you about God’s heart?

[Q] What does God’s portrayal of himself in Psalm 68:4–5 do for your heart?

[Q] Why do you think oppression of the poor would show contempt for God? Why would kindness towards the needy be honoring toward God?

Read Psalm 146.

[Q] List all the ways the Lord is described here. What is his stance toward the poor?

[Q] Why would an all-powerful God value the needy?

[Q] Does your heart match God’s heart in this regard? What would need to change in you to more properly reflect God’s heart for the poor and needy?

Teaching point two: The Incarnation is our model for ministry to people in need.

Rudy Carrasco, in his article, writes:

[Jesus] was close to the poor who needed justice. The Messiah was sent to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and the arrival of the Jubilee year (Luke 4:18–19). He did this first by becoming incarnate, one of us. He did not commute from heaven in a fiery chariot. “The word became flesh,” says John, “and made his dwelling among us.”

The Incarnation is not an annual memorial service from which we can leave and go about our business. It is, rather, a model for our ministry to the people around us. Read John 1:1–18 and Matthew 22:34–40.

[Q] How is Jesus, or the Word, described in John 1? Make a list.

**Leader’s Note:** “The Word” has Old Testament roots and has the meaning of: wisdom, power, the action of God, a bridge between God and humanity, revelation. This Word, however, is more than a message from a prophet; this Word is a person to be known: the Son of God. See Hebrews 1:1–2.

[Q] What does it mean to you that Jesus came in the flesh, instead of just spirit? What is the message here for those who focus only on saving souls to the neglect of people’s physical needs?

**Leader’s Note:** Instead of saying the Word became a man or human, John says “flesh.” This was an overemphasis to those in the Gnostic movement, who in those days believed that flesh and matter were evil and that only the soul counted. In the Incarnation, God himself relates to us in spirit and flesh. He relates to us in the whole person. We are not just souls in a throw-away box.
Reread John 1:14. Jesus became our neighbor when he “made his dwelling among us” in the Incarnation. What are some ways Jesus modeled love of neighbor (Matthew 22:34–40)?

Why do you think “love of God” is so closely connected to “love for neighbor” in Matthew 22:34–40?

Someone has said that a definition of poverty could be: a lack of healthy connections. What do you think of that definition?

In light of this definition, how is the Incarnation an effective ministry model, especially in terms of the poor, oppressed, and needy?

How does “incarnational ministry” differ from some of the methods the church employs today?

Leader’s Note: Sometimes our ministry to those in need can be band-aid charity that actually serves to keep the person in poverty, whereas incarnational ministry lives with the other person to make healthy connections and to help them help themselves.

Someone said “the Word must always become flesh.” What do you think that means? Who needs you to be the Word-in-the-flesh for them?

What would it look like for you to love your neighbor, as modeled by Jesus?

Teaching point three: Neighborly love brings wholeness to people in need.

“I wonder what a church would look like that measured its success by the quality of its members’ neighborly love. What impact would such a church have on a troubled society if it undertook intentional training in loving God by loving neighbor? How different—how welcome—would be the model that commissioned its most gifted to the strategic office of neighbor,” wrote Dr. Robert Lupton, a Christian community development pioneer in Atlanta (Restoring At-Risk Communities, John Perkins, ed.; Baker Books, 1995). Jesus commands us to be neighbors to those in need. It sometimes seems, though, that the modern Christian understanding of neighbor has dissolved into simply being nice.


Who has been a Good Samaritan to you?

What might have been the reasons the priest and Levite passed by the victim? What justifications do people use today for not helping their neighbors? Which ones do you use?

What did the Samaritan sacrifice, or give up, to bring the victim on the road to full health?

Leader’s Note: He gave up: time, as he stopped; safety, as he stopped in a risky neighborhood; cloth for bandages; oil and wine that were probably meant for some
celebration; comfort, as he gave up his seat on the donkey; money for the innkeeper; more time after returning to the inn; and more money as he settled up the bill.

[Q] After reading the story of the Good Samaritan, what is a good definition of neighbor?

Leader’s note: One who practically, relationally, and sacrificially walks the person in need through to health and wholeness.

[Q] The Samaritan enlisted the help of the innkeeper to bring the man to health. Who could you partner with to serve those in need?

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

God’s Word calls followers of Christ to more than just acts of charity, and to more than just being nice. We are given the high calling of neighbor. In his article, Rudy Carrasco asks, “When did you last spend time with a poor person, an at-risk individual, or someone in need? When was the last time you were close to them for an extended period? I ask, because that’s what Jesus did...When working for justice, it is crucial to have personal proximity to injustice.”

[Q] Mother Teresa asked the probing question, “Do we really know our poor?” Where are they in your community? Who are they and what do they need? Pray for them.

[Q] Dr. Robert Lupton wrote, “Loving our neighbor is always preceded by being a neighbor.” Are there ways you have insulated yourself from the poor and marginalized? If so, how? How could you step out of your safety and comfort zones this month?

[Q] Using a concordance, search for words like: mercy, justice, neighbor, compassion, poor, needy. What does Scripture say on those topics? What do you find out about God? What does he require of us?

[Q] What gifts, talents, resources, and/or connections do you have that could be shared with those in need around you? How will you do so this month?

—Study by Kyle White, director of Neighbors’ House, a ministry to at-risk students in DeKalb, Illinois.
### Recommended Resources

1. **ChristianBibleStudies.com**
   - The Measure of Our Compassion
   - From Personal Faith to Social Action


4. **PRISM magazine** (bi-monthly publication of Evangelicals for Social Action; esa-online.org/prism)


6. **Sharing God's Heart for the Poor: Meditations for Worship, Prayer, and Service**, Amy L. Sherman (Hudson Institute and Trinity Presbyterian Church, 1999; order at: hudsonfaithincommunities.org/fic/toolkit.html)

Some Habits of Highly Effective Justice Workers
Protesting injustice is necessary, but not enough.

By Rodolpho Carrasco, for the study, “Justice for All, One at a Time”

Sixteen years ago, I took my undergraduate degree and headed straight to the ‘hood. Since then, I’ve lived one block from the corner of Howard and Navarro, an area that once had the highest daytime crime rate in Southern California. I’ve lived through the 1992 Rodney King riots, the 1996 welfare-reform bill, and the rise of compassionate conservatism. And I’ve lived through a small revolution in how Christians think about justice.

Not so long ago, evangelical Christians who served the poor often found themselves on the defensive among fellow believers. Now it’s the rare church that doesn’t engage in works of mercy and justice. Watching this evangelical wave of concern and action, I’ve been greatly encouraged. Yet as I listen to my fellow justice-impassioned Christ-followers, whether they are newbies or grizzled veterans, I often hear only part of the message of justice.

There is no shortage of protest across the political spectrum. Some promote fair trade over free trade and argue for turning the minimum wage into a living wage; they seek to strengthen immigrant rights and oppose racism. Others object to activist
judges, family-hostile state laws and school curricula, and porous borders. But increasingly, all these concerns are framed in terms of concern for the most vulnerable members of society. These issues rouse people out of their living rooms, out of the pews, and into society to work for change.

While I celebrate this development, I worry that we are perilously weak at walking alongside the poor, at investing directly into the lives of individuals to give them what they truly need—not what we believe they need or what our policy statements tell us they need. I’ve found that it’s relatively easy to raise a voice in protest, but unfathomably hard to invest in a life.

**Justice habits**

Growing up, I had to learn how to manage money, how to be a good employee, how to act in someone else’s house, how to study, and how to delay gratification. As an orphan in a poor East Los Angeles neighborhood, learning these things was a matter of life and death.

My mother died when I was 6. My father had already left us. My sister, 20 years old at the time, became mother, father, grandma, and grandpa for my other two siblings and me. She drilled those basic life skills into me. Alongside her were members of a small Baptist church who taught us the Scriptures, teachers who saw the potential in the Carrasco kids, and employers who held us accountable for our behavior on the job.

Years later, the Carrasco family had emerged from poverty, and I had a bachelor’s degree from Stanford. I went straight to northwest Pasadena to join Harambee Ministries and be a part of breaking the cycle of poverty. I initially assumed that youth in the community surrounding Harambee were learning what I had learned growing up. And some were. Others, however—many others—were failing to learn these most basic skills.

Take money skills. While some urban youth have a good grasp of personal finance, many don’t. How to manage a credit card, why to avoid check-cashing shops, why a good credit report is a critical tool in America—most youth on my street know almost nothing about these topics.

Those who lack knowledge and experience managing money must be taught. But here is where doing justice by investing in the personal development of the poor gets hard.

Imagine teaching a young adult male how to manage a salary that provides for housing, food, family expenses, transportation, and emergencies. He might complete a class at a church or community center. But will that information stick? Money management must be practiced in order to be truly learned. Is this young man getting the training he needs? More often than not, the answer is no, especially among fatherless young men. The older he is, the more bad habits he is likely to have accrued.
over the years. While he painstakingly unlearns those habits, he still has to make ends meet.

After seeing this pattern repeatedly in northwest Pasadena, I began to wonder where I learned about money. After all, at age 6 I was the at-risk poster child. I was “the poor.” But my sister was a math major—and that fact alone made a difference. When I was in fifth grade, she made me multiply the number of chores I had done by ten cents to arrive at my weekly “salary.” At various stages of my life, she instructed, cajoled, and held me accountable. One year, she gave me $4,000 and suggested I take up day trading. By prodding me to save, plan, and experiment, she helped me learn. It took years.

Then there came a day, as a young adult, when the problem was not understanding, but confidence. Deep down, I didn’t believe I could really hold on to money, that this particular Mexican would ever rise above his circumstances. I went through a severe crisis of self-doubt.

I had a lot of support from family and friends, yet it took a long time to learn what I know now about finances. Now add issues like education, employment, and marriage. There is no way around these basic life skills if a person is ever to escape poverty. The investment needed is long, sacrificial, and, frankly, tedious. Doing justice by walking alongside people as they develop critical life skills is not exciting. Protesting on Wall Street against globalization is exciting. Getting arrested at the courthouse is exciting. Filling the National Mall with hundreds of thousands of people is exciting. But staying proximate to people as they learn lessons they should have learned years ago? When’s the last time you saw that on CNN?

The dignity of accountability

It’s not just justice workers who need to accept responsibility for investing in the skills of the poor. The poor themselves must realize their capacity to overcome poverty.

In saying this, I’m not blaming the victim and letting powerful people and systemic powers off the hook. I mean nothing of the sort. What I’m getting at is something I learned from Harambee’s founder, John Perkins.

If you are down and out, Perkins would ask, are you going to sit back and wait for someone else to transform your situation? Are you going to rely on the very government, for example, that has failed you? Your best chance is to take responsibility for changing your circumstances. Yes, you will need support from others and policies shaped by protesters for justice, but you are the principal engine for change in your own life.

I believe that, for every person is created in God’s image. The same God who created the world ex nihilo has created us capable of great things. We are able, because
he is able. Because our dignity comes directly from God, it is not only possible for people to rise above their conditions—it should be expected.

Yet it took a disappointment for me to learn just how hard it is to put that theology into practice.

One teen we’d known since elementary school had a father who was nowhere to be found and a mother who struggled to raise him and his siblings. By his teen years, street vice had become attractive. We at Harambee intervened, drawing him into our lives and our programs. After he graduated from high school, we helped him find a job—a great job, in fact.

Then he got fired. The reasons weren’t complicated: He ignored rules, was often late for work, and was oblivious to his employer’s wishes.

Gradually, I realized where this young man had learned much of his poor work ethic: on our staff. I wanted him to stay close to our community and off the streets, so I made concessions when I felt that discipline might turn him away from us.

This young man was now another unemployed urban male. Seeing him on the street, the protester against injustice might easily surmise that racism, discrimination, a bad economy, or any number of social factors had made this young man a victim. But I knew differently. His circumstance wasn’t the result of injustice, but of a flaw in his work ethic, a flaw that could have been corrected.

Yes, my role in this young man’s drama was secondary. The primary responsibility lay with his own choices. But he was close to me for some time, and I failed to use the myriad opportunities I had to shape his character. I meant well, but I turned out to be part of the reason he found himself unemployed and broke a year out of high school.

Since then, we’ve revamped our youth jobs program. We’ve made it harder for students to get in. Once in, we work them, as we say in the ‘hood, like they stole something. We expect a lot of them. A new teen at Harambee has to demonstrate high character immediately, because many little children in our after-school program are watching everything these teenagers do.

It’s a lot of pressure on the teens, but they rise to the occasion—or they get the boot. Our present crop has a high work ethic, and I feel hopeful they will be very employable very soon. Even those we’ve given the boot to are stepping up in their responsibilities. I heard the other day that one recent high school graduate is working at Starbucks, getting solid hours, and learning the ropes. He’s been there for four months, and his employment future looks promising.

Get closer

When did you last spend time with a poor person, an at-risk individual, or someone in need? When was the last time you were close to them for an extended
period? I ask, because that’s what Jesus did. He was close to the poor who needed justice. The Messiah was sent to preach Good News to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and the arrival of the Jubilee year (Luke 4:18–19). He did this first by becoming incarnate, one of us. He did not commute from heaven in a fiery chariot. “The Word became flesh,” says John, “and made his dwelling among us.”

In urban ministry circles, we call this relocation. Many urban ministers intentionally live in the neighborhoods they seek to serve. Proximity builds trust with neighbors, especially if a racial divide must be crossed. Relocation also helps urban ministers discern the roots of need. A man may ask me every day for money. He’s down and out, he says. But if I live in that community, I’ll be able to discern if he is down and out because of systemic injustice or because he does not want to work. Then I’ll be able to share with him what he truly needs.

People in need of justice are not just in the inner city. Individuals and families are struggling in suburban and rural settings as well. In many cases, you do not need to relocate in order to meet a need. But when working for justice, it is crucial to have personal proximity to injustice.

Up close, the protest-oriented injustice-fighter may discover that some matters are best settled by a personal intervention, not a new law. The personal-responsibility injustice-fighter may discover that impersonal systems often devastate the lives of the poor, and that these systems must indeed be protested.

In either case, the best way to get closer to doing justice for the poor is, quite simply, to get closer.
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 3

Tilting at the Windmills of Culture

Can we realistically fight against culture?

In his great literary classic, Miguel de Cervantes gave us a wonderfully comedic picture of the legendary Don Quixote, who was a romantic in an age when Enlightenment logic was taking over the world. He was chivalrous at a time when individualism was robbing graciousness from society. He was an oddball who couldn’t see or hear well and was ridiculed as an out-of-touch misfit.

But when he dreamed of doing great deeds, was he wrong? Were his exploits mere madcap, or was Cervantes trying to tell us something about ourselves? Is there a way to be a “fool for Jesus” that allows us to be prophetic without becoming either lost in the whirlwinds of our time or defeated into Christian isolationism? Frederica Mathewes-Green explores this in her article “Loving the Storm Drenched.”

Lesson #3

Scripture:
Isaiah 40:15–24; Matthew 5:1–16; Romans 13:1–7; Galatians 5:22–23; Philippians 2:12–16a; Colossians 1:9–17

Based on:
“Loving the Storm Drenched,” by Frederica Mathewes-Green, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 2006
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “Loving the Storm Drenched” from Christianity Today (included at the end of this study).

A teenaged boy brought his report card home from school. For the third grading period in a row his grades were edging downward. When his parents challenged him about it, he shrugged his shoulders and said nonchalantly, “Sorry, I can’t help it. According to my sociology teacher my actions and abilities are the result of either heredity or environment, and whichever way you look at it, it’s your fault, not mine!”

Some things in life seem beyond our control. Just as one disease appears to be cured, two more deadly ones pop up. If an intolerant and sadistic dictatorship crumbles, the world hardly has time to take a breath before the evil shifts into other nations or terrorist movements. When certain forms of crime seem finally under control, whole new scandalous industries erupt in unlooked-for places. Is it heredity? Is it environment? Is it culture?

There is something in our world that keeps optimists happy and pessimists sour at the same time. Like Charles Dickens’ opening in his novel A Tale of Two Cities, it is always the best of times and the worst of times; it is always the spring of hope and the winter of despair; it is always the season of light as well as the season of darkness.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Spend some time exploring changes in the world as we know it. Are things getting better or worse? Is it some of both? What has changed most in the last century?

[Q] How do we judge the moral fiber of a society? Can we use the Ten Commandments? Why or why not?

[Q] If not the Ten Commandments, then what is our standard? What determines a nation’s collective sense of values? Is there such a thing? Should there be?

[Q] What role does organized religion play in the development of a national moral consciousness?

[Q] How did you come to own the moral values that guide your lifestyle today?

[Q] What similar influences are shared among members of your group, and which stories are unique to some individuals?

[Q] How do you hope to pass along to others (children, grandchildren, friends) moral values you believe are appropriate? How successful do you think you are at this? Why?
PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God continues to shape human society and history, even in a fallen world.

Read Isaiah 40:15–24. Even though Isaiah was writing about international politics in his day, the themes he explored remain vital for us. We believe in a God who is above all creatures and retains ultimate control over the destinies of rulers and nations. The prophets of the Old Testament had no problem judging the moral climate of the countries around them, just as they did not hesitate to challenge the cultural movements at home in Israel and Judah. Amos pointed an accusing finger all around the map of the Middle East, letting it fall last on Samaria. Ezekiel, from his distant vantage point in Babylon, charted God’s similar displeasure with the catalogue of all nations listed in the “Who’s Who” of his day.

Read Romans 13:1–7. The New Testament is no less clear on the matter of God’s interest in national politics and world cultures. Within a month or two of penning these words, the apostle Paul would be arrested by the very Roman governing authorities he here defends, and would spend at least four years trusting that through them God would spare his life and give him justice. While Paul may well have had questions about how societies functioned around him, he never came to a position of either helpless fatalism or cynical agnosticism. God is in control, even of nations that are not directly responsive to God’s presence in this world.

Finally, read Colossians 1:9–17. Here again, even more explicitly, Paul informed us that all nations and cultural powers derive their authority from Christ, by virtue of both creation and redemption. God is in control. We may not sense it day by day, but that is the sure testimony of Scripture. One 19th-century English novel has a grim character face the weather-beaten British seacoast and say, “As luck would have it, Providence was on our side.” His words were truer than he even knew. Whether we deem it luck or answered prayer, God still writes the rules of earth’s gaming board and ensures that no piece marches beyond its ordained boundaries.

When have you confidently felt the providential care of God? Tell a story of when God’s control prevented disaster or brought about hope and healing.

Mathewes-Green mentions some changes in attitudes that seem to fall in line with God’s prevailing desires for human life, such as growing awareness of the dangers of alcohol and tobacco use.

Can you name other trends that echo divine wisdom or Creator-instilled values that have grown in prominence over the years?

Optional Activity

Distribute copies of Abraham Lincoln’s second presidential inauguration speech. It can be found in many books or online (cf. http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html). Read the speech together and pay particular attention to the third paragraph. Notice how Lincoln affirms the leading of God while at the same time pushing back against the parochialism of regional or denominational expressions of Christian religion.

Giving special consideration to how our world has changed its views about slavery and human dignity over the centuries, answer these questions:
How much effect do you suppose the values of Christianity had on changing cultural perspectives on slavery in Europe and the United States? Are there other similar cultural shifts that have increased our social sensitivities to things that reflect God’s design for humankind as revealed in Scripture?

Mathewes-Green suggests that the sexually promiscuous and erotically-charged mores of our age may soon be considered as destructive as alcoholism and as unhealthy as tobacco use. What role should the church take in pushing moral values on society? Is it possible to lead prophetically without being seen as merely prudish?

Teaching point two: There are different theological perspectives on how Christianity can influence culture.

Read Philippians 2:12–16a. It is obvious in this passage that the apostle Paul believed we can and must make a moral difference in the societies where we live. All Christians, including theologians from varying traditions, believe that. But not all agree on the manner in which that influence is to be felt. This is what Mathewes-Green gets at in her article. No reasoning and reasonable Christian argues that culture in any society is exactly in tune with biblical theology. But different people express divergent views on how the church is to interact with and influence the stormy winds of its social context.

Some years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr attempted to outline the options in a book called Christ and Culture (Harper 1951). He suggested five ways in which Christians understand “culture” and their interaction with it:

- **Christ against Culture.** This view sees Christians as entirely counterculture, and since there is no possibility of changing culture, Christians should form their own small societies that deny the culture’s impact on their lives. These small societies, like Hutterite colonies or Amish neighborhoods, stand as a prophetic witness over against the values that drive the current social culture. The apostle John put it clearly when he wrote, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

- **Christ of Culture.** A second approach to Christian interaction with cultures is to see the best of the culture as already representing Christ and the gospel. Advances in medicine and science are thriving because they explore the wisdom of the Creator. Art and music, in their best forms (here there would be some form of judgment) are expressions of the glories of heaven. The church needs to affirm these and nurture them as testimonies of God’s goodness.

- **Christ above Culture.** In this perspective Christianity stands as the heartbeat of all proper civilization. To be a true gentleman is to be a fine Christian. To play a game fairly is to do so according to the Ten Commandments or the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Culture comes into its best expression when it is nurtured as a social reflection of the Church and its teachings.

- **Christ and Culture in Paradox.** Here one begins with the assumption that there are two realms in which we live and move: the “sacred” and the “secular.” Each is a given part of the world order. We are impoverished if we limit ourselves to only one sphere, so we move daily between each. At the same time, there is a unique set of rules governing each realm, and we ought not to confuse them. The Bible and doctrine guide the sacred; natural law and reason are the arbiters of the secular.
Christ the Transformer of Culture. The premise in this view is that we live in a well-created but fallen world. There is no dualism between sacred and secular because all has emerged from God’s good pleasure. At the same time, because sin and evil are like a parasitic virus on the good world God brought into being, it is necessary for the church and Christians generally to act in ways that blunt the sting of evil and push back the power of sin. This requires that we work to transform culture in attempts to restore its creaturely reflective glory.

While these categories and their explanations are continually discussed and revised, Niebuhr served the church well by providing a helpful context for understanding the differences we express in various theological communities. In fact, Mathewes-Green is seeking to promote her point of view about culture-consciousness over against another one or two of these perspectives. In other words, Mathewes-Green has chosen one of Niebuhr’s categories as her home turf when she analyzes both the power of culture and the appropriate Christian response to it.

Similarly each of us, along with the church communities we are a part of, have adopted a particular stance toward culture, and in doing so have begun to promote our Christian morality through what we deem to be appropriate channels. The sermons we hear on Sunday reinforce our views. If they don’t, we switch churches. When we join or build small groups, we tend to affiliate with people who hold to much the same ideas as we do. The challenge for us is to begin to see beyond our chosen prejudices, even if they appear to be theologically grounded, and understand alternative approaches.

If you were to place Mathewes-Green in one of Niebuhr’s approaches to the relationship between Christ and Culture, which would it be? Why? Substantiate your choice with actual quotes from her article.

Now try to analyze the congregation or denomination of which you are a part. Which of Niebuhr’s five families would you place yourselves in? Why? Do you have specific doctrinal statements or Sunday sermons which help to identify it?

Optional Activity:

Take some time, perhaps in subgroups of your gathering, to reflect on Mathewes-Green’s thesis: we can’t change culture because it is always big and always bad, and it is not our primary concern. Rather, we must invest in helping individuals who have been battered by culture. Using each of Niebuhr’s identifying markers for differing perspectives, try to answer Mathewes-Green’s thesis from each.

What would someone influenced by the “Christ against Culture” perspective say to Mathewes-Green? What about someone shaped by the “Christ of Culture” view? The “Christ above Culture” approach? The “Christ and Culture in Paradox” orientation? The “Christ the Transformer of Culture” understanding? (If you have broken into sub-groups to discuss these, report your ideas back to the full group.)

Focus on a specific issue: perhaps housing for the poor, regulation of the media, the control of prostitution, or gambling licensing practices. Filter the social needs and perspectives of the issue you choose through each of Niebuhr’s five types of Christian response. If you are working in sub-groups, have each analyze the same issue and then report back to the full group for feedback and response.
Teaching point three: Regardless of our theological perspective on the big issues, Christian morality requires that we faithfully serve those in need.

Read Matthew 5:1–16. Jesus made it clear that we are the reflected light of God’s glory in this world. To live in harmony with God’s heart is to express love, joy, graciousness, and all of the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22–23) in various manifestations of goodness. This is not just to win converts, although the evangelistic thrust of the gospel is always an imperative. This is a way of life that makes an impact on others around us.

[Q] How do people in your neighborhood know of your faith in God? What idea of God do they get from watching you in your daily activities?

[Q] What would the community be like if your church suddenly disappeared? Would anyone notice? Why or why not?

[Q] What strategies are in place to ensure that your church addresses the needs of those who, according to Mathewes-Green, have been hurt by culture? How will those who are hurting find the services you offer?

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

Mathewes-Green ends her article with a challenge. Whatever our views and theological understandings about culture, no one can deny the action component of the gospel. We are called to live, act, and be Christ in our communities and world. The service we bring in the name of Jesus has two primary faces. One is relief: we rescue those who are dying; we feed those who are hungry; we protect those who are traumatized; we shelter those who are homeless. The other is development: we teach practices that lead to safety, health and well-being; we provide tools for long-term agricultural support; we establish hospitals and clinics; we nurture community values that support life rather than death.

[Q] What rescue effort in the name of Jesus will you be part of in the week ahead?

[Q] What development ministry will you engage in, so that a community ravaged by pain or ignored by society may find greater strength and well-being?

—Study prepared by Wayne Brouwer, who teaches in the Religion Department at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Wayne is author of numerous books and many studies in this series.
Additional Resources

- Culture: Love It, Leave It, or Transform It
- Government and Law
- America: A Nation of Pagans or Christians?
- The Kingdom and Our Culture
- Should Christians Have Power?
- How Shall We Defend the Pledge of Allegiance?
- The Measure of Our Compassion

- Becoming a Person of Influence, John C. Maxwell and Jim Dornan (Nelson, 1997; ISBN 0785271007)
- Involvement, John Stott (Revell, 1984; ISBN 0800714385)
- Reinventing Your Church, Brian D. McLaren (Zondervan, 1998; ISBN 0310216540)
- Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together and Doing It Right, John M. Perkins (Baker, 1995; ISBN 080105463X)
Body Loving the Storm-Drenched

We can no more change the culture than we can the weather. Fortunately, we’ve got more important things to do.

By Frederica Mathewes-Green, for the study, “Tilting at the Windmills of Culture”

If you hang around with Christians, you find that the same topic keeps coming up in conversation: their worries about “the culture.” Christians talk about sex and violence in popular entertainment. They talk about bias in news reporting. They talk about how their views are ignored or misrepresented. “The culture” appears to be an aggressive challenge to “the church,” and Christians keep worrying over what to do about it. You soon get the impression that Church, Inc., and Culture Amalgamated are like two corporations confronting each other at a negotiating table. Over there sits The Culture—huge, complex, and self-absorbed. It’s powerful, dangerous, unpredictable, and turbulent. The Church is smaller, anxious; it studies the culture, trying to figure out a way to weasel in.

But there are flaws in this picture. For one thing, neither party is as monolithic as it seems. There are many devout believers among the ranks of journalists and entertainers, and there are even more culture-consumers among the ranks of devout believers. Indeed, it’s almost impossible to avoid absorbing this culture; if you sealed the windows, it would leak under the door. I once heard a retreat leader say she’d attempted a “media fast,” but found the gaudy world met her on every side. “I may be free in many ways,” she said, “But I am not free to not know what Madonna is doing.”

Furthermore, the Church is not a corporation; rather, it is incorporate, or better, incarnate, carried in the vulnerable bodies of fallible individuals who love and follow Jesus Christ. The Culture is even less of an organization. It is more like a photomosaic, composed of tiny faces, faces of the millions of people—or billions, rather, thanks to the worldwide toxic leak of American entertainment—who are caught up in its path.

The influence of the culture on all those individuals, including Christians, is less like a formal institution and more like the weather. We can observe that, under current conditions, it’s cloudy with a chance of cynicism. Crudity is up, nudity is holding steady, and there is a 60 percent chance that any recent movie will include a shot of a man urinating. Large fluffy clouds of sentimental spirituality are increasing...
on the horizon, but we have yet to see whether they will blow toward or away from Christian truth. Stay tuned for further developments.

As Mark Twain famously remarked, everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it. The joke, of course, is that you can’t do much about the weather, and I think much of our frustration is due to trying to steer the weather, rather than trying to reach individuals caught up in the storm.

It’s possible to influence weather within limits, to seed clouds for rain, for example. And it is right for us to consider what we can do to provide quality fiction, films, and music, and to prepare young Christians to be responsible journalists. We can do some things that can help improve ongoing conditions. But it is futile to think that we will one day take over the culture and steer it. It’s too ungainly. It is composed of hundreds of competing sources. No one is in control of it.

What’s more, it is already changing—constantly, ceaselessly, seamlessly—changing whether we want it to or not, in ways we can’t predict, much less control. If you take the cultural temperature at any given moment, you will find that some of the bad things are starting to fade, and improvement is beginning to appear; simultaneously, some good things are starting to fall out of place, and a new bad thing is emerging.

Not only can we not control this process, we can’t even perceive it, until changes are so far developed as to be entrenched. Chasing the culture is a way to guarantee that you will always be a step behind the times.

**Waiting for fun to hurt**

One of my favorite classic films is *It Happened One Night* (1934), starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. This comedy won five Academy Awards and deserved them; it has some of the most original characters and clever writing you’ll find in any American film. The underlying premise is that a couple will not have sex before marriage, and this romantic tension drives the plot.

Yet that does not guarantee uniform “positive values.” In *It Happened One Night* everyone smokes, including the heroine (while wearing her wedding gown). It’s not even safe smoking: we see the hero light up in a haystack. What’s more, the hero regularly directs physical threats at the heroine; he says, for example, “She needs someone to take a sock at her once a day, whether she’s got it coming to her or not.” While the cultural barometer in recent decades has been falling on sexual morality, indicators for smoking and violence against women have indisputably improved.

But the most striking element is the attitude toward drunkenness. The first time we see Gable’s character he is roaring drunk, and this is assumed to be hilarious. His drunkenness is encouraged and subsidized by other characters. In the post-Prohibition decades, being drunk (as opposed to merely drinking) was seen as rebellious, cool, and fashionable, and people who objected were depicted as prudes
and squares. That fad eventually passed, when the damage done by alcoholism could no longer be romanticized away.

Now, in the post-sexual revolution decades, being promiscuous is seen as rebellious, cool, and fashionable, and people who object are depicted as prudes and squares. That fad too will eventually pass, when the damage done by abortion, divorce, and sexually transmitted diseases can no longer be romanticized away.

We cannot instigate this change by appealing to morality, but simple common sense has a stubborn tendency to re-emerge. By the 70s it was becoming apparent that alcoholism dealt too much disease, divorce, and family disintegration to be all that funny. This change was not achieved by the mocked Women’s Christian Temperance Union finally coming up with the bulls-eye slogan that would “change hearts and minds.” Instead, people just came to their senses.

But note that when the WCTU is mentioned today, it’s still seen as a bastion of prudes and squares. They were not vindicated, even though they turned out to be right. And it may be the same with us. We may always be seen as prudes and squares. Despite this, sexual common sense is likely to re-emerge. (It happened once before: films of the 1920s through 1950s reflect an acceptance of male adultery that would be horrifying today. We presume that these old movies will showcase “old-fashioned values,” and they do; we just don’t realize what those values were.) So sometimes cultures shift for the better. When so-called fun hurts enough, people stop doing it.

The pounding storm

The culture, then, is like the weather. We may be able to participate in it in some modest ways, seeding the clouds, but it is a recipe for frustration to expect that we can direct it. Nor should we expect positive change without some simultaneous downturn in a different corner we weren’t watching. Nor should we expect that any positive change will be permanent. The culture will always be shifting, and it will always be with us.

God has not called us to change the weather. Our primary task as believers, and our best hope for lasting success, is to care for individuals caught up in the pounding storm. They are trying to make sense of their lives with inadequate resources, confused and misled by the Evil One, and unable to tell their left hand from their right (Jonah 4:11). They are not a united force; they are not even in solidarity with each other, apart from the unhappy solidarity of being molded by the same junk-food entertainment. They are sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless (Matt. 9:36). Only from a spot of grounded safety can anyone discern what to approve and what to reject in the common culture.

But we must regretfully acknowledge that we too are shaped by the weather in ways we do not realize. Most worryingly, it has induced us to think that the public
square is real life. We are preoccupied with that external world, when our Lord’s warnings have much more to do with our intimate personal lives, down to the level of our thoughts.

So, when Christians gather, there’s less talk about humility, patience, and the struggle against sin. Instead, there’s near-obsessive emphasis on the need for a silver-bullet media product that will magically open the nation to faith in Jesus Christ. Usually, the product they crave is a movie. Now, I’m delighted that Christians are working in Hollywood; we should be salt and light in every community that exists, and so powerful a medium clearly merits our powerful stories. But it’s telling that the media extravaganza so eagerly awaited is not a novel or a song, something an individual might undertake, but a movie: something that will require enormous physical and professional resources, millions of dollars, and, basically, be done by somebody else.

This focus on an external, public signal is contrary to the embodied mission of the Church. Christ planned to attract people to himself through the transformed lives of his people. It’s understandable that we feel chafed by what media giants say about us and the things we care about, and that we crave the chance to tell our own side of the story. It’s as if the world’s ballpark is ringed with billboards, and we rankle because we should have a billboard too. But if someone should actually see our billboard, and be intrigued, and walk in the door of a church, he would find that he had joined a community that was just creating another billboard.

A Common Enemy

One excellent way to see how much our culture’s passing weather patterns have influenced us is to read old books. If you receive all your information from contemporary writers, Christian or secular, you will never perceive whole concepts that people in other generations could see. (For example, earlier generations of Christians perceived a power in sexual purity that eludes us completely; we can only fall back on “don’t”s.) Every Christian should always have at his bedside at least one book that is at least fifty years old—the older the better.

Sure, you can make yourself read the contemporary magazines and authors you disagree with, but even they share the same underlying assumptions. It’s as if we see our “culture war” opponents standing on the cold peak of an iceberg and, from our corresponding peak, all we can see between is an expanse of dark water. But underneath that water, the two peaks are joined in a single mass. The common assumptions we share are invisible to us, but they will be perceived, and questioned, by our grandchildren.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful passage on this phenomenon in his introduction to St. Athanasius’ “On the Incarnation”: “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good
at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.”

When we read old books we discover the assumptions we have absorbed from our cultural moment, not just about the content of our discussions, but their style. We expect that combatants will be casual, rather than formal. We expect that their arguments will be illustrated by popular culture, rather than the classics or history. Conservatives and liberals agree that it is admirable to be rebellious and challenge authority, and both sides are at pains to present the other side as authority.

More serious, however, is a tone of voice we adopt from the culture: sarcastic, smart-alecky, jabbing, and self-righteous. We feel the sting of such treatment, and give it right back; we feel anger or even wounded hatred toward those on the “other side.” But God does not hate them; he loves them so much he sent his Son to die for them. We are told to pray for those who persecute us, and to love our enemies. The weight of antagonistic and mocking big-media machinery is the closest thing we’ve got for practicing that difficult spiritual discipline. If we really love these enemies, we will want the best for them, the very best thing we have, which is the knowledge and love of God.

Smart-alecky speech doesn’t even work. It may win applause but it does not win hearts. It hardens the person who feels targeted, because he feels mocked and misrepresented. It increases bad feeling and anger. No one changed his mind on an issue because he was humiliated into it. In fact, we are misguided even to think of our opponents in the “culture wars” as enemies in the first place. They are not our enemies, but hostages of the enemy. We have a common Enemy who seeks to destroy us both, by locking them in confusion, and by luring us to self-righteous pomposity.

Culture is not a monolithic power we must defeat. It is the battering weather conditions that people, harassed and helpless, endure. We are sent out into the storm like a St. Bernard with a keg around our neck, to comfort, reach, and rescue those who are thirsting, most of all, for Jesus Christ.

—Frederica Mathewes-Green

“Loving the Storm Drenched,” by Frederica Mathewes-Green, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 2006
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 4

Living in a Culture of Sexual Immorality
Our response can invite or dissuade others to redemption.

Sexual drama pervades our culture. Sex sells clothes, cosmetics, boats, books, cars, movies, and music. Sexual expression is a highly coveted and hotly contested freedom. In our permissive society, God’s good purposes for sex are distorted and misunderstood in myriad ways.

So how are we to live in such a society? Should we burrow ourselves away, leaving the world to its wicked ways? Or do we head the other way, wanting so much to reach the world that we ignore and even accept its sexual standards? Is there a way to live righteously and spread the redemptive love and truth of God to those we live among? This study addresses these questions, using an article by Mark Buchanan from LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

Lesson #4

Scripture:

Esther 2:1–18; Daniel 1; Jonah 3

Based on:

"Sex & the City of God,” by Mark Buchanan, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL, Winter 2006
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Sex & the City of God" from LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (included at the end of this study).

Just when you thought the greeting card racks had all the bases covered, someone found a remaining untapped market: mistresses. The Secret Lover Collection is “committed to providing a greeting card collection with empathy and understanding, without judgment, to lovers involved in a secret relationship.”

The woman behind the collection, Cathy Gallagher, says she launched it to help the unfaithful “express their emotions”—and to cash in, since “there’s a huge, untapped market.”

How do you market greeting cards for the unfaithful? Very subtly. “There won’t be a big banner that says ‘Infidelity,’ she says. Cards will be displayed under labels like, “Love Expressions,” and “Intimacy.” Card messages include slogans like, “I used to look forward to the weekends, but since we met they seem like an eternity.” And (for those special holiday occasions) “As we each celebrate with our families, I will be thinking of you.” (Alex Johnson, “When You Care Enough to Risk Everything,” msnbc.com, 8-17-05)

Discussion starters:

[Q] When did you first realize that Christians had a different sexual standard than society?

[Q] What changed in your thinking when you adopted the Christian point of view? Was (is) it hard or easy to change this thought pattern?

[Q] How does society decide right and wrong concerning sexual issues?

[Q] How do you respond to those who hold a different sexual standard than you do? Do you ignore it, condone it, or condemn it?

[Q] What influences in society fly against your standards (music, movies, books)? How do you deal with those influences?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Shunning the sexually immoral from a safe distance is not the way of grace and redemption.

Read Jonah 3.
In his article “Sex & the City of God,” Buchanan reflects on the mission and character of Jonah. Jonah stands in prophetic, righteous indignation over the society of Nineveh.

For us to appreciate more fully what Jonah was feeling and doing, we have to understand something of the times in which he lived. Israel, during the days of David and Solomon, had been a major player in Middle Eastern politics. Solomon’s rule stretched all the way to Egypt in the south and beyond Damascus in the north. Every country within several hundred miles found strength and security by joining in alliances with Solomon’s Israel.

But when Solomon died in 931 B.C., he left his grand kingdom to a silly and spoiled son. Rehoboam had none of the grace or wisdom of his father and bumbled his way into the poorhouse. When citizens of the realm petitioned him to lower taxes now that Solomon’s massive building projects were complete, Rehoboam listened only to the advice of his playboy friends. Rather than showing compassion for his people, Rehoboam insulted them by stating that he was about to increase levies astronomically so that he would have more wealth for personal splurging and carousing.

Everyone but Rehoboam could have predicted the result: most of the nation mutinied and followed Solomon’s chief of staff Jeroboam to birth a new and rival nation. They even stole the name Israel for their official stationery! Rehoboam was left with tiny Judah, while Jeroboam went off to consolidate his new kingdom, even establishing a new place of worship that disintegrated into new theologies, gods, and goddesses.

Meanwhile old alliances were crumbling, and the nation of Assyria caught the expansionist bug. In a short while, its cruel armies deployed a death wave that scorched every country in its wake, including Israel. God’s prophets said the Assyrian scourge was the way God would punish his people for turning from him. None could deny the righteousness of God’s indignation. But what bothered some was that the Assyrians were far worse than the Israelites. How could God use such an evil whip to chastise his own moderately naughty child?

Into this situation, against his own will, marched Jonah. He was told by God to preach judgment on the people of Assyria’s capital city Nineveh. Jonah was caught in a conundrum: first of all, he would be an enemy in his opponent’s front yard. It would be like rolling around in a minefield. He would be blown to bits before nightfall.

But second, Jonah knew that God always means business. If God commanded Jonah to preach, God expected the Assyrians to repent. And if the Assyrians repented, they would no longer be Jonah’s enemies, and he would not be able to hate them anymore. This is why Jonah first tried to run away—he did not want the Assyrians to change; he wanted them to be big, bad, ugly, and sinful—and rightfully despised and hated by Jonah’s kind.

This is the stance Buchanan often finds in the church when it comes to dealing with the sexual promiscuity of our culture. We don’t like it. We throw stones at it. We preach against it. But sometimes we do so to feel better about ourselves rather than to effect change and redemption in others. We love to hate the world in order to pretend we are good people. If someone else can consume our indignation, we are afforded a break from looking too closely at ourselves. Like Jonah, we can justify our own pettiness and hatred by covering it over with supposedly righteous anger.

[Q] When was the last time you heard other Christians condemning deviant sexual behavior in our culture? What was the topic? What was the tone? Who were the bad guys? What action was suggested on the part of the church?
Take the issue of homosexuality. In what ways has the church been like Jonah: smugly condemning the sinful, without genuinely extending God’s grace?

Rather than simply railing against the immorality of our culture, how could we show others God’s love and the opportunity for repentance?

Buchanan says “we should stop preaching morality and start preaching purity.” How is trying to impose morality less effective than calling others to a life of purity?

Teaching point two: Embracing and endorsing immorality also does not bring redemption.

Read Esther 2:1–18.

Esther is often extolled among us as a kind of folk hero. Here she is, an orphan in a strange country, and she manages to keep her integrity while rising to a position of influence where she can avert the annihilation of her people. What a woman!

But the context of Esther’s experience may rob it of some of its glow. Take the name of her cousin Mordecai, for instance. It means “Marduk’s servant.” Marduk was the great god of the Babylonians to whom Nebuchadnezzar paid particular allegiance. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar believed it was his life mission to build the great city of Babylon as a shrine to Marduk. So why was a Jew proudly wearing a badge of belonging to a pagan deity?

Second, consider the times. King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) was the son of Darius the Great and ruled the vast Persian Empire from 485–465 B.C. These dates may mean little to us until we understand that Darius’ distant cousin, Cyrus the Great, issued a decree allowing and urging the Jews to go home to Judea from their exile in Babylon in the year 537 B.C. Yet during the days of Xerxes, 50 years later, Mordecai and Esther lived thousands of miles from the homeland promised them by their God. Indeed, the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt in 515 B.C., and the community in Judea was crying out for people and resources to bring viability and social health back to the region. But many of the Jews remained in Babylon and Persia because life there was easier. They had adapted to the culture and remained synergistically attached to it.

Third, think through what it meant for Mordecai and Esther to invest themselves in the “Miss Universe” pageant organized for Xerxes. He was, according to historical reports, a somewhat petulant ruler at best. The Book of Esther seems to confirm this, showing Xerxes as excessive in wasteful partying, easily duped by advisors, and wimpy when it came to doing the right thing. While a beauty pageant may be a borderline investment for a pious person in the best of times, the circumstances surrounding this event were highly questionable: it was based upon the inappropriate dethroning of Queen Vashti; it arose out of sexually charged male chauvinism that was seeking to promote cultural female subjugation; its primary criteria for assessment was physical attraction; and it required Esther to cloak her religious and ethnic identity. Was it appropriate for a supposedly devout young woman to play this game?

For reasons like these, Buchanan charges Esther and Mordecai with cultural compromise and assimilation. He also draws the analogy to contemporary North American Christianity. In the church’s desire to be relevant, does it ever sell out? As Christians who live in a culture shaped by a plethora of values, how do we interpret the command of Jesus to live in the world but not be of it?
Buchanan points particularly to sexual mores. Recent studies have shown that evangelical Christians share all the relational practices of general North American society: premarital intercourse, cohabitation outside of marriage, addictions to pornography, abortion and divorce rates, even incidence of spousal abuse. Interestingly, in 2005 a pastor’s daughter from Bellflower, California, became Miss California Teen and went on to win runner-up status in the national Miss Teen USA pageant. Or take entertainers Ashley and Jessica Simpson: their father was a youth pastor who left that calling to promote his daughters’ careers in Hollywood and beyond. It seems, as Walt Kelly said through his comic strip character Pogo, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

[Q] Was Esther doing something proper, improper, or neutral when she stepped into Xerxes’ beauty queen contest? Explain your answer.

[Q] Where do you see compromise and accommodation to culture most prevalent among churched people? How does it show itself in lifestyle? How does it affect testimony and witness?

[Q] Is there, or should there be, a uniquely Christian cultural lifestyle, complete with clothing styles, dating habits, and marriage practices? Why or why not?

[Q] Buchanan suggests the opposite of Jonah’s “shun and denounce” approach is Esther’s “embrace and extol.” How do Christians sometimes embrace and extol the sexual norms of our society?

[Q] In what ways must the church be relevant with regard to sexual norms in order to witness to its culture?

[Q] When does being relevant cross the line to endorsing immoral sexual behavior?

[Q] How might irrelevancy be seen as attractive, helpful, or hopeful to those caught in the negative effects of culture?

Teaching point three: Walking in righteousness and integrity is the best witness of God’s truth and redemption.

Read Daniel 1.

Daniel lived between Jonah and Esther on the calendar of time. The Assyrians had been trumps by the Babylonians when Daniel was a boy. By the time he finished high school (or its Jerusalem equivalent), Nebuchadnezzar’s nation was gobbling up the ancient Near East. Rolling through the mountains of Judah, the Babylonian armies first surrounded Daniel’s home city in 607 B.C. Within a few months, the city capitulated and a puppet government was installed. Dozens of the leading families were forced to give up their brightest sons, who were then taken back to Babylon with the retreating armies. These young achievers were enrolled at Babylonian University to be spin-doctored; they were to learn the culture, language, religion, politics, economics, law, and philosophies of Babylon so that, in a few years, they could be sent back to Jerusalem as good Babylonian leaders who would bring their families, friends, and society into the new Babylonian age. That’s the background to the first scenes in the Book of Daniel.
Before these young adults were fully trained, however, two more rebellions erupted in Jerusalem. In the end the Babylonians decided that the city and its people weren’t worth the effort of retooling as a Babylonian province, and in 586 the city and its temple were destroyed. Daniel and his friends were stranded in Babylon. Every fiber in the fabric of their universe screamed for them to assimilate into Babylonian high culture and forget the forgotten cause of their old country, ways, and religion.

But not Daniel and his three friends. They went with the plan of their captors in all possible ways, but preserved their religious worldview and its practices. They lived in the Babylonian world but were clearly never of it.

What is it that drove Daniel and his friends to retain their religious identity in a world that was so completely stacked against them? How did they navigate the distinctions between living in a foreign culture and staying true to their faith?

Buchanan writes that Daniel “stands between the extremes of Esther and Jonah. He ... had neither Jonah’s surly, haughty ways, nor Esther’s coy, accommodating manner. He had simple clarity and quiet integrity.”

**Q** How can we find the place of clarity and quiet integrity as we live among a sexually immoral culture? What is the godly approach to people in that culture, the point between haughtiness and accommodation?

**Q** How does this approach offer the best opportunity for others to see the love and truth of God?

**Q** How should the church respond to those living sexually immoral lifestyles? How will the response differ with those on the periphery of church life, who are just exploring the faith, and those who are active church members and yet live by secular sexual standards?

**Q** What role should sex education have in a church discipleship curriculum? What would it look like? What ideas and practices should be taught?

**Q** How should the church work with those seeking to be married? Do pastors have to officiate at marriages just because couples ask? Should certain criteria be met before pastors agree to do the deed? Should a board of elders or deacons be involved in the process? If so, in what way?

**Q** Some states (Louisiana, for instance) are encouraging the use of marriage covenants to spell out the terms of the relationship and its obligations. Is this a path the church should endorse? What might be fitting stipulations in a Christian marriage covenant? Who should enforce these—the church, the state, both? How?

**Optional Activity:** As a group, devise a meaningful marriage covenant that could be signed by those seeking to be married in your church. Think through what values it should promote and what kinds of stipulations it should require of those entering marriage in the context of God’s design and blessings.
PART 3

Apply Your Findings

The last part of Buchanan’s article is a story about pastors at a conference arguing over the church’s role in defining and nurturing strongly countercultural sexual mores and behaviors. *(Note to Leader: it may be helpful to have someone read the story aloud to the group at this time.)*

Buchanan says the church should promote purity rather than impose morality. He also argues that more people will be attracted to a church with strong ideals than one with broadly tolerant theology.

[Q] What is your reaction to Buchanan’s implications and claims? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Action Plan—spend some time as a group on one of the following activities:

- Invite your pastor to join you for an hour to explain her or his marriage preparation activities. Dialogue about standards for marriage, views on divorce and remarriage, and the best way to handle situations where there is cohabitation or ongoing premarital sex. NOTE: treat your pastor with kindness and respect! She or he is always working in an environment where people are pressing for compromise and accommodation, and your encouragement is much more beneficial than your critique. Close the hour by laying hands on your pastor and praying for wise congregational and community leadership in these areas.

- Devise a plan to pair members of your group with teens for somewhere between several months and a year. The purpose of the new relationships would be to show interest in the teens, learn from them about their practices of dating and sexual behavior, and attempt to mentor them in biblical sexual values by way of testimony and example.

- Work with your pastor to develop a marriage preparation seminar to be offered to couples seeking to be married in your church. Plan with your pastor how many sessions there would be and what topics would be covered. Then participate in these sessions by telling your own stories as your pastor suggests and invites. Be honest in sharing lessons you have learned, your values, your struggles, and your ideals about marriage in the Lord.

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Study prepared by Wayne Brouwer, who teaches in the Religion Department at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Wayne is author of numerous books and many studies in this series.
Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - 1 Corinthians: Sex from God’s Point of View
  - Christian Teens and Sex
  - Sex and the Christian Couple
  - Sex as God Designed It
  - Sex Excess
  - Marriage
  - The Sensuality Snare


- Fit to Be Tied, Bill Hybels and Lynne Hybels (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN 0310214653)


- Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living, Lewis B. Smedes (Eerdmans, 1994; ISBN 0802807437)
ARTICLE

Sex & the City of God
How do we respond to a corrupted culture? Two faulty examples and a better one.

By Mark Buchanan, for the study “Living in a Culture of Sexual Immorality”

Over the next year, LEADERSHIP, along with sister publications CHRISTIANITY TODAY and BOOKS & CULTURE, will feature articles that explore the relationship between church and culture, specifically the question: How can the church be a counterculture for the common good? This effort, funded in part by the Pew Charitable Trust, is called The Christian Vision Project. Mark Buchanan provides the first article in this series.

Jonah is my favorite prophet, and for no better reason than our uncanny resemblance. I’m bald and I figure him bald—why else his emotional tumult over how shade-dappled or sun-scorched his head? I’m short and I imagine him short: a stumpy, wiry guy, all that peevishness compacted tight as a nail bomb. He loved comfort and resented interruption, and that runs pretty close to my own bias. He was possessive, evasive, defensive, obsessive. Things not unknown to me.

Jonah is my least favorite prophet, and for exactly the same reason. He reminds me too much of me. I long to be Daniel-like in wisdom, Isaiah-like in righteousness, Ezekiel-like in faithfulness. I want the courage of Elijah, the endurance of Jeremiah, the long-view of Zechariah. I dream of standing down kings and outrunning horses, commanding drought and deluge with a word, calling down woe like thunderbolts and blessing like manna.

But I’m plagued with Jonah-likeness.

And here’s a deeper worry: so is the church. Not just my church, but the church—especially the church in North America. We’re evasive with God, resentful toward outsiders, smug about our own goodness. Prudish, hawkish, lovers of comfort, and nursing a giant grudge against anyone and anything that threatens it.

Just like Jonah.

That’s half the story, anyhow.

The other half is that the church is Esther, Esther prior to her awakening: assuming an insider status and willing to disguise her true identity for the sake of it,
fearful of confronting her culture. We want to be like everyone else, only more so. We’re a people terrified of being peculiar. We’ll do almost anything to win a pagan king’s affections.

Jonah wants just to be left alone, and would happily let everyone else go to hell. Esther wants just to fit in, and willingly forsakes her distinctiveness to achieve that.

Between these two impulses, the kingdom always goes begging.

**But this is about sex**

And that’s exactly where I find these two stories so compelling, and so disturbing. Jonah and, implicitly, his community are threatened by Assyrian exile. Jonah is called as a missionary to the very people who bear that threat. Esther and, explicitly, her community are in the clutches of Persian exile. Esther is called to take a stand against the very people in whose land she and her people dwell but who now threaten to destroy them.

Neither story is about sex per se (though that’s a subtext in Esther: the things we do for love), but both are about God’s people living amidst pagan culture—a culture that is pervasive, seductive, potentially coercive, and often at deep odds with what God thinks. Both are about the ways God’s people try to negotiate their place toward or within that culture. And so both help us think through spiritual and ethical issues, including sexual ethics, for such a time as this.

How then shall we live?

Jonah chooses the way of condemnation. He hates the culture that threatens his own. His attitude is leave-us-alone and damn if you don’t. He is prideful of his distinctiveness (“I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land,” he smugly tells the sailors whose ship he’s boarded, even though he’s using these men to escape this God), but he’s not the least bit inclined to invite others to share in it.

So when God calls him to confront the people of Nineveh, Assyria’s capital, for their wickedness, Jonah flees. He simply doesn’t want to get involved. When God forces the issue, Jonah goes—grudgingly—and trumpets the doom of Nineveh, and then waits to behold it, and relish it. When the Ninevites repent and God shows mercy, Jonah throws a full-scale tantrum. This is what he long suspected God would do, and he turns surly and self-pitying about it.

Jonah’s attitude toward pagan culture is an old standby for the church. Avoid outsiders, and when you can’t, protest against them. Lament the sorry state of things. Call God’s judgment down. Imagine, with pleasure, the punishment to be visited on the disobedient. Meanwhile, make yourself as comfortable as possible. And if the threatened divine judgment fails to materialize? Sulk. Mightily.
It’s hard not to think here of some conservative churches’ reaction to the homosexual community. I live in Canada, where recently our government, against the wishes of most Canadians, pushed through legislation that legalized same-sex marriage. A few months prior to that, I attended a citywide prayer meeting where this issue was at the forefront.

Emotions were strong. I expected that, but what caught me by surprise was the tone of the meeting. It had a Jonah-like ring: jingoistic, gloating, self-righteous. People warmed quickly to themes of divine vengeance. They evoked it in vivid imagery.

The problem here is tactical as well as spiritual. Spiritually, we should be careful what we eat. Bloodthirst causes heartburn, severely. But tactically, this is hardly a way to start a kingdom revolution. The church on this issue should be begging God to help us to be Mark 2 communities: when people find out Jesus is in the house, they’re willing to break the roof open if that’s what it takes to get themselves and their sick friends inside.

I have talked with gay people about how they see Christians. Generally they see us as, well, you know the drill: bigoted, angry, narrow, hateful, afraid …

It’s a caricature, I know. Only, everything about that citywide prayer meeting supported it.

What if God’s larger desire is to invite people, all people, into the wideness of his mercy? Somehow the Ninevites were able to respond to God despite Jonah’s rancor and belligerence. After all, judgment is real, not to be trifled with. God’s wrath is being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness.

Only, Jonah doesn’t know anything but judgment. He is a Johnny-one-note. In God’s kingdom, judgment entwines with invitation, and is usually uttered with deep heartache (Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem …). It’s God’s kindness that leads to repentance. That kindness needs to be visible in the church. The consummation of the church’s missionary role will be that day when ten people from every tribe and tongue—Nineveh included—take hold of the hem of the robe of one believer and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23).

But Jonah is not interested. He doesn’t want his enemy’s repentance. He doesn’t want them in church, singing the songs of Zion. He certainly doesn’t want them coming to his church and bringing their own strange music with them. He wants them to pay, to suffer. He wants judgment, not mercy.

Jonah’s moral dogmatism, I think, hides his theological ambivalence. That’s usually what dogmatism does. Jonah is wary and begrudging, not just toward Ninevites, but toward God. He’s boastful of his knowledge of God but cagey in his relationship with him. He finds God both too hard and too soft—hard toward his
chosen ones, soft toward the enemy. God, in his view, lacks an appropriate sense of favoritism.

I wonder if this isn’t the hidden motive of churches that take up Jonah’s style. Maybe the angry, accusatory stance is mostly a mask for our own misgivings about God.

“Fanaticism,” Carl Jung said, “is overcompensation for doubt.” We can trace this theological trajectory in the Pharisees. They disapproved of whatever they did not initiate. But Jesus identified their problem as a broken relationship with God. They overcompensated for doubt.

Jonah wants to condemn the culture. He would love to see it destroyed. The idea that it could be reclaimed, redeemed, invited to share in the goodness of God—such thinking is anathema to him. After all, he can hardly invite anyone, friend or foe, to taste and see that the Lord is good when he has not tasted and seen such things himself.

That’s only half our problem. The other half is being Esther, prior to her moment of reckoning. When it comes to pagan culture, Esther moves in precisely the opposite direction.

Jonah avoids it, caricatures it, condemns it. Esther accepts it, embraces it, extols it.

Many early interpreters and Bible commentators viewed Esther (and/or the Jewish community depicted in the book) as a type of the church in compromised, semi-pagan form. Modern interpreters generally dismiss typological readings of Scripture (with good reason), but as one who adjusts to a hostile culture, her example can be instructive.

She conforms to whatever standards the culture sets—dress like the reigning pop queen, subscribe to whatever attitudes are au courant—in order to look like everyone else, only better.

And here, it’s hard not to think of many mainline churches. In the recent controversy over same-sex marriage in Canada, entire denominations have aligned themselves with the spirit of the age. They want to be deemed beautiful in the eyes of the pagan king. The Anglican Church in Canada is even ostracizing dissenting churches and defrocking their ministers. The idea that the church should do anything other than endorse the culture’s current thinking on sexual matters is, in the minds of these denominational leaders, a throwback to medievalism. We’re in a new millennium now, is the rallying cry. We must move with the times.

If Jonah’s theological ilk were the Pharisees, Esther’s were the Sadducees. They valued expedience above faithfulness (or, more to the point, equated the two). The worst sin was to be out of kilter with the culture’s dominant values. Their highest goal was to reduce the lag time between the latest trends and their blessing thereof.
Of course, Esther eventually awakens from this. She realizes, in the nick of time, that the culture whose acceptance she craves is laying ambush for her and her people. And then, with savvy and courage, she finds a new way of living in exile.

But before that happens, Esther immerses herself in pagan culture. The idea that she should confront it, or refuse its wares, is unthinkable. She wants to be left alone, too—not by the culture, but by any sense that her primary loyalty lies elsewhere.

Both Jonah and Esther define two of the church’s reactions to today’s sexual values.

Shun and denounce.

Embrace and extol.

In my own church, I see both attitudes. Recently, I made a comment from the pulpit that the starting place for Christians to uphold the “sanctity of marriage” is not the courts but our own households. I cited statistics on divorce rates among evangelical Christians that put us pretty much in a dead heat with society at large. I talked about the high incidence of spousal abuse within conservative churches. I spoke about the widespread estrangement that prevails among many church-going couples. I mentioned the hidden plague of internet porn that is withering intimacy between husbands and wives.

Some people came out swinging: stop meddling with matters in here, they told me. Start condemning what’s happening out there.

Jonah.

On the other side, the statistics on premarital sex among evangelicals hardly distinguish us from all the other people on the face of the earth. And yet whenever I address this, a few folks take me aside and say, in effect, what’s the big deal? Aren’t there more important issues? A few kids are mixing it up between the sheets—well, so? Why fuss over that when we have a crisis of global warming, when the Amazonian rainforests are disappearing, when the sperm whale faces extinction? Recently, the Christian parents of a girl from our church tried to convince her to go on the pill. She sat them down and told them in no uncertain terms that she had no intention of having sex until she was married. They told her that was unrealistic, and she should go on it anyhow.

Esther.

What’s the alternative? I think Daniel is our best guide for such a time as this. He stands between the extremes of Esther and Jonah. He, like Esther, lived in a time of Exile—Babylonian, then Persian. He lived among people mostly indifferent to his own convictions but who, when put off by those convictions, grew swiftly and menacingly hostile. He had to sort out his place within that culture: what could he, without
violating conscience, say “yes” to? What must he, regardless of the personal risk, say “no” to?

Daniel had neither Jonah’s surly, haughty ways, nor Esther’s coy, accommodating manner. He had simple clarity and quiet integrity. Some things about the pagan culture—their education system, the political structure, their habit of naming you after one of their gods—no problem. Go to their schools. Work in their government. Bear their god’s name.

But one thing especially was taboo: king’s food. Of that Daniel would not partake. The food wasn’t wrong in and of itself. But it had been dedicated to pagan deities. To partake was to submit. To eat was to worship. So better to subsist on a diet of raw vegetables than eat the king’s rich meats and richer sauces, his wines and confections.

But Daniel and his companions did not merely subsist on vegetables: they thrived. They ended up more healthy and bright-eyed than all the other young men being trained with them.

We can sit under the teaching of our culture, and emerge shrewder in our own convictions. We can participate in the government of our culture, and bring glory to God by our diligence and integrity. We can be named after our culture’s deities (Mark—god of war!), and not suffer diminishment to our faith.

What we can’t do is eat king’s food.

But what is king’s food now? What is that element within our culture that, if the people of God participate in it, will ruin us?

I think it’s our culture’s sexual ethics.

What this culture lacks is purity. The church—especially Jonah—has not helped here much, because always we want to impose morality. Purity is to morality what intimacy is to acquaintance, what love is to tolerance, what oneness is to equality. Purity is not just a higher thing: it is a category unto itself.

I think we should stop preaching morality and start preaching purity. After all, no one wants to drink merely sterilized water, chlorinated water, water with a drop of iodine.

What awakens and then slakes thirst is pure water.

Daniel embraces the way of purity. He will not taint his body with what has been dedicated to another god. And if there’s a clear lesson from his story, it’s this: that is the one true way to win a pagan king’s heart. Everywhere Daniel goes, the king ends up acknowledging that God alone is God.

At our church, we call young people to the way of purity, not morality. We call them to be Daniels. Far from languishing, they thrive.
Not long ago, I was invited by an Esther-like church to do a one-day seminar on worship. I was surprised by the invitation—I don't get many like it. The pastor who invited me told me that most of his colleagues were deeply wary of me, some openly hostile. He told me of one fellow pastor who phoned him to denounce me. He denounced evangelicals as a breed. “What has this man in common with us?” he demanded to know.

“What don’t you come and see?” the host pastor said.

I came with a team of worship leaders and dancers, men and women in their late teens or early 20s. Only a handful of people had registered. Even in the church’s tiny sanctuary, they seemed thinly scattered. I kept watching for the man who hated me. Though I never met him, I knew him the moment he entered. He walked in like he was hunting vermin. He sat down, his arms locked across his chest. When we started singing and asked the people to stand, he remained seated. He scrutinized the words on the overhead.

After lunch, we led seminars. The dancers taught basic choreography. The musicians taught basic song writing. And I taught a basic theology of worship. The man came to mine. He sat beside me, spoiling for a fight.

Ten minutes into it, he erupted. A woman commented how the mainline church had compromised the gospel, and he started trading blows with her. He had a litany of evangelical crimes against humanity. The argument escalated, and the host pastor jumped in.

“Well,” he said, mild-mannered. “I think the mainline tradition is perhaps somewhat narrow in its ecclesiology and broadly tolerant in its theology. Whereas the evangelical tradition is rigidly narrow in its theology, and somewhat loosey-goosey in its ecclesiology.”

A brief moment of silence followed. I seized my opportunity. “Who here are pastors?” I asked. A few put up their hands, including the angry man.

“Let me ask you this,” I said. “The young people I brought today, do you like them?”

Everyone did, including the angry man.

“Are there many young people like that in your own churches, who are that passionate, that in love with God, that committed to the church and her mission?”

No, they all said.

“Do you want young people like these in your churches?”

Yes, they all said.
“With all due respect,” I said. “I think you don’t have them exactly because of your broadly tolerant theology. That theology helped abort a third of their peers. With all due respect, it assisted in creating a sexual ethic that robbed this generation of intimacy and hope. It has driven most of them out of the church.

“My opinion? If you’re really serious about seeing this kind of young people in your churches—not just warming the pews but leading—you might consider being less broadly tolerant.”

I went on to speak about how we don’t teach our young people to be moral. We teach them to be pure. We call them to be Daniels.

“You can see for yourself,” I said, “the difference that makes.”

I looked over at the man who hated me. He was stricken. I thought he hated me even more. I thought he would walk out. But to my surprise, he came back for the last session.

To my delight, he stood when we sang. To my amazement, he opened his arms and held them like he was catching rain.

And he sang with gusto. “Great is thy faithfulness,” he declared. I think he meant it. Daniel tends to have that effect on people.

—Mark Buchanan is pastor of New Life Community Baptist Church in Duncan, British Columbia.
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 5

Counterculturally Relevant

A new way of thinking about how Christians can influence culture.

For Christians living in post-modern culture, it can be difficult to know how to live among those with clashing values, attitudes, and beliefs. The church may fight culture through politics or boycotts, or we may take flight by retreating into the Christian subculture. “...even people who agree on the need for change disagree over what to do to...reach the culture.... We need a new and different strategy,” Tim Keller writes in his CHRISTIANITY TODAY article, “A New Kind of Urban Christian.”

This study asks, if “fight or flight” isn’t the answer, how should Christians engage the culture? What is God’s desire for the church’s interaction with society?

Lesson #5

Scripture:
Isaiah 58:5–12; Matthew 5:14–16; Acts 2:42–47; Philippians 2:3–11; 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12

Based on:
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "A New Kind of Urban Christian" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

“The relationship of Christians to culture is the singular current crisis point for the church. Evangelicals are deeply divided over how to interact with a social order that is growing increasingly post-Christian,” writes Tim Keller in his CHRISTIANITY TODAY article. Many of the church’s “magic bullet” solutions, as Keller calls them, such as political positioning or that elusive goal of trying to be culturally relevant, can be unproductive and unsatisfying. Rather than redeeming the culture, these methods can serve to alienate or confuse those in the culture. But the God who is Creator and Redeemer allows for more freedom and more satisfying solutions than these. As kingdom citizens, Christians are called to an adventurous, communal, holistic life that is not afraid of, antagonistic towards, nor compromising with the surrounding culture.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Keller, in his article, writes that evangelicals are divided over how to interact with a culture that is increasingly post-Christian. What do you think he means by post-Christian?

Leader’s Note: Post-Christian simply means that the church is no longer the central influence in our culture. It is no longer an authoritative voice and is even dismissed or ignored.

[Q] Christians seem to have a hard time knowing how to interact with today’s American culture. Why do you think that is the case?

[Q] In your circles, how have you seen the church or other Christians engage culture? What have been the results?

[Q] Who is the best Christian model you know of when it comes to engaging the culture?

[Q] How do you interact with culture? Why have you chosen this route?

[Q] What does Scripture say about how God’s people should engage the culture around them?
PART 2
Discovering Biblical Principles

Teaching point one: Christians should choose to live in places of need and influence.

In his book, Return Flight: Community Development Through Reneighboring Our Cities, Dr. Robert Lupton questions a preacher’s use of the adage “bloom where you are planted.” He writes:

A major question had been omitted. Neither the preacher nor the listeners were asking, “Why are you planted where you are?” We were simply assuming that the American Dream is the guiding standard by which people should locate themselves.... As the disruptive words of the Teacher have penetrated my value system, I have become persuaded that location, location, location are indeed the critical selection criteria for those who desire to bloom where God wants to plant them. (FCS Urban Ministries, 1997)

In considering how faith relates to culture, Christians need to allow God’s values to dictate where they live. Read Philippians 2:3–11.

[Q] What do you think of Lupton’s quote above? What factors usually dictate where people decide to buy or rent a home?

**Leader’s Note:** Lupton suggests that credit ceiling and safety are the determining factors for where we locate. Locating for the sake of mission is further down the list.

Keller writes, “Evangelical Christians have been particularly unwilling to live in the cities.... [They] should live in cities in at least the same percentage as the general population does. If we do not, we should not expect much influence in society.” Lupton suggests that Christians should relocate to areas of need, especially urban areas.

[Q] Does it really matter where Christians live? Why or why not?

[Q] What does Philippians 2:3–11 tell you about God’s economy and what he values?

[Q] What did this act of condescension and relocation cost Christ? What was the benefit to us?

[Q] What would your attitude be if it were “the same as that of Christ Jesus”?

[Q] How could “selfish ambition and vain conceit” manifest themselves in relation to the city or community where you live?

[Q] How should this version of the Incarnation story inform your decisions about where to live and invest your time?
Teaching point two: Christians should choose to live countercultural rather than culturally relevant lives.

There are Christian movies, superheroes, romance novels, rap, and even breath mints. Sometimes, in the church’s quest to be culturally relevant, we end up just imitating the world a day late and a dollar short. These attempts seem, at times, less about cultural relevance and more about Christian entertainment—about reassurance that, yes, we’re just as cool as the world. But does the gospel need to be dressed up to be relevant? Read Acts 2:42–47.

[Q] Do you agree with the introductory paragraph above? Were you offended by it in any way? If so, why?

[Q] Is it necessary for the church to be culturally relevant? Is it possible?

[Q] What were the activities of the fellowship of believers in Acts 2:42–47? List them.

[Q] What was this fellowship’s disposition towards others, especially those in need?

[Q] Why do you think people were being saved in this fellowship every day (verse 47)?

**Leader’s Note:** Theologian and philosopher Francis Schaeffer talked about how community is the apologetic (or proof of Christianity) of the day. This echoes Jesus’ prayer for believers in John 17:23: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Unity and sacrificial concern are countercultural and compelling. They point to Someone bigger.

[Q] How does your church fellowship compare favorably to this example? Where does it need to grow?

[Q] The believers in Acts 2 met in the temple courts. What would allow your church to live its life of faith more in full view of the surrounding community?

Keller writes, “Christians are called to be an alternate city within every earthly city, an alternate human culture within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in nondestructive ways.”

[Q] What would you need to contribute to make the church look more like its countercultural roots?

**Optional Activity:** Get creative! As a way for your small group to invite unbelievers into the life of your church and to discuss culture, host a film night. Some popcorn, a compelling film, and a lively discussion would be an easy invite for neighbors and coworkers. You can find a plethora of intriguing movie discussions at: CHRISTIANBIBLESTUDIES.COM.

And/or host a soup night once a month in the neighborhood where your small group meets. Invite a few neighbors to the house where you meet, especially any single parents or struggling families. Let them contribute to the meal if they’d like. This is a practical, inexpensive way to invite people into your fellowship. There is no need for an altar call. See what God will do as you reach out and invite people into your home.
Teaching point three: Christians should choose to live for the good of the whole community.

British theologian and pastor John R. W. Stott wrote, “If we truly love our neighbors and, because of their worth, desire to save them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the well-being of their soul, their body and their community” (Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today, Revell, 1995). While Christianity is a communal faith, it is not intended to be an ingrown, self-centered community. On the contrary, the Christian community moves out together with the love of Christ to minister to the whole person. Read Isaiah 58:5–12.

[Q] How have you seen churches work for the good of your whole community?

[Q] In Isaiah 58:5–12, what kind of self-centered religious ritual is God displeased with (v. 5)?

[Q] What are the characteristics of the kind of fasting God finds acceptable? List them all. Which of these callings is most challenging to you?

[Q] When God’s followers observe the kind of fasting God has chosen, what will be the result? What will be God’s response? Which blessing encourages you most?

[Q] What does this passage tell you about God’s heart?

[Q] How has your church lived out the fasting that’s acceptable to God? Where does it falter in self-centered religious ritual?

Keller writes, “Christianity will not be attractive enough to win influence except through sacrificial service to all people....” The kind of fast that God calls for affects the whole city in this passage.

[Q] In your city or community, where do you and your church need to be “Repairers of Broken Walls”? “Restorers of Streets with Dwellings”? What, specifically, needs to happen in those places?

Teaching point four: Christians should choose to live integrated lives.

“When many Christians enter a vocational field, they either seal off their faith and work like everyone else around them, or they spout Bible verses to their coworkers.... [But] if Christians ... [do] their work in an excellent but distinct manner, that alone will produce a different kind of culture than the one in which we live now,” Keller suggests. It can be easy for anyone in our culture to live a compartmentalized life. But it’s especially tragic for “salt and light” followers of Christ to compartmentalize work and faith to where “never the twain shall meet.” Instead, Christians are called to an abundant, holistic life that overflows to those around them. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12.

[Q] When your faith has crossed the line into your work, what has been the result?

[Q] Is it easy or hard for you to integrate work and faith?

[Q] What might the life in 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 look like in the day-to-day?
Why might this kind of life “win the respect of outsiders”?

Which “outsider” is observing your life? What does he or she see?

Read Matthew 5:14–16.

What does it do for you to know that you are a city on a hill and a lamp on a stand? Is there such a thing as private faith?

What would it look like, practically, to put one’s lamp under a bowl?

What would it look like to “let your light shine before men”? At work? In your city? What might these “good deeds” be?

Who needs to see the light of Christ shining through you at work? In your community?

What is the ultimate goal of living out good deeds in plain view of our coworkers and neighbors?

How can you allow your light to shine more brightly before your coworkers and neighbors?

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

Beyond the tired ways of “fight or flight,” Christ calls his followers to an adventurous, communal, holistic faith that changes the culture. Keller concludes, “The church shows[s] how Christ resolves our society’s cultural problems and fulfills its cultural hopes.” Amen.

Take a drive around your city. Read carefully through a regional newspaper. Where are the areas of need? Where do more Christians need to be an influence?

How are you influencing your immediate culture now? Is God calling you to a new location? Are you willing to go?

Action Plan:

- Are you ready to be countercultural? Invite someone into your home for a meal this month. Host a dinner where your guests are a Christian family from your church and an unbelieving family from your neighborhood—no agenda, just enjoy the evening.

- What needs in your community could be met through an ongoing, relational commitment from your church or small group? Take steps this week to contact that women’s shelter or tutoring organization and find out their needs.

- Make a list of people at work and in your neighborhood for whom you can pray. Ask a friend to pray for you to be more of a light to your coworkers and neighbors.
Additional Resources

- ChrisitanBibleStudies.com
  - Culture: Love It, Leave It, or Transform It
  - Tilting at the Windmills of Culture
  - America: A Nation of Pagans or Christians?
  - The Kingdom and Our Culture
  - Justice for All, One at a Time

- The Connecting Church, Randy Frazee (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN 0310233089)


- Theirs is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America, Robert Lupton (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989; ISBN 0060653078)
A New Kind of Urban Christian
As the city goes, so goes the culture.

By Tim Keller, for the study, “Counterculturally Relevant”

His speaking style is disarmingly low-key, almost professorial, but only the rarest professors make every word count the way Tim Keller does. For 16 years, he has been preaching at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, distilling biblical teaching into arrestingly simple phrases that convey the radical surprise and gracious truth of Christian faith. One such typically piquant phrase is the source of the Christian Vision Project’s big question for 2006: How can followers of Christ be a counterculture for the common good? Keller’s vision of a church keenly committed to the welfare of its city attracts 4,000 worshipers each week to Redeemer’s four rented locations, sends them out into many forms of charitable service through the church’s ministry Hope for New York, and fuels a church-planting effort that embraces Baptists and Pentecostals as well as Presbyterians, immigrant neighborhoods as well as Manhattan. Fifty years from now, if evangelical Christians are widely known for their love of cities, their commitment to mercy and justice, and their love of their neighbors, Tim Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians.

In the winter of 2006, two movies mirrored the fractured and confusing relationship between Christians and culture. The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe struck fear in many secular hearts. Some journalists saw it as an ominous sign of growing right-wing power that a company like Disney would make a movie that had such profound evangelical appeal (and, arguably, content). And why did Disney pull the plug on the gay-friendly TV reality series Welcome to the Neighborhood? Isn’t this, the pundits asked, what happens when you let Christians influence culture?

At the same time, The End of the Spear, the account of five evangelical missionaries martyred in Ecuador, upset some Christians when it was discovered that an active gay man was playing Nate Saint, the lead role in the movie. Conservative cultural commentators were divided. Some, like Eugene Veith of World magazine, urged Christians to see the movie and judge it on its artistic merits, not on the morals of its actors off screen. Others urged a boycott. Major questions about Christianity and
culture were raised on hundreds of websites. What makes a movie “Christian”? Do all the actors have to be Christians? If not, which kinds of sinners are allowed, and which are not? Is spiritual compromise inevitable when Christians try to enter mainstream cultural production?

The relationship of Christians to culture is the singular current crisis point for the church. Evangelicals are deeply divided over how to interact with a social order that is growing increasingly post-Christian. Some advise a reemphasis on tradition and on “letting the church be the church,” rejecting any direct attempt to influence society as a whole. Others are hostile to culture, but hopeful that they can change it through aggressive action, often of a political sort. Still others believe that “you change culture one heart at a time.” Finally, many are attracted to the new culture and want to reengineer the church to modify its adversarial relationship with culture. Many in the “one heart at a time” party play down doctrine and stress experience, while some in the reengineering group are changing distinctives of evangelical doctrine in the name of cultural engagement. That is fueling much theological controversy, but even people who agree on the need for change disagree over what to do to our doctrine to reach the culture.

None of the strategies listed above should be abandoned. We need Christian tradition, Christians in politics, and effective evangelism. And the church has always contextualized itself into its surrounding culture. There are harmful excesses in every approach, however. I think that is because many have turned their specialty into a single magic bullet that will solve the whole problem. I doubt such a magic bullet exists, but just bundling them all together is not sufficient either.

Instead, we need a new and different strategy.

City within a city

My first strategic point is simple: More Christians should live long-term in cities. Historians point out that by A.D. 300, the urban populations of the Roman Empire were largely Christian, while the countryside was pagan. (Indeed, the word pagan originally meant someone from the countryside—its use as a synonym for a non-Christian dates from this era.) The same was true during the first millennium A.D. in Europe—the cities were Christian, but the broad population across the countryside was pagan. The lesson from both eras is that when cities are Christian, even if the majority of the population is pagan, society is headed on a Christian trajectory. Why? As the city goes, so goes the culture. Cultural trends tend to be generated in the city and flow outward to the rest of society.

People who live in large urban cultural centers, occupying jobs in the arts, business, academia, publishing, the helping professions, and the media, tend to have a disproportionate impact on how things are done in our culture. Having lived and
ministered in New York City for 17 years, I am continually astonished at how the people I live with and know affect what everyone else in the country sees on the screen, in print, in art, and in business.

I am not talking about the “elite-elites”—the rich and famous—but about the “grassroots-elites.” It is not so much the top executives that make MTV what it is, but the scores of young, hip creatives just out of college who take jobs at all levels of the organization. The people who live in cities in the greatest numbers tend to see their values expressed in the culture.

Do I mean that all Christians must live in cities? No. We need Christians and churches everywhere there are people! But I have taken up the call of the late James Montgomery Boice, an urban pastor (at Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church) who knew that evangelical Christians have been particularly unwilling to live in cities. In his book Two Cities: Two Loves, he argued that evangelicals should live in cities in at least the same percentage as the general population. If we do not, we should not expect much influence in society.

Once in cities, Christians should be a dynamic counterculture. It is not enough for Christians to simply live as individuals in the city. They must live as a particular kind of community. Jesus told his disciples that they were “a city on a hill” that showed God’s glory to the world (Matt. 5:14–16). Christians are called to be an alternate city within every earthly city, an alternate human culture within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in nondestructive ways.

Regarding sex, the alternate city avoids secular society’s idolization of sex and traditional society’s fear of it. It is a community that so loves and cares for its members that chastity makes sense. It teaches its members to conform their bodily beings to the shape of the gospel—abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within. Regarding money, the Christian counterculture encourages a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. Regarding power, Christian community is visibly committed to power-sharing and relationship-building between races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. The practical evidence of this will be churches that are increasingly multiethnic, both in the congregations at large and in their leadership.

It will not be enough for Christians to form a culture that runs counter to the values of the broader culture. Christians should be a community radically committed to the good of the city as a whole. We must move out to sacrificially serve the good of the whole human community, especially the poor. Revelation 21–22 makes it clear that the ultimate purpose of redemption is not to escape the material world, but to renew it. God’s purpose is not only saving individuals, but also inaugurating a new world based on justice, peace, and love, not power, strife, and selfishness.
So Christians work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their city and their neighbors, loving them in word and in deed, whether they believe what we do or not. In Jeremiah 29:7, Israel’s exiles were called not just to live in the city, but also to love it and work for its shalom—its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. The citizens of God’s city are the best possible citizens of their earthly cities.

This is the only kind of cultural engagement that will not corrupt us and conform us to the world’s pattern of life. If Christians go to urban centers simply to acquire power, they will never achieve cultural influence and change that is deep, lasting, and embraced by the broader society. We must live in the city to serve all the peoples in it, not just our own tribe. We must lose our power to find our (true) power. Christianity will not be attractive enough to win influence except through sacrificial service to all people, regardless of their beliefs.

This strategy (if we must call it that) will work. In every culture, some Christian conduct will be offensive and attacked, but some will be moving and attractive to outsiders. “Though they accuse you ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12, see also Matt. 5:16). In the Middle East, a Christian sexual ethic makes sense, but not “turn the other cheek.” In secular New York City, the Christian teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation is welcome, but our sexual ethics seem horribly regressive. Every non-Christian culture has enough common grace to recognize some of the work of God in the world and to be attracted to it, even while Christianity in other ways will offend the prevailing culture.

So we must neither just denounce the culture nor adopt it. We must sacrificially serve the common good, expecting to be constantly misunderstood and sometimes attacked. We must walk in the steps of the one who laid down his life for his opponents.

The worldview of work

There is another important component to being a Christian counterculture for the common good. Christians should be a people who integrate their faith with their work. Culture is a set of shared practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs, which are rooted in common understandings of the “big questions”—where life comes from, what life means, who we are, and what is important enough to spend our time doing it in the years allotted to us. No one can live or do their work without some answers to such questions, and every set of answers shapes culture.

Most fields of work today are dominated by a very different set of answers from those of Christianity. But when many Christians enter a vocational field, they either seal off their faith and work like everyone else around them, or they spout Bible verses to their coworkers. We do not know very well how to persuade people of Christianity’s answers by showing them the faith-based, worldview roots of everyone’s work. We do
not know how to equip our people to think out the implications of the gospel for art, business, government, journalism, entertainment, and scholarship. Developing humane, creative, and excellent business environments out of our understanding of the gospel can be part of this work. The embodiment of joy, hope, and truth in the arts is also part of this work. If Christians live in major cultural centers in great numbers, doing their work in an excellent but distinctive manner, that alone will produce a different kind of culture than the one in which we live now.

Jewish society sought spiritual power, while Greek society valued wisdom (1 Cor. 1:22–25). Each culture was dominated by a hope that Paul’s preaching revealed to be an idol. Yet only in Christ, the true “wisdom of God” for Greeks and the true “power of God” for Jews, could their cultural storylines find a happy ending. The church envisioned in this article attracts people to Christianity by showing how Christ resolves our society’s cultural problems and fulfills its cultural hopes. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”

LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 6

Answer the Skeptics

Do you have an answer for the misconceptions about Christianity?

Newspaper and magazine articles regularly report the growing influence of evangelicals, a term often perceived by the public as a catch-all word for religious fanatics. The stories are often related to issues in the political arena or the economic buying power of Christians.

How do you engage your neighbor or coworker who is not a Christian with the Good News about Jesus Christ? While people who appreciate the man Jesus may not be hard to find, skeptics who react to the word Christian seem to be everywhere.

Using Philip Yancey’s CHRISTIANITY TODAY article “Exploring a Parallel Universe,” we’ll look at the issues surrounding the skepticism about Christianity and why we need to have a good answer for our faith.

Lesson #6

Scripture:

Based on:
“Exploring a Parallel Universe,” by Philip Yancey, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2005, Page 128
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each student the article “Exploring a Parallel Universe” from Christianity Today magazine (included at the end of this study).

Yancey describes how religious views threaten those individuals who view themselves as “a minority of agnostics in a land of unbelief...They tend to regard evangelicals as morals police determined to impose their ideas of proper behavior on people who do not share their beliefs.”

While the culturally loaded term evangelical is tossed around in the media, what does it mean? How can we help a person who is skeptical understand the Good News about Jesus?

Discussion starters:

[Q] How is the word evangelical tossed around in conversations or the news media? Name some examples. What feelings or stereotypes do these examples promote about evangelicals?

[Q] Why do you think some people fear evangelicals? What is the perception of a morals police?

[Q] When do you interact with non-evangelicals? Have you had conversations with them about your faith? What are their perceptions?

[Q] How would you describe the Good News about Jesus Christ in a few words? Use simple sentences that aren’t full of church jargon.

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: It is healthy to our own spiritual life to befriend non-Christians.

For almost ten years, Yancey has participated in a book group where his belief system is in the minority. This commitment gives Yancey a window into what he calls a “parallel universe.” He wonders, “How can people who inhabit the same society have such different perceptions?”

From the early days of his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ confounded the expectations of religious leaders and made friendships with unexpected people. When criticized for his choices in companions, Jesus said in Luke 5:31, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Yet numerous Christians isolate themselves and make friends only with those who mirror their beliefs.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1–6.
What understanding does this passage give you into why non-Christians don’t get us? Compare this passage to Yancey’s article, noting why the unbelievers he cites react as they do.

As people of faith, part of our challenge when we hear misconceptions is to listen carefully, then ask good questions that will refocus the conversation on the real issue rather than let it run amuck down a rabbit trail.

Can you think of some situations where you’ve handled these types of discussions effectively? Can you think of other situations where you have handled them improperly? What did you learn from these experiences?

In the article, how does Yancey interact with unbelievers about their spiritual questions? Does he respond defensively or does he probe them to move deeper? What can you learn from his experience to help develop your own relationships with unbelievers?

Yancey doesn’t try to be someone with all the answers, but he admits such a discussion leaves his head spinning. How do these questions affect his faith?

Where could you go to get more information or training so you are better prepared to answer questions from skeptics?

Yancey’s article points to one person from his reading group who expressed interest in exploring matters of faith. What made the difference for this individual?

Take a moment to evaluate your life through the eyes of others. What are the outward evidences of a changed life in Christ?

Teaching point two: Prepare for unexpected conversations so you can seize opportunities to talk about your faith in Christ.

Read Acts 8:26–35. Notice Philip’s sensitivity to the leading of God’s Spirit who told him to “go to that chariot and stay near it” (8:29). When he got near the chariot, Philip heard the official reading from the Book of Isaiah. Notice how Philip engaged this important political figure in a spiritual discussion.

Yancey writes about his friend Josh from the reading group, who is looking for an explanation of faith in a way he can understand. Josh comments about Christian books, “They are totally unconvincing. They seem written for people who already believe them.”

If you were asked to recommend a book about faith in Jesus Christ, what would you recommend?

In Letters from a Skeptic by Dr. Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, a son wrestles with his intelligent, strong-willed, 70-year-old father’s spiritual questions. Dr. Boyd asks, “Could a more unlikely candidate for conversion be found than my father?” Later in the same preface, he writes, “Far too often we view the study of apologetics as an ‘ivory tower’ discipline with little relevance to what goes on in spreading the Gospel...It is my hope that this dialogue begins to dispel this myth.”
What practical steps can you take to have a simple answer to skeptical questions from unbelievers?

Many people claim to have read the Bible, but when pressed they admit they haven’t read much of it or are confused by it. As you prepare to share your faith, what simple tools can you add to help such a person?

*Leader’s Note:* These might include modern translations of the New Testament, books that chronicle a person’s faith journey, and apologetic books.

When you give someone a Bible, what steps do you take to follow up? Do you suggest a starting place for their reading?

*Leader’s Note:* Many people encourage those who know little about Scripture to start with the Gospel of John. Perhaps you could encourage a person to read a chapter a week and then you could get together and discuss it.

Read 1 Peter 3:15–16. What principles about preparedness and delivery can you draw from Peter’s words?

What is your overall goal in being prepared to talk gently about your faith? Is it to win an argument or to help the other person move a step closer to Jesus?

*Leader’s Note:* The Covells and Rogers, in How to Talk About Jesus Without Freaking Out, say, “What’s important is moving pre-Christians one step closer to the foot of the cross. It’s all about the Cross.”

**Teaching point three: Use different approaches for discussing spiritual matters with individuals.**

Evangelistic training programs often teach a particular method to talk about faith with someone who is not a Christian. While at times these methods are effective, there isn’t one single method for talking about faith with skeptics.

In Yancey’s article, he writes about faith issues in different settings. From his actions, can you draw a principle of how to communicate to unbelievers? List the ways you see Yancey doing this.

The church at Corinth struggled with who got the credit for bringing someone to a relationship with Jesus (1 Corinthians 3). Read 1 Corinthians 3:6–9. Notice in particular the phrase in verse 7: “only God, who makes things grow.”

When you tell others about your faith, do you listen first for the person’s need, then determine your approach, or do you have a standard story?

Michael L. Simpson writes about the power of story to influence people for Christ in *Permission Evangelism.* Formerly an atheist, Simpson loved to attack Christians’ faith. Now Simpson teaches Christians right and wrong ways to approach unbelievers. One powerful tool is your own story about how you came to know Jesus. Simpson says, “The purpose for telling your story is simply to get him to tell you his. The seeker’s story is the foundation of your salvation discussion and his ultimate decision.”
Think about your personal faith story. Can you tell it in three to five minutes? Use a timer to check. Can you prepare a longer version of your story? What are the elements that you love in a good story that is a page-turner? Can you build those elements into your faith story?

Teaching point four: Love is the overriding force to demonstrate Jesus to skeptics.

Near the conclusion of Yancey’s article, he recalls a remark from C.S. Lewis, “who drew a distinction between communicating with a society that hears the gospel for the first time and one that has embraced and then largely rejected it. A person must court a virgin differently than a divorcée, said Lewis. One welcomes the charming words; the other needs a demonstration of love to overcome inbuilt skepticism.”

Consider this comparison of someone who does not believe in Christ to either a virgin or a divorcée. How is the approach to one distinct from the other?

Have you ever had the chance to explain the Good News to someone who had never heard the gospel?

How is love an overwhelming demonstration of Jesus to the unbeliever? How can you demonstrate this love in practical ways?

When you encounter someone who is skeptical about the Good News, how do you respond? What steps can you take to practice overwhelming love to unbelievers in your every day life?

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

In Velvet Elvis, Rob Bell writes, “If the gospel isn’t good news for everybody, then it isn’t good news for anybody. And this is because the most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and to convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way of Jesus is most vividly put on display. To do this, the church must stop thinking about everybody primarily in categories of in or out, saved or not, believer or nonbeliever. Besides the fact that these terms are offensive to those who are the “un” and “non”, they work against Jesus’ teachings about how we are to treat each other. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, and our neighbor can be anybody.”

What do you think of Bell’s statement? How can you put his teaching into action?

Action Point: Break into pairs so partners can discuss: Where are the places in my life that I naturally encounter skeptics about the Good News of Jesus Christ?

► Current situations where they are actively involved with people who are not Christians

► New situations where they can meet skeptics and become involved in their lives
Conversations they’ve had with skeptics or unbelievers that have been successful, and those that were a failure; evaluate why

Specific names to pray for and the ability to answer questions about matters of faith

Discuss the time, energy, and potential rewards in developing these relationships

—Study prepared by W. Terry Whalin, editor and author of Alpha’s Teach Yourself the Bible in 24 Hours (Alpha Books).

Recommended Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - Faith in the Workplace Course
  - From Personal Faith to Social Action
  - Culture: Love It, Leave It, or Transform It
  - Fresh Ways to Connect the Gospel


- Letters from a Skeptic, A Son Wrestles with His Father’s Questions about Christianity, Dr. Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd (Life Journey, 1994; ISBN 1564762440)


Exploring a Parallel Universe

Why does the word evangelical threaten so many people in our culture?

By Philip Yancey, for the study, “Answer the Skeptics”

For almost ten years, I have participated in a book group comprising people who attended the University of Chicago. Mostly we read current novels, with a preference for those authors (Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, J. M. Coetzee) who have a connection with the school. The group includes a Marxist-leaning professor of philosophy, a childhood-development specialist, a pharmaceutical researcher, a neurologist, and an attorney.

I marvel in our meetings at how the same book can evoke radically different responses. Yet after navigating a sea of ideas, the living room conversations almost always drift back to political issues. Though I live in a red state, all but one of my book buddies are liberal Democrats—the sole exception being a libertarian who opposes nearly all government.

The group views me as a window to a parallel universe. “You know evangelicals, right?” I nod yes. “Can you explain to us why they are so opposed to homosexuals getting married?” I do my best, but the arguments I cite from leading evangelicals make little sense to this group.

After the 2004 election, the Marxist professor launched into a tirade against “right-wing evangelicals.” “They’re motivated by hate—sheer hate!” he said. I suggested fear as a possible alternative, fear of changes in a society that is moving in a troubling direction. “No, it’s hate!” he insisted, uncharacteristically raising his voice and turning red in the face.

“Do you personally know any ‘right-wing evangelicals?’” I asked. “Not really,” he admitted a little sheepishly, though he said he had known many in his youth.

I have learned from this group how threatening religion can seem, especially to those who see themselves as a minority of agnostics in a land of belief. They tend to regard evangelicals as morals police determined to impose their ideas of proper behavior on people who do not share their beliefs.
Visiting another city a few months ago, I met with three gay men who consider themselves Christians, attend church regularly, and take their faith seriously. They view the political landscape through the same lens as my reading group friends, though with a far more acute sense of alarm. “We feel like we’re in the same situation as the Jews in the early days of Hitler’s regime,” said one. “We’re trying to discern whether it’s 1933 or 1939. Should we all flee to Canada now? It’s obvious the country doesn’t want us, and I believe most evangelicals would like to see us exterminated.”

I responded with sheer incredulity. “How can you think such a thing! Homosexuals have more rights in this country than ever. And I don’t know a single Christian who wants to have you exterminated.” The three cited legislative efforts in several states to roll back rights granted homosexuals and gave me several pages of inflammatory rhetoric against homosexuals by prominent evangelical political activists.

I went away from that discussion with my head spinning, just as sometimes happens at the university reading group. How can people who inhabit the same society have such different perceptions? More ominously, what have we evangelicals done to make Good News—the very meaning of the word evangelical—sound like such a threat?

Only one person in the reading group has expressed interest in matters of faith. One evening Josh told us about his sister, now a conservative evangelical. She had been a drug addict, unable to hold a job or keep a marriage together. “Then one day she found Jesus,” Josh said. “There’s no other explanation. She changed from night to day.”

Josh asked me to recommend some books by C. S. Lewis or someone else who could explain the faith in a way that he could understand. “My sister sends me Christian books, but they’re totally unconvincing,” he said. “They seem written for people who already believe them.” I happily complied.

Reflecting on our conversation, I remembered a remark by Lewis, who drew a distinction between communicating with a society that hears the gospel for the first time and one that has embraced and then largely rejected it. A person must court a virgin differently than a divorcée, said Lewis. One welcomes the charming words; the other needs a demonstration of love to overcome inbuilt skepticism.

I thought, too, how tempting it can be—and how distracting from our primary mission—to devote so many efforts to rehabilitating society at large, especially when these efforts demonize the opposition. (After all, neither Jesus nor Paul showed much concern about cleaning up the degenerate Roman Empire.) As history has proven, especially in times when church and state closely mingle, it is possible for the church to gain a nation and in the process lose the kingdom.
Philip Yancey is editor at large of CHRISTIANITY TODAY and cochair of the editorial board for BOOKS AND CULTURE.

"Exploring a Parallel Universe," by Philip Yancey, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2005, Page 128
The Church’s Highest Calling: Faithfulness

When being countercultural is our goal, we may be nearer to colluding with culture than changing it.

As Christians we are faced with an extremely difficult task: to live as holy people in a sinful and evil world. When we choose to follow biblical values, we embrace a worldview that is in opposition to that of the larger culture. But as Alan Jacobs argues in an article in BOOKS & CULTURE, there is a tendency in this contemporary age for Christians to pursue a countercultural influence as an end in itself. Jacobs believes that our first goal as Christians should be faithfulness to the gospel. If we steadfastly pursue this calling, the inevitable result will be a countercultural influence on society.

This study will ask: What are the marks of a faithful church? How do we resist the tendency to pursue counterculture change for its own sake? What does faithfulness to the gospel look like in contemporary society?

Lesson #7

Scripture:

Based on:
"Choose Life," by Alan Jacobs, BOOKS & CULTURE, March/April 2006
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “Choose Life” from BOOKS & CULTURE magazine (included at the end of this study).

A casual reading of the Gospels will convince most open-minded people that Jesus was not a conformist. He was continually saying and doing things that were unconventional and controversial. But he wasn’t acting this way to be a rebel. He was being faithful to the purpose for which he came: to restore our relationship with God. As a result of his faithfulness to that calling, he dramatically changed not only individual lives but the entire culture. And his disciples, not the least of those changed, became the early church. Their commission from Jesus, before he ascended into heaven, was to “make disciples of all nations.” Read Matthew 28:18–20. This was their calling and the task to which they devoted the remainder of their lives.

But this calling to faithfulness came at a price. The disciples were scorned and persecuted. Read John 15:18–19. They were already distinct from those in the surrounding culture by virtue of following Jesus. Opposing the cultural values that were in conflict with Jesus’ teachings was simply part of that call to faithfulness. They were on a mission not to change the larger culture, but to change the hearts of men and women in that culture.

Discussion starters:

[Q] How would you describe the term countercultural? Does this term elicit a positive, negative, or neutral reaction in you? Explain.

[Q] Can you think of ways Jesus’ life and message were countercultural? How were his values in opposition to those popular in his culture? What were the consequences of opposing the larger culture’s values?

[Q] Do you see the church today as being countercultural? If so, how? If not, explain.

[Q] What price do you think modern Christians pay for being countercultural in our part of the world? Do you equate this with persecution? Why or why not? What about in other parts of the world?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Living faithfully means being obedient.

Obedience is one of those concepts we both love and hate. We favor it when our wishes are served, such as when children or employees do what they have been told. But we are typically slow to apply the same standard of submission to ourselves. This is especially true when we don’t fully understand why we must submit. Living in an individualistic culture, we have come
to believe we have a right to know why we should submit to authority. As if knowing why the speed limit is so low, for example, gives us the right to violate the law if we choose.

But faithfulness to God does not offer that prerogative. We don’t always have the luxury of knowing why we must obey or have the privilege of seeing the outcome of our efforts. Think of Moses wandering in the desert for 40 years with tens of thousands of disgruntled Israelites wondering when they would reach God’s promised land. Moses led them faithfully during that time, but never stepped into the land himself. Yet the modern church, according to Jacobs, is increasingly uncomfortable with uncertainty. As a result, it often resorts to applying corporate techniques to measure its progress and quantify the end product of its effort. Hence, obedience now seems to require less faith because it can be measured by the outcome.

But Jesus had a simpler and more profound approach to obedience. In John 14:15 he said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Our incentive for obedience is not the end product but rather our relationship with God.

(Q) Obedience implies a willingness to submit to authority. How willing are you to voluntarily submit to authority?

(Q) Under what circumstances is submission to authority difficult for you?

(Q) Which personality characteristics in an authority figure make obedience easier for you?

In his article, Jacobs likens a walk of faith to having just enough light to see the next step but not enough to illuminate the surrounding landscape.

(Q) What cultural trends or values prompt us to seek predictability in our daily lives? Are these trends and values compatible or incompatible with walking by faith and dependence on God? If incompatible, how might we change our approach?

(Q) Discuss the uncertainty that biblical characters like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David Esther, Ruth, and others lived with as they followed God’s leading. How did these men and women live obediently amid such uncertainty? How could these insights be applied to your faith walk with God?

(Q) Have you observed corporate techniques and principles being used in the church? If so, give an example.

(Q) What are the possible consequences—both positive and negative—of the church becoming a corporation-like environment?

**Teaching point two: Being faithful implies an open-ended generosity.**

Natural disasters prompt many people to be generous with their time and money. Think of hurricane Katrina or the tsunami that hit parts of Asia in 2004. A great outpouring of generosity followed, much of which was organized and delivered by churches. But the church is not called to be generous only in times of crisis. It is called to be generous at all times—to a type of generosity that is hard for secular culture to understand. This type of sacrificial generosity is countercultural by nature. Read 2 Corinthians 9:12–13.
But there is a strong temptation for the contemporary church to substitute “good stewardship” for sacrificial giving. Jacobs quotes a passage from the late historian Christopher Dawson who states the concern this way:

The spirit of the Gospel is eminently that of the ‘open’ type which gives, asking nothing in return, and spends itself for others. It is essentially hostile to the spirit of calculation, the spirit of worldly prudence and above all to the spirit of religious self-seeking and self-satisfaction.

In other words, the church can easily become so caught up in caring for its own affairs that it takes a casual approach to generosity—governed more by budgets, spreadsheets, and fundraising programs than by the spirit of the gospel. In so doing, the church insulates itself from many blessings while redefining faithfulness as a cleaner task than it actually is.

[Q] What do you think motivates people to give beyond their comfort level in times of great need, like natural disasters?

[Q] Is it realistic or unrealistic to expect Christians to sustain this type of sacrificial generosity on an ongoing basis? Why or why not?

[Q] Why do you think Jacobs links generosity with faithfulness? Besides giving money, how can individual Christians and the church express generosity to those in need?

[Q] What message does the sacrificial generosity mentioned in 2 Corinthians 9:12–13 send to unbelievers? How is this type of generosity countercultural?

Optional Activity: Instruct group members to think of areas in which the church is weak in its expression of generosity to the local community. Have group members brainstorm a collective list. Then choose one area from the list that interests most members, and discuss ways the group could creatively work toward meeting those needs more effectively. The solution need not be financial only; it could involve time spent, manpower, food, visitation, or other resources.

Teaching point three: Faithfulness is marked by an uncommon love.

The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a short but profound book called The Mark of the Christian (InterVarsity Press, 1976). His thesis was that love is the distinguishing characteristic of both the individual Christian and the church. He believed that if we are to be faithful to our calling, we must, above all, manifest God’s love to one another, especially those within the church. He said:

The church is to be a loving church in a dying culture. How, then, is the dying culture going to consider us? Jesus says, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present culture, Jesus is giving a right to the world. Upon His authority He gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians.

It was this kind of uncommon love that Jesus spoke of when he told the story about the Samaritan traveler. In Jesus’ parable, a Samaritan man helped a Jewish man who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road leading out of Jerusalem. Read Luke 10:30–37. This illustrated uncommon love because Jews and Samaritans did not get along. It is worth
noting that before the Samaritan arrived, two religious leaders, a priest and a Levite, passed by the injured man, offering no help. It is this kind of uncommon love that Jesus was constantly modeling for his disciples, whether teaching, healing, or rebuking. He even exemplified this love on the cross as he asked the Father to forgive those who had mocked, beaten, and crucified him. It is this uncommon love that the church is called to faithfully practice.

**Q** Do you agree or disagree with Schaeffer’s comment that the world has the right to judge Christians on the basis of how they love one another? Explain.

**Q** Had you been a Samaritan traveler who found a beaten Jewish man on the road, what do you think your response would have been? If you had helped him, would you have gone to great trouble (bandaging his wounds, transporting him on your own beast, and paying for his stay at an inn) to care for his needs? Why or why not? How much do you think the cultural prejudice against Samaritans would have affected your decision to extend undeserved love in this situation?

**Q** In Jesus’ parable, what relevance does it have to the story that both a priest and a Levite passed the Jewish man without offering help? Do you see any parallels that could be drawn about modern-day Christians too busy or caught up in their own affairs to extend love to someone? Explain.

**Q** Can you think of someone you know who currently exemplifies this type of uncommon love? If not, have you heard of someone who fits this model? What inspires you about this person’s life and faith?

### PART 3

**Apply Your Findings**

Being faithful to our calling through obedience, an open-ended generosity, and an uncommon love is only possible if we step out of our comfort zone. In *The Four Loves* (Harvest Books, 1971), C. S. Lewis aptly describes the fears that threaten to suffocate our faith and the accompanying risk we take as followers of Christ. He says:

> Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

It is that kind of vulnerability that exemplifies faithfulness. Read 2 John 1:5–6. Faithfulness that is characterized by obedience, selfless generosity, and an uncommon love will surely be a countercultural influence for the cause of Christ in this generation.

**Q** What fears can you identify that keep you from stretching your comfort zone regarding obedience, generosity, and love?

**Q** How might you practically expand your comfort zone in at least one area over the next month? What needs to change for this to happen?
[Q] How might you engage others in your church to begin thinking about the principles discussed in this study? What type of resistance might you encounter? How could you respond appropriately to this resistance?

[Q] How would you like to see your life changed over the next year as a result of applying these principles?

[Q] What changes in popular culture could you envision if large numbers of Christians made living faithfully to God, as discussed in this study, their main focus in life?

—Study prepared by Gary A. Gilles, adjunct instructor at Trinity International University and editor of Chicago Caregiver magazine

Additional Resources

- [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)
  - Culture: Love It, Leave It, or Transform It
  - Tilting at the Windmills of Culture
  - America: A Nation of Pagans or Christians?
  - The Kingdom and Our Culture
  - Justice for All, One at a Time
  - Counterculturally Relevant


Choose Life
Lessons from Wendell Berry and Yul Brynner.

By Alan Jacobs, for the study “The Church’s Highest Calling: Faithfulness”

In 2006, BOOKS & CULTURE, along with our sister magazines CHRISTIANITY TODAY and LEADERSHIP JOURNAL, is posing a single provocative question to an array of creative and influential thinkers: How can followers of Christ be a counterculture for the common good? It is the opening question of the Christian Vision Project, a three-year exploration of next steps in the church’s relationship to culture, its role in global mission, and its proclamation of the gospel.

One of the many benefits of this project is the chance to highlight a few individuals who exemplify evangelical Christianity at its best, at a time when mainstream media, abetted by our own foibles and follies to be sure, frequently highlight our vast and variegated movement at its worst. These voices may not shout the loudest, but they often have a great deal indeed to say, not just to fellow believers but to the wider culture.

Happily, Alan Jacobs’ voice, familiar to readers of our pages, is being heard more widely recently, thanks to the publication of The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis. A frequent contributor to the Boston Globe, First Things, The Weekly Standard, the Mars Hill audio series, and other outlets, Alan is an eminently readable writer because he is above all a reader, discerning in his choice of texts and unfailingly careful with his subjects, engaging them with what he has called, in his book A Theology of Reading, “the hermeneutics of love.” As Booklist put it in their review of his collection Shaming the Devil, Alan is “the most personable of critics.” Here it is evangelicalism itself that benefits from his personable critique.

Implicit in the question I have been asked to consider—“How can followers of Christ be a counterculture for the common good?”—is a judgment: that we followers of Christ are not now such a counterculture. It’s a sound judgment, I think, and it seems to call for a particular kind of discourse: what that great scholar of early American culture, Perry Miller, called the jeremiad.
Miller tells us that the preachers of colonial New England, in an “unending monotonous wail,” in “something of a ritual incantation . . . would take up some verse of Isaiah and Jeremiah with which to berate their congregants.” After 1679—thanks to the hard work of a synod of preachers—they could even employ a prefabricated list of the twelve varieties of iniquity characteristic of New Englanders, “merely bringing the list up to date by inserting the new and still more depraved practices an ingenious people kept on devising.” Miller was duly impressed by these denunciations: “I suppose that in the whole literature of the world, including the satirists of imperial Rome, there is hardly such another uninhibited and unrelenting documentation of a people’s descent into corruption.”

Well, don’t think I’m not tempted. But it would provide more pleasure for me than edification for my readers. The problem with jeremiads is that they only convince people already in the Jeremiah frame of mind; everybody else is likely to say, “Whoa, it’s not that bad, is it?”

And in any case, those who would rectify the weaknesses or errors of any body of people should keep two warnings in mind. First, when a community fails to live up to its own standards, as of course it will, that community will be laboring under some kind of illusion—some distorted or fanciful self-understanding. As Kierkegaard pointed out long ago, “an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed . . . one must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion.” When anyone sees a jeremiad coming, he or she, like the captain of the Enterprise, immediately begins deploying the shields. This is why the prophet Nathan approached that adulterous murderer King David with a little story about sheep.

But the most desirable goods, like the most deadly illusions, rarely yield to direct assault. Wise men and gurus, saints and cranks alike testify that happiness cannot be sought but can only be found in the pursuit of something else. C. S. Lewis wasted years of his life seeking the peculiar stab of longing he called Joy—only to discover in the end that, like a stray cat, it declined to come when called, but appeared when it was least looked for.

Similarly, we Christians cannot set as our goal the becoming of a counterculture for the common good. Nor can we directly seek the elimination of the vices and illusions that constrain our attempts to love our neighbors as we should. We will strip away our self-deceit and become a true light unto the nations only by seeking and becoming faithful to the call of the gospel. If we eventually become a true counterculture for the common good, that counterculture (and that good) will simply be the product of our faithfulness.

All too often Christians think even of faithfulness as a means to an end, that end being (usually) something called “church growth.” We think so because in our culture goals are always products: quantifiable goods that, because they are quantifiable, can
be produced by techniques. Thus our true ancestor is Charles Finney, the 19th-century evangelist who believed that his evangelistic techniques were fully scientific: “The connection between the right use of means for a revival and a revival is as philosophically [i.e., scientifically] sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat.” Improvements in agricultural technique and improvements in evangelistic technique are, then, achieved by application of the same experimental practices—though I am not sure what the evangelistic equivalent of Cyrus McCormick’s reaper is. It is truly wonderful that Finney and his many modern heirs fail altogether to notice that whenever the Bible compares soul-winning to agriculture it invariably does so in order to emphasize the inscrutable sovereignty of God: Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. And we never get an explanation of why the ground on which the sower sows is so variable in quality, in receptiveness to the seed of the Gospel. Obedience, not results, must be our watchword, and in one sense all I have to say is this: be obedient to Christ today.

Last Christmas Day my pastor, Martin Johnson, spoke of his youthful habit of walking in the forests of British Columbia at night, guided only by moonlight. It was remarkable how far he could see by that meager illumination, how delicately beautiful the landscape was. The only problem was that he couldn’t see where to put his foot for his next step, and as a result he took plenty of tumbles. The light of Christ, said Martin—the light that is Christ—is just the opposite: it illuminates with perfect clarity your next step, but blots out the surrounding territory. Christ is the Word of God, and the psalmist tells us that that word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path: it shows us where to place one trembling foot, but it does not make us authoritative cartographers of the whole territory. It’s worth remembering that when people ask Jesus the cartographic kinds of questions—“Will many be saved or only a few?”—Jesus tells them to mind their own spiritual business. I think that if we try to formulate a plan for becoming a counterculture for the common good—if we draw up a map and an itinerary—we may well receive a similar rebuke. “What is that to you? Follow me. One step at a time.”

Yet there is a sense in which a focus on today’s obedience makes a long view possible: it does not yield a map, but it does yield a confidence that he who has called us is faithful, and will conduct the whole Church to her journey’s end. About a dozen years ago, Pope John Paul II agreed to answer some questions posed to him by an Italian journalist named Vittorio Messori. (His answers ultimately became the book Crossing the Threshold of Hope.) One of those questions concerned demographic predictions that Muslims would outnumber Catholics by the year 2000: “How do you feel when faced with this reality, after twenty centuries of evangelization?”

To this inquiry—with its freight of implicit worry—the pope replied placidly. After all, Jesus Christ himself proposed a still more frightening question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8)—will there be any faithful believers at all? And yet this same Jesus, John Paul reminded Messori, had already
given this word of comfort to his fretful disciples: “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for the Father is pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32, italics by JPII). The whole business of counting the adherents of religions in order to find out which of them “has a future” is a process at best distracting from, at worst hostile to, true faith.

The same trust prompts John Paul’s successor Benedict to accept the possibility that the Roman Church may become smaller before it becomes larger. That is, the Church must insist on the integrity of its witness, because only such countercultural integrity will save the church—and therefore serve the common good—in the long term. Benedict has no interest in deliberately making the church smaller; rather, he wishes to make the church faithful, and if that has the (temporary) effect of reducing numbers, because there are people who will not wish to add to their lives the extra effort of becoming disciples, then so be it. One prays that this not happen; one recognizes that it very well might. George Weigel points out that Pope Benedict is fond of quoting the old Benedictine maxim Succisa virescit—“pruned, it grows”—but as every gardener knows, the immediate result of a vigorous pruning is an apparently lifeless remnant: it is only in the next season that the luxurious growth appears.

Bodies of believers with a briefer history and shallower roots in the great tradition of Christian orthodoxy may find such assurance harder to come by. If we evangelicals habitually think locally and in the short term, that is because our very existence is local and short-term: we have to will a connection with historic orthodoxy. Still more must we pray for and earnestly seek the confidence that the Father is pleased to give us the Kingdom. And it is my belief that—both for our own well-being and for the common good—we need to find ways to perform the assurance that we are supposed to have, the confidence that the One who has called us is faithful beyond our ability even to imagine. Only when we act upon that assurance can we enact a sign: that is, only in that way does our confidence become readable. And what might such a sign be?

I think it would be wonderful if some large and wealthy American church would have to cut staff and programs (or better yet, actually have to close its doors) because it had given far too much money to foreign missions or the needs of local people. Not every such church, just one—or three or four, maybe—on the same principle that made my son’s doctor, when Wes was five or six, check for the reassuring presence of cuts, scrapes, and bruises on his arms and legs: if he didn’t have those, he was too timid. Unmarked limbs would have shown that Wes was keeping himself safe, but at the cost of failing to learn, failing to develop—failing, indeed, to find out what he could do as well as what he couldn’t. How delightful it would be to drive past an empty megachurch and tell an unbelieving friend that the congregation couldn’t pay their bills after they gave too much to rebuilding churches in New Orleans.

Or: given all the thousands of American churches that have enjoyed the great satisfaction of moving from a high-school cafeteria or a storefront to a beautiful new
building, wouldn’t it be wonderful if just a few reversed that course? That is, if a congregation gave their building away so that it could house a Christian service agency (or indeed another, poorer church), and then found a nice gymnasium somewhere to meet on Sunday mornings?

Some will say that such actions would be reckless and improvident, a failure to meet the standards of “good stewardship.” But this would be to confuse the prudence appropriate to the monetary affairs of the bourgeoisie with the very different prudence called for by the gospel. Compelling here are some words written by the Christian historian Christopher Dawson 70 years ago:

The spirit of the Gospel is eminently that of the “open” type which gives, asking nothing in return, and spends itself for others. It is essentially hostile to the spirit of calculation, the spirit of worldly prudence and above all to the spirit of religious self-seeking and self-satisfaction. For what is the Pharisee but a spiritual bourgeois, a typically “closed” nature, a man who applies the principle of calculation and gain not to economics but to religion itself, a hoarder of merits, who reckons his accounts with heaven as though God was his banker? It is against this “closed,” self-sufficient moralist ethic that the fiercest denunciations of the Gospels are directed. Even the sinner who possesses a seed of generosity, a faculty of self-surrender, and an openness of spirit is nearer to the kingdom of heaven than the “righteous” Pharisee; for the soul that is closed to love is closed to grace.

Christians, I think, need to consider these words carefully. We must ask ourselves whether we have, indeed, taken “worldly prudence” for good stewardship, and Christian generosity for recklessness. And we must remind ourselves that we can insulate ourselves from surprising uncertainties or setbacks only by the kind of false prudence that insulates us also from surprising blessings.

Indeed, we need to ask what, exactly, in our prudence, we are afraid of. Sometimes I suspect that it is God himself, or at least life itself. Many years ago the farmer and writer Wendell Berry came across an advertisement for a new John Deere tractor heralding the advent of an “earth space capsule” that would protect the farmer not only from the “noise and fumes” produced by the tractor’s own engine but also from the vagaries of weather. Berry found himself first bemused and then disturbed by the idea of a farmer who doesn’t like weather; but then he reflected that this ad might well have relevance beyond the world of agriculture:

Of course, the only real way to get this sort of freedom and safety—to escape the hassles of earthly life—is to die. And what I think we see in these advertisements is an appeal to a desire to be dead that is evidently felt by many people. These ads are addressed to the perfect consumers: the self-consumers, who have found nothing of interest here on earth, nothing to so, and are impatient to be shed of earthly concerns.

Too many church buildings, it seems to me—and I say this suspecting that, for all my caveats and self-warnings, the spirit of Jeremiah has possessed me after all—have
become vast “earth space capsules,” and it may be time to escape before the spiritual oxygen runs out.

The sign I ask that some of us enact is not, I think, a sign of renunciation—not that there’s anything wrong with that—but of generosity. Giving is not renouncing. And if it turns out that we cannot do this, or something like it, then I think the least we can do is to admit that we have locked ourselves in our capsules and have no intention of coming out. We can write our confession and tape it to the door so passersby can learn who we are.

Our great exemplar, I think, should be Yul Brynner. The Russian-born actor knew that he was dying from lung cancer when he appeared on ABC’s Good Morning, America in January 1985. And on that occasion he said that what he really wished he could do was to tape a public service announcement that would say, “Now that I’m gone, I tell you: Don’t smoke, whatever you do, just don’t smoke.” He died ten months later, and soon thereafter his words were indeed presented to the world by the American Cancer Society—prefaced by an image of his tombstone. So we too, we who could not manage to give or renounce, we who could not risk falling down, just before we crawl into our capsules should affix a simple message for those passersby, and especially for our children: “Don’t do what we did. Don’t hoard, don’t close yourself up in your own comforts and even your own virtues. Be open to love and grace: choose life.”

—Alan Jacobs is professor of English at Wheaton College. He is the author most recently of The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco).

"Choose Life,” by Alan Jacobs, BOOKS & CULTURE, March/April 2006
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 8

Dual Citizenship

How can we labor for God’s kingdom during our time here on earth?

September 11, 2001, was hardly the first time a vicious attack shook a predominantly Christian nation, writes Timothy George. A few decades after the Roman Empire made Christianity its official religion—just as church leaders were gaining cultural power and social transformation seemed to be underway—an army of unbelievers reduced the “Eternal City” to ruins. Fifteen centuries later, as C. S. Lewis watched “Christian” Europe self-destruct, he pondered the same questions Augustine had asked in the last days of Rome: Why do so many promising human endeavors fail so miserably? Surrounded as we are by death and destruction, what can Christians possibly accomplish? How can we engage the world without being dragged down to its level? Is God’s kingdom really coming? These are the questions we’ll explore in this study.

Lesson #8

Scripture:


Based on:

“Theology for an Age of Terror,” by Timothy George, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, September 2006
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “Theology for an Age of Terror” from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

Though hardly anyone talks about “Christendom” anymore, Timothy George suspects that many people believe in it. Augustine (354–430), one of the greatest theologians in the Western church, drew fine distinctions between God’s kingdom and earthly powers in his monumental City of God, but Christians have struggled ever since to follow his guidance. At times, Christians have placed too much faith in human institutions, believing their church or nation to be God’s perfect instrument. The results of this misplaced enthusiasm have always been disastrous. Some critics charge American evangelicals with making this mistake today. Any talk of America being a chosen nation or having a God-given mission in the world makes such critics intensely nervous.

George warns against the opposite mistake as well. Christians face a temptation to eschew civic activity in order to evade worldly contamination. In these situations, George writes, “We withdraw into our own self-contained circle of contentment, which can just as well be a pious holy huddle as a secular skeptics club.” American evangelicals get accused of committing this error, too, when they shun interfaith endeavors and preach against other people’s sins. Some observers charge that evangelicals are thoroughly of the world—selfish, materialistic, power-hungry—even as they marshal all of their suburban resources to avoid being in it.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Why is it so hard for Christians to find the right balance between the demands of earthly citizenship and those of heavenly citizenship? What specific situations seem to put these demands in conflict?

[Q] Many American churches have an American flag in the sanctuary and patriotic songs (like “America the Beautiful” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”) in the backs of their hymnals. Does your church have these things? Do you think such patriotic symbols belong in church? Why or why not?

Optional activity: Read (or sing) the lyrics to a few patriotic hymns. Evaluate their theology. Do any of these lyrics make you uncomfortable? How might they sound to a non-Christian American or to someone living in a foreign country? If you do not have a hymnal handy, these sites have lyrics and music:

http://www.scoutsongs.com/lyrics/americathebeautiful.html (America the Beautiful)
http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/b/h/bhymnnotr.htm (Battle Hymn of the Republic)
http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/m/c/mctisoft.htm (My Country ’Tis of Thee)
http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/g/f/gfathers.htm (God of Our Fathers)
Some disgruntled Romans blamed Christians for the fall of the empire. Edward Gibbon, the author of an epic 18th-century history of the conflict (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), partially blamed the Christians too. Is it possible for Christians to be bad for a country? Why or why not?

**PART 2**

**Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: All human institutions are deeply flawed.**

With reference to Augustine, George writes, “we must not equate any political entity—whether it be the Roman Empire, the American republic, the United Nations, or anything else—with the kingdom of God.” Augustine also cautioned against equating the visible church with the kingdom. The kingdom is perfect, eternal, and ruled by a holy God, while even the best earthly institutions are imperfect, changing, and governed—proximately, if not ultimately—by fallible human beings. The Bible identifies the limits of human endeavors.

**[Q]** According to Genesis 3:17–19, what will Adam be able to do after the fall? What will he not be able to do? What does it mean for the ground to be cursed (v. 17)?

**[Q]** Read 1 Samuel 8:10–22. After they heard what a king would do to them, the people of Israel demanded one anyway. Why? Why did God give in to this demand? If God’s anointed king, leading his chosen people, could be such a bad leader, what hope is there for other human leaders?

**[Q]** Read 1 Corinthians 3:1–4, 10–15. What evidence does Paul find of the Corinthians’ immaturity? How do these faults threaten their efforts to build up the church?

**[Q]** Thinking through the metaphor of 1 Corinthians 3:12–15, what does it mean to build with gold, silver, and costly stones versus wood, hay, or straw? Can you think of institutions that seem to be built more with one type of material than the other, or are all institutions a jumble?

**Teaching point two: Humans are sorely tempted to trust in their own collective strength.**

George mentions Eusebius of Caesarea, a pastor and biographer of Rome’s first Christian emperor, Constantine. Eusebius had endured the last great persecution of Christians in the empire before living to see a fellow believer in command of the realm. The sudden change of fortune overwhelmed him, leading him to write, in 337, excessive praise of the lately deceased emperor:

> But now, while I desire to give utterance to some of the customary sentiments, I stand perplexed and doubtful which way to turn, being wholly lost in wonder at the extraordinary spectacle before me. For to whatever quarter I direct my view, whether to the east, or to the west, or over the whole world, or toward heaven itself, everywhere and always I see the blessed one yet administering the self-same empire. On earth I behold his sons, like some new reflectors of his brightness, diffusing everywhere the luster of their father’s character, and himself still living and powerful,
and governing all the affairs of men more completely than ever before, being multiplied in the succession of his children. They had indeed had previously the dignity of Caesars; but now, being invested with his very self, and graced by his accomplishments, for the excellence of their piety they are proclaimed by the titles of Sovereign, Augustus, Worshipful, and Emperor.

Elation about the end of persecution caused Eusebius to overlook Constantine’s many sins, which included ordering the execution of his wife and oldest son, and to gloss over the political divisions already threatening the Roman Empire. Eusebius saw only what he wanted to see, and he staked his future on it. This tendency crops up throughout the Bible as well.

**[Q]** Read Genesis 11:1–9. What was the sin of the people of Babel? Does this story indicate that God disapproves of human unity and cooperation, or that such unity and cooperation can go too far?

**[Q]** Read Isaiah 31:1–3. In Isaiah 30 and 31, the prophet castigates Israel for forming a military alliance with one powerful enemy (Egypt) in hopes of fighting off another one (Assyria). Why should Israel have known better? What unintended consequences could result from Israel’s strategy?

**[Q]** Read Revelation 3:14–22. Though all of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are pointed, the letter to the Laodiceans is perhaps the one most likely to make American readers wince. Where did the church at Laodicea go wrong? How could the God who has promised never to leave nor forsake his people spit an entire church out of his mouth (v. 16)?

**Teaching point three: Despite their flaws, human institutions play key roles in God’s plan.**

The Roman Empire around the time of Constantine remains a source of much debate in Christian circles. Before Constantine, the empire persecuted Christians, yet church leaders at the time refrained from calling the government evil or advising Christians to overthrow it. Under Constantine and his immediate successors, the Roman government sought to further what it understood to be the goals of the church. This meant funding church-building campaigns and generally cleaning up society, but it also meant intervening in theological debates, prosecuting heretics, and waging war in God’s name. Less than a century after Constantine, the empire was weakened by dissension—among Christians, and between Christians and members of other religions—and, finally, crushed by invaders.

Eusebius and most of his contemporaries saw Constantine’s conversion as an unmistakable turn for the better. Some Christians in more recent centuries consider the Constantinian alliance between church and state to be a trap from which true Christianity has struggled ever since to escape. Similarly, the fall of the empire was viewed by most Romans as a bitter and shocking catastrophe, while various later observers have seen it as an inevitable, though lamentable, consequence of poor political planning or as a divine blow enabling the church to renew its real mission. Augustine could only be sure that God knew all about the Romans’ successes and failures, and that his kingdom was bigger than any of them. This assurance is based in Scripture.

Read Exodus 11.
What interpretations might Egyptians and Israelites have given of the final plague? What additional interpretations emerge when one views Exodus 11 in light of the Scriptures before and after it?

Do you believe God still disposes some peoples positively or negatively toward others or hardens rulers’ hearts? Why do you believe or not believe this? Could Christians ever know that God was doing this? If so, how?

1 Peter 2:13–21 presents a very different picture of life under a harsh foreign power. Peter promises no escape and gives no indication of what God is doing “behind the scenes.”

Peter wrote these words to Christians living under the hostile rule of pagan and Jewish authorities. They would have remembered Herod’s slaughter of baby boys (Matthew 2:13–18), Jesus’ crucifixion, and numerous other atrocities not detailed in the New Testament. Yet Peter counsels obedience. Which elements in this passage conflict with American notions of freedom, democracy, and equality? Are all of Peter’s admonitions valid today? If any are not, why not?

Peter advises in verse 17, “Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.” What different behaviors (from the passage and your own experience) fit under the headings “love,” “fear,” and “honor”? Are these different types or levels of obedience?

How might this passage strike believers living in countries like China, Iraq, or, at the opposite extreme, the super-tolerant Netherlands?

What do Christians learn through obedience to secular authorities? What do non-Christians learn by observing Christians in those situations? Are American Christians modeling what they should be modeling in this area?

Teaching point four: Civil society can be a dangerous place, but Christians are needed there.

Near the end of his article, George writes of a “chastened form of civic virtue,” explaining: “The key word here, chastened, calls for a posture of engagement that acknowledges, in the words of the old gospel hymn, ‘This world is not my home; I’m just a-passing through,’ while at the same time working with all our might to love our neighbors as ourselves and to seek justice and peace as we carry out what Augustine called ‘our business within this common mortal life.’” That posture of engagement can take a variety of forms. Read Matthew 5:13–16, Mark 2:13–17, Acts 5:27–32, and Acts 16:35–39.

In Matthew 5, Jesus does not give specific examples of being “salt” and “light.” What examples can you think of?

Evangelicals tend to think of social problems in individual terms: poverty, domestic abuse, addiction, and so forth are fought one changed heart at a time. The call of Levi, recorded in Mark 2, certainly changed his life. But Levi was not just a crooked man—he was a cog in a corrupt tax-collecting machine. How, then, did his conversion also have broader social implications? Was there value in the dinner at Levi’s house, even if no one other than Levi came to Christ through it?
Acts 5 shows Peter seemingly disobeying his own advice (1 Peter 2) by declaring, “We must obey God rather than men!” How can you reconcile the contradiction?

**Leader’s Note:** There’s a difference between railing against the government on a day-to-day basis and arguing with those in power on the rare day you get a chance to confront them directly.

In Acts 16, an earthquake frees Paul and Silas from prison, but instead of fleeing right away, they lead the jailer to Christ. After the jailer’s whole family has been baptized, Paul complains to the officers about his treatment. Why does Paul stick around to lodge this complaint? Who might benefit from his decision to take a stand?

**PART 3**

**Apply Your Findings**

Ultimately, for Augustine, specific political involvements—or non-involvement—mattered less than the disposition of the heart. He wrote:

> Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, “Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.” In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, “I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength.”

Christians may legitimately disagree about the role of governments in the world or about the role of Christians in government, but none can dispute that the eternal, infallible God must be our glory and strength.

George poses utopianism and cynicism as equal and opposite dangers for Christians. Which is the bigger danger for your church? For you personally?

How are you involved in civil society? Is your involvement in line with the principles we have seen in the Bible and in Augustine?

**Action Point:** In the passage above, Augustine does not give citations for his biblical quotations (they are from Psalm 3:3 and Psalm 18:1, KJV), for two reasons. For one thing, the Bible was not divided into our familiar chapters and verses until the 13th century. More significantly, though, Scriptures were so much a part of Augustine’s vocabulary that it would not have occurred to him to pause and give a citation every time he quoted them. What verses or Bible stories can you add to your “mental vocabulary” to help you navigate the demands of earthly and heavenly citizenship?

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY magazine.
Additional Resources

- [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)
  - God and Government
  - Culture: Love It, Leave It, or Transform It
  - How Shall We Defend the Pledge of Allegiance?
  - Defining Our Role in Politics
  - The Kingdom and Our Culture
  - Patriotism
  - Church and State: Keep Them Separate
  - Should Christians Have Power?


- *City of God*, Augustine (selections), see [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aug-city2.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aug-city2.html)


Theology for an Age of Terror
Augustine's words after the 'barbarian' destruction of Rome have a remarkably contemporary ring.

By Timothy George, for the study, “Dual Citizenship”

September 11, 2001, is frequently compared to December 7, 1941, as a day that will "live in infamy." But a more appropriate analogy might be August 24, 410, when the city of Rome was besieged and pillaged by an army of 40,000 "barbarians" led by the Osama bin Laden of late antiquity, a wily warrior named Alaric. One can still see the effects of this cataclysmic event when walking through the ruins of the Roman Forum today. The Basilica Aemilia was the Wall Street of ancient Rome, a beautiful structure in the Forum with a marble portico. One can still see the green stains of copper coins melted into the stone from the conflagrations set by Alaric and his marauders.

Before then, Roman coins bore the legend Invicta Roma Aeterna: eternal, unconquerable Rome. It had been more than 800 years since the Eternal City had fallen to an enemy's attack. In many ways, Rome was like America prior to 9/11, the world's only superpower. But in 410, Rome's military power could not prevent its walls being breached, its women raped, and its sacred precincts burned and sacked.

When Jerome heard about the fall of Rome in faraway Bethlehem, he put aside his Commentary on Ezekiel and sat stupefied in total silence for three days. "Rome was besieged," Jerome wrote to a friend. "The city to which the whole world fell has fallen. If Rome can perish, what can be safe?" The British monk Pelagius, who was in Rome when the attack occurred, gave this report: "Every household had its grief, and an all-pervading terror gripped us."

Responding to those who said Rome fell as the gods' punishment against the ascendant Christians, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, began writing The City of God, an opus magnum et arduum, as he called it—a "great and laborious work." Augustine completed the book shortly before his death in 430. Its influence extended to the Reformation and beyond. For 1,500 years, it has been the bedrock of a Christian philosophy of history.
Augustine's Journey

As a theologian in an age of terror, Augustine provides wisdom for our own precarious situation. Like C. S. Lewis, Augustine came to the Christian faith through a tortuous process of denial, doubt, false starts, dead ends, and surprising discovery. For nearly nine years, he followed the way of the Manicheans, radical dualists who divided the world into kingdoms of light and darkness and who taught that matter itself was inherently evil. Next he turned to academic skepticism. The skeptics, not unlike some postmodernists today, denied that there was any knowable absolute truth.

Later, he turned to Neo-Platonism, which offered a model of transcendence: It explained the world in terms of a spiritual reality—the ideals of truth, goodness, beauty—that could not be reduced to the flow and flux of the visible, changing world around us. Neo-Platonism continued to influence Augustine even after he became a Christian.

There were, however, two major problems with this philosophy that could not be squared with biblical faith. First, Neo-Platonism argued that matter had always existed. Creation was the work of an artisan who reshaped primordial matter into some other form. But the first five words of the Bible contradicted this cosmogony: "In the beginning God created." Augustine reflected deeply on the creation narrative in Genesis. In book 11 of Confessions he made a startling, brilliant discovery. He came to see that God had not only created both time and space, but that he had created them simultaneously and interdependently. (This insight, which Augustine derived from meditation on the Bible, anticipated Einstein's theory of relativity by 1,500 years.)

Second, Neo-Platonism had no explanation of history. The Christian doctrine of Creation does not mean merely that when God said "poof," the material cosmos popped into being. It means also that God is a principal actor in the unfolding drama of the world, its peoples, and its destiny. As John 1:14 puts it, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Neo-Platonism had no place for the Incarnation, but Augustine came to see that this central datum of Christian revelation was the key to understanding the human story.

Between the conversion of Constantine in 312 and the conversion of Augustine in 386, the Christian movement had been transformed from a small, persecuted sect into a tolerated, then legally recognized, and finally officially established religion within the Roman Empire. While there were many benefits that came with this transformation, including the fact that Christians were no longer routinely hauled into the arena or fed to hungry lions, there was a downside as well.

Within a few generations, those who had once been persecuted became persecutors. For the first time, Christians had to think about what it means to follow Jesus Christ while also participating in civil governance. What does it mean to wage a just war? Can followers of a Palestinian peasant who declined to call armies of angels
to deliver him from physical assault now sanction violence against heretics and recalcitrant pagans in his name?

Eusebius of Caesarea, the biographer of Constantine, had hailed the emperor as the 13th apostle and acclaimed his conversion in utopian terms. Nearly a century later, Augustine realized that such hopes were as misplaced as they had been premature. As wealthy refugees from Rome began to stream into Hippo with their horror stories of Alaric's acts—temples burned, women raped, citizens forced to flee for their lives—Augustine reminded his hearers that the City of God in its pilgrimage here on earth was not exempt from the ravages of time, that it was ever marked "by goading fears, tormenting sorrows, disquieting labors, and dangerous temptations."

Forgotten Distinction

With the assumptions of "Christendom" shaken again today by the forces of terror, Augustine teaches us that we must not equate any political entity—whether it be the Roman Empire, the American republic, the United Nations, or anything else—with the kingdom of God. Islam proclaims an undifferentiated understanding of the human community (ummah), whereas Christianity, especially in the Augustinian perspective, requires a proper respect for the complementary but clearly distinguishable roles of church and civil authority.

Whenever this distinction is forgotten or minimized, the Christian faith is in danger of being politicized and the state idolized. When this happens, religious liberty invariably gets trampled. The danger of being co-opted by forces imimical to the gospel is not limited to one political party or ideology. It can arise from any point along the political spectrum, from the raucous right, the loony left, or the mushy middle.

In the early 1930s, many earnest Christians in Germany equated the Nazi state with the direct unfolding of God's purpose in the world. In the face of this crisis, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (whose 100th birthday we celebrated this year), and other courageous church leaders supported the Barmen Declaration. The first and second articles in this statement of faith argue for the supremacy of Jesus Christ over every temporal authority that would usurp the crown rights of the King of Kings:

Jesus Christ, as he has testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and death. ... Just as Jesus Christ is the pledge of the forgiveness of our sins, just so, and with the same earnestness, [he] is also God's mighty claim on the entirety of human life. In him we encounter a joyous liberation from the godless claims of this world to free and thankful service to its creatures.

This is one side of the Augustinian equation, but there is another. Christians hold a double citizenship in this world. Like the apostle Paul—who could claim that his true political identity was in heaven (Phil. 3:20), but who also appealed to Caesar as a
Roman citizen when his life was at stake—so believers in Christ live as sojourners, resident aliens, in a world of profound discontinuity and frequently contested loyalty.

Jean Bethke Elshtain summarizes the counsel Augustine gives to believers beset by such fears and hopes: "Resisting altogether any notion of earthly perfection, Augustine offers instead a complex moral map that creates space for loyalty and love and care, as well as for a chastened form of civic virtue."

The key word here, chastened, calls for a posture of engagement that acknowledges, in the words of the old gospel hymn, "This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through," while at the same time working with all our might to love our neighbors as ourselves and to seek justice and peace as we carry out what Augustine called "our business within this common mortal life."

There are two major (and regrettably common) mistakes Augustine wants us to avoid. One is the lure of utopianism. This is the mistake of thinking that we can produce a human society that will solve our problems and bring about the kingdom of God on earth. This was the basic error of both Marxism and 19th-century liberalism.

The other error, equally disastrous, is cynicism. This creeps up on us as we see ever-present evil. We withdraw into our own self-contained circle of contentment, which can just as well be a pious holy huddle as a secular skeptics club.

**Fragile World, Strong Faith**

How can we avoid such reactions? Perhaps another great Christian of the past, Francis of Assisi, can help. One day when Francis was riding to Assisi, he saw a leper on the road. He reached out to embrace the leper and actually gave him the kiss of peace. While embracing this filthy, diseased outcast, Francis said, he was overcome by a dual sensation. One was nausea. The other was a sense of sweetness and well-being. Like Francis, we need both.

If all we experience is nausea, we will become cynics. We will give up on the world and turn away. But if all we have is sweetness, then our faith will amount to little more than sentimental fluff.

Genuine Christian faith, and true ministry, takes place on the thin line between nausea and sweetness. Feel-good Christianity, so common in our popular culture, actually masks the suffering and pain of the world for which Christ died.

C. S. Lewis preached at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin at Oxford on October 22, 1939. Less than two months earlier, Hitler had invaded Poland. Britain was about to face the horrible Nazi onslaught. This is what Lewis told the assembled students:
It may seem odd for us to carry on classes, to go about our academic routine in the midst of a great war. What is the use of beginning when there is so little chance of finishing? How can we study Latin, geography, algebra in a time like this? Aren't we just fiddling while Rome burns?

This impending war has taught us some important things. Life is short. The world is fragile. All of us are vulnerable, but we are here because this is our calling. Our lives are rooted not only in time, but also in eternity, and the life of learning, humbly offered to God, is its own reward. It is one of the appointed approaches to the divine reality and the divine beauty, which we shall hereafter enjoy in heaven and which we are called to display even now amidst the brokenness all around us.

That is our calling, too, amidst the brokenness—including the threat of terrorism—all around us. We are to be faithful to God's calling, to bear witness to the beauty, the light, and the divine reality that we shall forever enjoy in heaven. We are to do this in a culture that seems, at times, like Augustine's, a crumbling world beset by dangers we cannot predict.

As Augustine aged, he increasingly thought of the world, its politics, culture, and institutions, as a tottering old man whose days were numbered: "You are surprised that the world is losing its grip? That the world is grown old? Don't hold onto the old man, the world; don't refuse to regain your youth in Christ, who says to you: 'The world is passing away; the world is losing its grip; the world is short of breath. Don't fear, your youth shall be renewed as an eagle.'"

As Augustine lay dying in 430, a new wave of terror swept across the Mediterranean world. The Vandals, led by a ferocious warrior named Genseric, surrounded Hippo—bringing torture, violence, and disarray to its churches and its people. As Augustine chanted the psalms on his deathbed, he might have come across this verse in Psalm 31:21: "Blessed be the Lord, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city."

—Timothy George is dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and an executive editor of Christianity Today.

"Theology for an Age of Terror," by Timothy George, Christianity Today, September 2006
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 9
Pulling Weeds in the Church Yard
Is the church honestly a “counterculture for the common good”?

Most of us probably have a ready qualifier when unbelievers question us about faith issues—a way to distance ourselves from the often silly, and sometimes terrible, things perpetrated by so-called Christians. “Well, yes, I’m a Christian, but not like those abortion clinic bombers. And not like that CEO who defrauded his company. And not like...”

In the CHRISTIANITY TODAY article “The Church’s Great Malfunctions,” Miroslav Volf writes, “Christian faith has been put to the most scandalous uses. As we reflect on how followers of Christ can exemplify ‘a counterculture for the common good,’ it’s important to keep these ill effects of faith in mind.” What should take the place of “idleness of faith and oppressiveness of faith,” as Volf labels them? How can Christians address these “malfunctions” and weed them out? This study will discuss these issues.

Lesson #9
Scripture:

Based on:
“*The Church’s Great Malfunctions,*” by Miroslav Volf, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, October 2006
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "The Church’s Great Malfunctions" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

Faith in Jesus is meant to be, according to Scripture, a way of life that presents hope and healing to individuals and cultures. “Too often, however,” Miroslav Volf writes in his CHRISTIANITY TODAY article, “Christian faith neither mends the world nor helps human beings thrive. To the contrary, it seems to shatter things into pieces, to choke up what’s new and beautiful before it has a chance to take root, to trample underfoot what’s good and true.” Ouch. Volf suggests that there are two main “malfunctions” within the church. The first is “idleness of faith,” where, because of temptation, compartmentalized lives, and misconstrued thinking about Christ, Christians view faith as an enhancement drug rather than a reality in which to live our whole lives. The result is moral failure. The second malfunction is “oppressiveness of faith.” Volf states that these Christians have embraced the “ends” of faith but not the Christ-like “means”; they view faith as irrelevant to modern issues and find it too demanding to live the values of the kingdom. Thus, Christians can resort to oppressive, at times violent, methods to accomplish their goals. “We Christians should be our most rigorous critics,” Volf writes. This will lead the way towards a mature way of life—a “counterculture for the common good.”

Discussion starters:

[Q] How do you react when people ask you about the latest moral failure of a Christian in the public eye, or violence perpetrated in the name of Christ?

[Q] Do you agree with Volf that these are the two great malfunctions of the modern church? Did he miss any? Did he over/understate the ones he chose?

[Q] Are you guilty of either of these malfunctions and/or the factors that lead up to them? How do you deal with these in your own life?

[Q] What do you think the author means by “counterculture for the common good”? Is this your understanding of the role of the church in culture?

[Q] What would it look like if the church were to repent of these malfunctions? For individual Christians to repent of them?

[Q] What does Scripture say about how faith should influence our lives, and, in turn, how it is to influence the world around us?
PART 2

Discovering Biblical Principles:

Teaching point one: Real faith is an integrated reality, not an idle veneer.

Theologian Dallas Willard, in *The Divine Conspiracy*, writes tongue-in-cheek:

> The theology of Christian trinkets says there is something about the Christian that works like the bar code ... Some belief or some association with a group affects God the way the bar code affects the scanner. Perhaps there has occurred a moment of mental assent to a creed ... God “scans” it, and forgiveness floods forth. An appropriate amount of righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account to our account ... We are accordingly “saved” ... How could we not be Christians?

The Kingdom of God, however, is a transforming reality that we are invited to live in, not simply a label, badge, or sweet candy coating.

[Q] Volf asks in regard to the moral failure of self-professed Christians, “Why didn’t their faith prevent their crimes?” What’s your answer to that?

[Q] The article suggests that the factors that contribute to an “idle faith” are the lure of temptation, the power of systems, and a misconstrued faith. What do you think the author means by each of these? How have these factors affected your faith?


[Q] These are strong words. What does this passage tell you about the kind of faith that Jesus values?

[Q] What are some ways people tend to “clean the outside of the cup” or “whitewash tombs”? How are you tempted to practice a faith of appearances rather than inner transformation?

[Q] How does one clean the “inside of the cup”? How does the cleaning of the inside affect the cleanliness of the outside?


[Q] What does Jesus mean when he says, “Follow me”?

[Q] What does it cost to follow Jesus? What is the cost of *not* following Jesus?

[Q] Can you blame these people (vv. 59, 61) for their distracted or divided allegiance to Jesus? Why or why not?

[Q] In what areas of life do you say, “I will follow you, Lord; but...”? What distracts and divides your allegiance?

[Q] Why is the one who “puts his hand to the plow” and then looks back not fit for kingdom service?
[Q] How will you aim your plow straight ahead this week?

Optional Activity: On a poster board or whiteboard, ask the group to make a list of why Christ is more valuable than even our “nearest and dearest,” as seen in Luke 9:57–62. Use it as a focus for thanksgiving and worship. Copy the list for all to take home (or e-mail it afterwards) as encouragement to live fully for Christ this week.

Teaching point two: Real faith is a call to love enemies, not a violent oppressiveness.

Christian faith has been used to justify acts as violent as the Crusades, the lynching of blacks in America, and the bombing of abortion clinics. And maybe not as violent—but certainly as vicious—can be the rhetoric Christians use in public political and moral debates. However, faith requires Christ followers to put ourselves under the Word of God, not the other way around, to fit our agendas.

[Q] Volf writes in his article, “Many Americans ... eagerly [merge] the Cross and the flag. They follow in the footsteps of many Christians over the centuries who’ve left behind a trail of blood and tears.” What do you think he is talking about? Do you agree? Why or why not?

[Q] Later, Volf asks, “Why have Christians, who embrace a peaceable faith, often been so violent?” What do you think?

[Q] Is Volf accurate in his assessment of the factors that lead to an oppressive faith (a thin faith, an irrelevant faith, an unwillingness to walk the narrow path)?

[Q] Should Christ followers ever condone or resort to violence? If so, when? If not, why? Does the end ever justify the means?


[Q] How can Jesus place an angry heart on the same level as murder when it comes to judgment (vv. 21–22)? What does this tell you about the nature of Christian faith?

[Q] What new standard does Jesus set in verses 21–22?

[Q] Jesus takes things to a new level in verse 39, when he says to turn the other cheek. What does this tell you about his kingdom and its values?

[Q] How do churches and followers of Christ sometimes practice the old law of “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (v. 43) today? Are you guilty of this?

[Q] How does loving our enemies demonstrate that we are true sons and daughters of the Father (v. 45)? How would this affect our political and moral rhetoric in this country? Is there a difference between the way governments and individuals should react toward our enemies?

[Q] How can we live up to this new standard of being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48)?

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**Leader’s Note:*** Jesus’ statement reminds us that faith is not keeping another set of rules but a wholehearted devotion to our Father. He sets the standard of God’s perfection in order for us to keep striving and growing towards maturity and love as we humbly interact with others. And he gives us the resources of his Spirit, his Word, and his body to move us closer to perfecting our obedience.

**[Q]** Are there ways you use oppression, even violence, to accomplish your goals or express your views? How can you deal with the deeper heart issues here?

**[Q]** Who are your enemies? How can you love and pray for them this week?

**Teaching point three: Real faith examines itself and strives for a “counterculture for the common good.”**

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” the Greek philosopher Socrates observed. So true; but what he forgot to mention is that the unexamined life doesn’t do much good for those who come in contact with it either. Reactionary, self-righteous lives tend to leave a trail of broken and ignored people behind them. Christian faith requires self-examination individually and corporately—for the good of everyone.

**[Q]** How do you practice self-examination? What are the results?

**[Q]** How does your church evaluate itself? What are the results?

Read Psalm 51.

**[Q]** What does this psalm tell you about God? About his desire for his people?

**[Q]** What does God desire to do for us as we examine ourselves (confess and repent) before him?

**[Q]** In verses 12–15, what is the result of repentance and God’s restoration? Why?

**Leader’s Note:** The result of restoration is public proclamation and exhortation.

**[Q]** In what does God delight (vv. 16–17)? How can you practice this? Your small group? Your church?

**[Q]** King David closes this psalm of repentance and self-examination by bringing the whole nation before God (v. 18). What does this say about individual sin and its effects on society?

**[Q]** How can you make a practice of rediscovering and re-examining what God desires from you, your small group, and your church?

Read Acts 2:42–47.

**[Q]** What did this new community of believers devote themselves to, or hold in common?
[Q] Do you think this kind of community would prevent some of the malfunctions we see in the modern church? Why or why not?

[Q] How did this community influence those around it? What did this community communicate to the world about God and faith?

[Q] Volf suggests that the “Christian pursuit of the common good must be church-based without being church-centered.” What do you think that means? How would it look in your church community?

PART 3

Apply your findings

“We Christians should be our own most rigorous critics ... We need to build and strengthen mature communities of vision and character who celebrate faith as a way of life,” Volf ends his article. “As a counterculture, we work for the common good—because we believe in the common grace of the one God.” Regular and honest examination of our faith in light of Christ’s values and methods will allow us to extend hope and healing to the world.

[Q] Have you been tempted toward either or both of these malfunctions? How about the factors that lead to the malfunctions? How could you address these issues in your life?

[Q] How could your church or small group present more of a “counterculture for the common good” to your community?

Action Plan:

- Share a time of repentance as a small group. Take as much time as needed. Focus upon the issues of idleness and oppressiveness, and the factors that lead to them (lure of temptation, misconstrued faith, unwillingness to walk the narrow path, etc.).

- Of whom do you need to ask forgiveness? Have you failed in your faith or character? Is there some person or group that you are oppressive toward in your language or actions? Make a phone call or write a letter this week asking for forgiveness.

- “The pursuit of the common good must be church-based but not church-centered,” Volf writes. Get out of your church building or small group meeting place this month and go serve someone in his or her neck of the woods. The homeless shelter? The nursing home? The neighborhood around your meeting place? Make it an ongoing, relational commitment.

—Study by Kyle White, director of Neighbors’ House, a ministry to at-risk kids in DeKalb, Illinois.
Additional Resources

- ChristianVisionProject course
- A Counterculture for the Common Good
- Counterculturally Relevant
- Tilting at the Windmills of Culture
- The Church’s Highest Calling: Faithfulness
- Justice for All, One at a Time


The Church’s Great Malfunctions
We need to acknowledge these out of the deep beauty and goodness of our faith.

By Miroslav Volf, for the study, “Pulling Weeds in the Church Yard”

Though theology, like nearly every human endeavor, is a collaborative process, not many eminent theologians turn in articles with the names of co-authors attached. But Miroslav Volf’s article arrived bearing no fewer than five additional names—Joseph Cumming, David Miller, Andrew Saperstein, Christian Scharen, and Travis Tucker, his colleagues at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

That generosity is a good clue to Volf’s contribution to Christian theology. His 1996 book Exclusion and Embrace was both a serious work of biblical and theological investigation and a deeply personal reflection on the horrors of sectarian violence in his native Croatia, setting a standard for personal engagement with its subject that theology, unfortunately, rarely meets.

The Yale Center for Faith and Culture is dedicated to advancing faith as “a way of life,” not just a way of thinking—a way that should transform every human practice. While the essay responds to the question we’ve been addressing in CT’s 50th anniversary year—How can followers of Christ be a counterculture for the common good?—the Yale Center staff’s collaboration is also an eloquent answer all by itself.

There is a remarkable image in the closing pages of Scripture that has become a touchstone for the way my colleagues and I think about faith and culture. Amid its descriptions of the New Jerusalem, Revelation includes “the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). The tree holds out hope that whole cultures will be healed and mended, becoming places where people can flourish. And it sets an agenda for faith as a way of life that contributes to that flourishing, in anticipation, here and now.

Too often, however, Christian faith neither mends the world nor helps human beings thrive. To the contrary, it seems to shatter things into pieces, to choke what’s new and beautiful before it has chance to take root, to trample underfoot what’s good and true.
Some of faith’s damaging effects are a matter of perspective. Prizing power, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche derided Christianity for its “active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak.”

But even according to its own standards, Christian faith has been put to the most scandalous uses. As we reflect on how followers of Christ can exemplify “a counterculture for the common good,” it’s important to keep these ill effects of faith in mind. I’ll call them “malfunctions” and group them under two rubrics: idleness of faith and oppressiveness of faith.

Spectacular Failure

He was a “good Christian man,” he even taught Sunday school, and yet he ended up presiding over one of the worst business frauds in history, involving thousands of people and billions of dollars. I could be referring to any number of executives in the business-page headlines of the past several years, from Enron to WorldCom and beyond. Why didn’t their faith prevent their crimes? I suspect at least three factors were at work in their faith’s spectacular failure.

First, the lure of temptation. In a way, fraud in business is no different from infidelity in marriage or plagiarism in scholarly work. Even people committed to high moral standards succumb.

Giving in is as old as humanity—but so is victory over temptation. Virtuous character matters more than moral knowledge. Like Adam and Eve in the Fall or the self-confessing apostle Paul in Romans 7, most of those who do wrong know what’s right but find themselves irresistibly attracted to evil. Faith idles when character shrivels.

Second, the power of systems. The lure of temptation is amplified by the power of the systems in which we work. This may be true most of all in the nearly ubiquitous market, whether that is the market of ideas, goods and services, political influence, or mass communication. More than a century ago, Max Weber spoke of the modern market as an “iron cage.” The rules of the market demand that profit be maximized; these rules, and not moral considerations, determine how the game is played. Living as we inescapably do in various spheres that follow their own internal rules, we find ourselves leading divided lives.

Most people of faith living in the modern world have experienced the pull of divided loyalties. Though many have given in, many have also resisted by refusing to play by the rules of the game when those rules conflict with their deeply held convictions. They know they must be people of faith not only in the inner sanctuary of their souls, in their private lives, or when gathered with likeminded folks at church, but also in their everyday activities when scattered to the various places in which they do their daily work.
Third, a *misconstrued faith*. Karl Marx famously noted that religion—Christian faith, he primarily meant—is the “opiate of the people,” a “downer” or depressant insulating them from reality and consoling them with a dream world of heavenly bliss. Marx missed the point that religion can often be an “upper,” a stimulant that energizes people for tasks at hand. But the truth is that when Christian faith functions only as a soothing or performance-enhancing drug, that faith is, in fact, malfunctioning.

To be sure, the Christian Bible bears two great traditions that very roughly cover these two functions of faith, “deliverance” and “blessing.” As deliverance, faith helps repair broken bodies and souls, including healing the wounds and disappointments inflicted on us. As blessing, faith energizes us to perform our tasks excellently, with requisite power, concentration, and creativity.

Yet if faith *only* heals and energizes, then it is merely a crutch, not a way of life. There are faiths of this sort—for example, mystical faiths of various kinds, including New Age spiritualities. But the Christian faith is not one of them. This faith does its proper work when it sets us on a journey, guides us along the way, and gives meaning to each step. When we embrace faith—when God embraces us—we become new creatures constituted and called to be part of the people of God. We are invited into the story of God’s engagement with humanity. As we embark upon that journey, faith guides us by indicating paths to be taken and dark alleys to be avoided. Finally, faith’s story gives meaning to all we do, from the smallest act to the weightiest. Is what we do in concord with that story? Then it is meaningful and will remain, glistening like corrosion-resistant gold. Does it clash with the story? Then it is ultimately meaningless and will burn like straw, even if we find it the most thrilling and fulfilling activity in which we’ve ever engaged.

For Christian faith not to be idle in the world, the work of doctors and garbage collectors, business executives and artists, stay-at-home moms or dads and scientists needs to be inserted into God’s story with the world. That story needs to provide the most basic rules by which the game in all these spheres is played. And that story needs to shape the character of the players. I fear that few leaders in business, or in any field, think of their faith in those terms today.

**Violent Faith**

For Christians, faith is a precious good, the most valuable personal and social resource. When it is left untapped, the common good suffers—not just the particular interests of Christians. But many non-Christians today would consider the idleness of faith a minor blessing. Active faith is what they fear. As Sam Harris put it in *The End of Faith*, the Bible contains “mountains of life-destroying gibberish,” and for Harris, when Christians take the Bible as their final authority, they act in violent, oppressive, life-destroying ways that undermine the common good.
A Serbian soldier rides on a tank and triumphantly flashes three fingers into the air—a symbol of the most holy Trinity, a sign that he belongs to a group that believes rightly about God. Clearly, his faith, in some sense, gives legitimacy to his triumphant ride on that killing machine. He’s not alone in draping the wild-eyed god of war or the fierce goddess of nationalism with the legitimizing mantle of religious faith. Some of his Croatian enemies did the same, as have many Americans who eagerly merged the Cross and the flag. They follow in the footsteps of many Christians over the centuries who’ve left behind them a trail of blood and tears.

Consequently, critics say that by positing a cosmic struggle between good and evil, Christianity and other major religions are inescapably violent. Yet the absence of struggle against evil may bring more violence than the struggle itself, and not all struggle is properly described as violent. Critics say that monotheistic religions in particular divide the world into “us” (followers of the one true God) and “them” (followers of false idols). Yet polytheism divides people who worship incompatible gods into “us” and “them” even more fundamentally than does monotheism. Moreover, if we take the question of truth out of the sphere of religion, the only way to adjudicate competing claims of diverse gods is by violent struggle. And atheism did nothing to curtail the ravings of Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot.

Christianity, of course, is not merely monotheism. And its particular claims about both divine reality and human history are a powerful resource for human flourishing. Critics can only see the death of the Son of God as divine child abuse, but Christians respond that Jesus Christ is not other than God but other in God. On the Cross, God takes the consequences of human sin on God’s own divine self. The New Testament insists that such divine action provides the model for relations between human beings. Critics charge that Revelation’s vision is one where a divine Rider kills all the enemies of God, but Christians are never encouraged in Revelation to imitate the Rider; to the contrary, they are told to imitate the martyrs—the victims of violence. Should not the violent, who persistently refuse to be redeemed by self-sacrificial love, be excluded from the final world of love? The “violence” of the divine Rider on the white horse is no more than the divine enactment of such exclusion.

So why have Christians, who embrace a peaceable faith, often been so violent? There are three main reasons, and they roughly correspond to the three reasons for faith’s idleness.

First, a thin faith. Too many Christians embrace the ends mandated by their faith (for instance, maintaining the sanctity of unborn life or just social arrangements), but not the means by which faith demands that these ends be reached (persuasion rather than violence). The cure for religiously induced violence is not less faith but more faith—faith in its full scope, faith enacted with integrity and courage by its holy men and women, faith pondered responsibly by its great theologians.
Second, seemingly irrelevant faith. Can a faith born 2,000 years ago tell us anything useful about democratic governance, running a modern corporation, or defending a nation from terrorists? Sensing a tension, we use faith merely to bless what we think is right to do. It takes hard intellectual and spiritual work to learn to understand and live faith authentically under changed circumstances. This work cannot be placed only on the shoulders of theologians; it must be an endeavor in which faithful people from all walks of life are engaged, and study of a variety of disciplines must be involved.

Finally, unwillingness to walk the narrow path. Often “impractical” slides into “overly demanding.” Someone has violated us or our community; we feel the urge for revenge—and we set aside the explicit command to love our enemies, to be benevolent and beneficent toward them. Or we believe that our culture is going down a perilous road; we want to change its self-destructive course—and we forget that the ends that Christian faith holds high do not justify setting aside its strictures about the appropriate means.

And so we’re back at the question of character. In addition to applying an authentically understood faith to various spheres of life, we need properly formed persons who resist misusing faith in oppressive ways. For the Christian faith produces devastating results when it devolves into a mere personal or cultural resource for people whose lives, like the life of that Serbian soldier, may be guided by anything but that faith.

The Task Ahead

Is it really possible for our faith to become functional again in spite of these two great and troubling malfunctions? Only if we expose the malfunctions with the honesty of those who know that our salvation doesn’t depend on our moral excellence. We Christians should be our own most rigorous critics—and be that precisely out of a deep sense of the beauty and goodness of our faith.

Then we can begin to think of faith neither as simply a system of propositions to be believed, nor as merely a set of energizing and healing techniques to be practiced, but as an integral way of life. This will not take the form of a free-floating “public theology” unrelated to concrete communities of faith. The Christian pursuit of the common good must be church-based without being church-centered. We need to build and strengthen mature communities of vision and character who celebrate faith as a way of life as they gather before God for worship and who, sent by God, live it out as they scatter to pursue various tasks in the world.

In all of this, we will do well to learn from non-Christian endeavors. A temptation for any group that sees itself as a counterculture is to understand its relation to society in oppositional terms. But blanket opposition isn’t right for those who believe in God
as the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. We do not need to melt down all the
gold of the Egyptians. While some non-Christian approaches may have to be rejected,
others can be taken over as they are, and still others repaired or improved. As a
counterculture, we work for the common good—because we believe in the common
grace of the one God.

“The Church’s Great Malfunctions,” by Miroslav Volf, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, October 2006
How much hope should Christians place in political solutions to our problems? “The New Testament writers show great confidence that the world is being transformed through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ,” says David P. Gushee. “But they show no confidence whatsoever that the powers and principalities of this world serve as the agents of that global transformation.” Gushee reminds us that redemption is God’s work, and he will accomplish it in his time. The church is intimately involved in this process through the faithful pursuit of its mission and the daily practice of God’s will.

How might Christians best impact the culture in which we live? What does Scripture say about a Christian’s role in politics? How might we best produce moral change in our country? This study will discuss the relationship of Christians and politics.

Lesson #10

Scripture:
Jeremiah 18:5–12; Romans 6:1–14; 12:1–2; 13:1–7; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Titus 3:1–11; 1 Peter 2:11–17

Based on:
“Children of a Lesser Hope” by David P. Gushee, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2006
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article, "Will Government Save Us?" by David Gushee (included at the end of this study).

Believers are increasingly pressured to be vocal and involved in political change. This pressure is usually focused around culturally controversial issues related to morality. Gushee believes that there may be a correlation between declining confidence in the church and increased political activity. He believes that Christians turn to the state to enforce the values the church cannot seem to advance. Gushee reminds us that while there are many good reasons to exercise our citizenship, the church’s message is that Jesus saves, not the government. Instead of relying on the government to change the morals and values of our nation, we would do well to concentrate on the mission Christ gave to the church—to preach the gospel and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Why do you think Christians are increasingly involved in politics?

[Q] What role do you believe Christians should have in politics? Are Christians negligent to the cause of Christ if they are not politically active? Why or why not?

[Q] Why might Christians in a democracy have more of a political responsibility than Christians who live under other kinds of governments?

[Q] How do you feel when you are pressured to be politically involved? Is this pressure justified? Explain.

[Q] How do you feel Christians should go about trying to improve moral behavior?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God establishes governments.

Read Jeremiah 18:5–12. God establishes governments (Romans 13:1), and he is ultimately in control of their destiny. He builds up and plants some governments and uproots and destroys others. The backbone of a nation’s morality depends on the individual hearts of its members. Whether legislated to do so or not, each of us must turn from our evil ways in order for the nation as a whole to turn back to God.
How should remembering that God is ultimately in control of government influence our thinking and behavior toward politics? Why should it give us peace even in the face of poor government policies?

What is the root of evil in a nation (Jeremiah 18:12)? What must a nation do to reform its evil ways (Jeremiah 18:11)?

According to the Book of Jeremiah, true moral reform in a nation requires the repentance of the nation’s individual members. Given this truth, what are the best ways the church can promote reform in our nation?

Read 1 Timothy 2:1–2. Since God is ultimately in control of all governments, what role should prayer have in the moral fiber of a nation?

How might prayer and the freedom to live a Christian life without harassment by our government be related?

Is it possible that the church spends too much time fighting the current political agenda and not enough time in prayer? Explain your answer.

Teaching point two: True transformation is a product of a changed heart and a renewed mind.

Read Romans 6:1–14 and 12:1–2. The moral character of a nation must be rooted in the hearts and minds of its individual members. Through the redemptive work of Christ, we have the power to conform our thinking and behavior to God’s will. Legislation may promote the outward appearance of obedience, but God alone can produce true moral change in the lives of individuals and nations.

The apostle Paul warned the Romans not to conform to this world. Gushee says, “The more we find it hopeless to think that we can actually create and sustain disciplined communities of faith, the more we spend our time on political activities.”

Why is the draw to conform to the world so strong?

According to the passages we read in Romans, how do we keep from being conformed to this world?

In what ways should a Christian act differently from the rest of the world?

Do you agree with Gushee that many Christians today are hard to distinguish from the rest of the world? If yes, what accounts for the discrepancy between their statement of belief and their behavior?

Would stronger moral legislation improve the morality of the church? Would it improve the morality of the nation as a whole? Why or why not?
Gushee believes that American evangelicals struggle with moral mediocrity to the point that we are left feeling hopeless about the church as the center of God’s redemptive work in the world. Gushee believes this feeling of hopelessness causes us to turn to the state to enforce values.

[Q] Do you agree with Gushee? Why or why not?

[Q] According to Romans 6, what was the apostle Paul’s response to moral mediocrity?

[Q] How might the church be more influential if it forsook its moral mediocrity and modeled a life that sin did not master?

Gushee says, “The redemption of the world is God’s activity, occurring in God’s good time. It is an ongoing process in which the church is intimately involved, through faithful pursuit of its mission, but also, quite simply, through its quiet daily practice of God’s will.”

[Q] Where should the emphasis on moral commitment begin? What role should the church have in helping define and shape the values and morals of our nation?

[Q] How can we best go about seeking change in the lives of individuals and the nation?

[Q] Do laws that attempt to control morality assist in the transformation of behavior? Why or why not?

[Q] How would our nation be different if most of its members desired to obey God?

Teaching point three: We honor God by living lives that bring glory to his name. This includes obeying our government’s authorities.

Read Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:11–17. The apostle Paul called us to obey and honor our government’s authorities. God uses governments as a tool to fulfill his purpose for nations and the individuals within them. No government exists that is not established by God. If we resist the authority that God has established, we oppose the ordinances of God. Paul warned the Romans that this would bring condemnation upon them.

The believers to whom Peter wrote lived in a society hostile to Christians. They faced slander, acts of violence, arrest, the confiscation of their property, and social ostracism. In the face of this hostile society, Peter reminded the early Christians to live godly lives so the pagans would see their good deeds and glorify God. This included submission to even difficult government authorities. In response to this very antagonistic society, Peter admonished Christians to “show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, and honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

[Q] Since 1 Peter 2:17 tells us to respect everyone, how does this relate to those with whom we disagree politically? How might Christians take a stand for what they believe politically while at the same time demonstrating love and respect for the government officials with whom they disagree?

Leader’s Note: One way to do this is by honoring their position, even if we don’t respect them as persons. For example, we can pray for and refuse to belittle even a corrupt government official in front of our friends and family. We can teach our children what we believe is a bad or immoral policy without making fun of the person
who holds such a position. This communicates to those around us that while we hate the sin, we love the sinner.

Are there ever times we should not obey our government? If yes, give practical examples. If no, explain your answer.

**Optional Activity**: Romans 13:1–2 tells us that God establishes all authority. Therefore, if we resist authority, we oppose the ordinances of God. First Peter 2:17 tells us to honor the king.

Form two teams for a debate.

**Team 1**: Defend the American Revolution. Explain why the American Revolution was necessary and did not conflict with God’s commands to obey authority.

**Team 2**: Argue against the American Revolution because it was resisting authority that was established by God.

After a predetermined length of debate time, have your entire group vote to decide if the American Revolution was a justified disobedience to government.

What negative behaviors do political activists often use to further their cause? How might these tactics be detrimental to the cause of Christ if Christians use them?

The apostle Peter warned believers not to use their freedoms to cover evil. How might we use our freedoms as an excuse for inappropriate behavior? How might we use our freedoms to glorify God?

Peter said the pagans would observe the Christians’ godly behavior and glorify God. How do you think today’s American culture views the reactions and responses of Christians to government laws and policies? Give examples.

How might the reactions and responses of Christians influence the culture’s view of God either positively or negatively? How might your reactions to governmental laws or policies influence your neighbor’s view of God?

**Teaching point four: Have a heart of humility and respect toward all men when dealing with political issues.**

Read Titus 3:1–11. Paul told Titus to remind the people of Crete to be obedient to their rulers and ready for every good deed. They were to have attitudes of humility and hearts that focused on respect, kindness, love, and mercy toward all men. Paul specifically warned them to be careful to neither malign anyone nor be contentious in any way. He cautioned them to shun foolish controversies, strife, and disputes because they were unprofitable and worthless. Paul encouraged them to be gentle and considerate of all men.

The good deeds Paul described require humility before Christ and men, recognizing that we, too, are sinners saved by God’s mercy and kindness. Our focus should be on sharing the love of Christ with those around us. We must guard against a heart of pride that thinks our political views are the only correct ones. Pride can lead to contentious, overbearing, and judgmental attitudes toward those with whom we disagree. Even when we are fighting against sin issues prevalent in our culture, we must remember that we are also sinners saved by God’s mercy so
that we approach the subject in all humility and gentleness. Our conduct and speech must be seasoned with salt and grace. The best way to win individuals, and ultimately our nation, to Christ is to speak the truth with kindness and mercy—just as Jesus our Savior is kind and merciful to us.

Consider the following behaviors that Paul specifically addressed and discuss how they relate to the way we should deal with government and politics:

- Slander no one
- Be peaceable and considerate
- Show true humility
- Avoid foolish controversies, arguments, and quarrels
- Devote yourself to doing what is good
- Do not be divisive

➢ Why might these virtues be difficult for us to practice when we are in disagreement with someone politically?

➢ Why should remembering God’s kindness and mercy toward us give us the desire and strength to display the character qualities God requires?

Optional Activity: Act out a conversation involving the following scenarios. Practice exhibiting the above character qualities that are outlined in Titus.

A. An 18-year-old unmarried woman has had an abortion and believes every woman should have the legal right to choose an abortion.

B. You are having lunch with a coworker who feels that homosexual behavior is as natural as heterosexual behavior. He further believes that homosexuals should be legally allowed to marry.

C. Your neighbor, who is a quadriplegic, asks you to write to your representatives to encourage them to pass a law that will allow the government to financially support stem-cell research using frozen embryos. You are morally opposed to this.

Paul told us not to be contentious and to avoid strife and disputes. Does this mean we must never verbally disagree with someone politically, or is it possible to verbally disagree and still be respectful? What role does humility have in our ability to exhibit these behaviors?

According to the passage we read in Titus, what must be the cornerstone of moral change? Can we expect our nation to improve morally as a result of outward political pressure? Why or why not?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Christians must put their hope and faith in God—not government policy. The church’s main purpose is to lead people into the arms of Jesus, who loves them unconditionally. Christ alone can produce a genuine heart change that will result in improved moral behavior. This behavior
is a result of a personal relationship with God and a desire to love and obey him. When we are involved in politics, we must be excellent ambassadors for the cause of Christ through exemplary Christian behavior that demonstrates humility and kindness.

[Q] What attitudes and behaviors should Christians who are involved in political discussion or activities exhibit?

[Q] What do you believe is the best way to produce positive moral change in our nation?

[Q] Have your views about how Christians should be involved in politics changed as a result of this article and study? If so, how?

Action Point: Determine how you can begin to speak in a loving way to friends, family members, and acquaintances about your political and moral views. If you need to apologize to anyone for past behavior, make a commitment to do so this week.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker, freelance writer, and regular contributor to CHRISTIANBIBLESTUDIES.COM.

Additional Resources

ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Defining Our Role in Politics
-Government and Law
-Should Christians Have Power?
-Counterculturally Relevant
-Patriotism and God
-A Counterculture for the Common Good
-Titling at the Windmills of Culture
-Justice for All, One at a Time
-Contemporary Christian Issues – a 13-week course

Christians and Politics After the Culture Wars, David P. Gushee (Baker, 2000; ISBN 0801022312)


Jesus and Politics, Alan Storkey (Baker, 2005; ISBN 0801027845)

ARTICLE

Children of a Lesser Hope
What happens when we lose confidence in the church?

By David P. Gushee, for the study, “Christians and Politics”

I am a Christian ethicist, but there's something wrongheaded about much Christian social ethics. In graduate school, I learned to examine some social problem in detail, then bring Christian principles thoughtfully to bear on that problem. Curiously, this process most often results in statements about what government—not the church—should do about the particular problem.

Mainline Protestants have dominated the discipline of Christian social ethics from its beginning, but today it is conservative evangelical Christians who are most vocal and visible in telling government what it should and should not do. Sometimes this involves analysis. Often it merely involves raised voices.

Now certainly, the United States government should not be the primary audience for Christian ethics. Over the past 40 years, ethicists beginning with John Howard Yoder and then Stanley Hauerwas have strongly objected to this development. There is something quite wrong, they say, when the intended audience for Christian moral reasoning is the secular world and the institutions that govern it.

This simply does not fit with the biblical witness, especially in the New Testament. The ethical exhortations offered there are articulated for followers of Jesus Christ by Jesus himself or by his apostles. New Testament moral teachers aim to instruct Christians in what manner of life is worthy of those whose identity is bound up with that of Christ. Think, for example, of Paul’s great ethical exhortations in Romans. Having been chosen by God and baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, we are to offer ourselves a living sacrifice, not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The New Testament writers show great confidence that the world is being transformed through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. But they show no confidence whatsoever that the powers and principalities of this world serve as the agents of that global transformation. No, the redemption of the world is God's activity,
occuring in God’s good time. It is an ongoing process in which the church is
intimately involved, through faithful pursuit of its mission, but also, quite simply,
through its quiet daily practice of God’s will.

Generally speaking, American evangelicals have a poorly developed theology of the
church. We also produce a variety of expressions of church life that do not emphasize
rigorous moral commitment. Our pietistic individualism creates a "Jesus and me"
ethos that often weakens any loyalty to the community of faith or any willingness to
submit to a disciplined covenental vision. The church is where I go to get my spiritual
needs met—you have no right to tell me what to do as I pursue that quest.

The moral mediocrity of this kind of church can leave us hopeless about the church
as the center of God’s redemptive enterprise in the world. How can we truly believe
that the world’s transformation is happening right here, right among us, when we
can’t stop divorce in our midst, or abortion, or greed, or internal church conflicts?

Ironically, we turn to the state to enforce the values we can’t seem to advance in
our own churches. We’re rightly concerned about our collapsing families, internet
pornography, decadent movies and music, and the weakening of sexual morality. But
we often can’t seem to prevent the encroachment of these problems in our own
Christian families and congregations. As if in response, we keep trying to change our
nation’s laws.

**The Church’s Message**

Is there a direct correlation between our declining confidence in the church and
our growing engagement with politics? The more we find it hopeless to think that we
can actually create and sustain disciplined communities of faith, the more we spend
our time on political activities. We may not be able to get self-identified Christians to
obey the Word of God, but we might be able to leverage our political clout to elect "our
people" to Congress.

Recently I was brought up short by reading about an Ohio pastor who was hoofing
it through his neighborhood getting the work of the church done. No, he wasn't
visiting the sick, preaching the gospel, or inviting people to church. He was registering
voters. Call me old-fashioned, but somehow that doesn’t seem quite right to me. I’m
glad it’s not how my own pastor invests his time.

It is election season, and we must remember that there are many good reasons to
exercise our Christian citizenship with care. But the church’s **message** is that Jesus
saves.

"Children of a Lesser Hope" by David P. Gushee, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2006
Control your temper, now. Count to ten. Go cool off. Don’t blow a gasket. Take an anger management class, you hothead! Obviously, anger is the black sheep in the family of emotions. How many books, seminars, and sermons teach ways to put the clamp on anger? What if anger was intended to be a positive thing?

In her CHRISTIANITY TODAY essay “To Russia with Fury,” Agnieszka Tennant describes an event that causes “the kind of anger God stirs up so that we would defy evil.” A righteous anger. How does this emotion reflect the heart of God? How could it affect social change? And what keeps it from going overboard? This study will discuss these questions.

Lesson #11

Scripture:

Based on:
“To Russia With Fury,” by Agnieszka Tennant, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, October 2006
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

Several books lately have lamented the contemporary Christian value of “niceness.” They suggest that the highest calling for Christians today is simply to be nice. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the virtues of righteous anger?

In her CHRISTIANITY TODAY essay “To Russia with Fury,” Agnieszka Tennant tells of coming up against a brick wall of corruption in Russia. During her travels with Russian Ministries, in benefit of the city of Beslan and its school siege victims, she was detained by police and airport security who “shake down foreigners for bribes.” Their Russian guide stepped in to diffuse the situation, but the crooked officers held out for the bribe. Three thousand rubles later the travelers were on their way. But the Russian guide gathered courage, fueled by fury, to look “his compatriot extortionists in the eyes” and say, “You bring shame on our country.”

Tennant rejects the current “psychobabble pulp on this complex emotion” of anger. She quotes pastor and author Garret Keizer: “Anger is grace both when Christ is cleansing the temple and when he is cleansing the lepers.” Jesus is our model for righteous anger. Tennant posits, therefore, that love-induced anger can help us jump into the fray of hard hearts and broken people around us. And, as a result, effect change.

Discussion starters:

[Q] How would you have honestly reacted in the situation in which Tennant found herself in Russia?

[Q] When you think of the word anger what comes to mind?

[Q] In what situations has anger been a positive resource for you?

[Q] Why do you think the church doesn’t seem to talk much about righteous anger?

[Q] What does Tennant mean when she writes, “The officers shrugged, cold to the lovers’ quarrel”? What was the lovers’ quarrel?

PART 2
Discovering Biblical Principles:

Teaching point one: Righteous anger reflects the heart of a loving God.

“Anger is evidence that we are made in God’s image; it demonstrates that we still have some concern for justice and righteousness in spite of our fallen estate ... The experience of anger is evidence of our nobility, not our depravity,” counselor Gary Chapman writes (The Other Side of
Love, Moody, 1999). It sounds odd, but our anger can be a godly response to the world around us.

**[Q]** What do you think of Chapman’s quote above?

Tennant quotes Garret Keizer, “The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God. I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any Messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.”

**[Q]** How can a loving God also be an angry God? Can there be one without the other?

**[Q]** What are some examples of God’s anger in Scripture?

Read Deuteronomy 6:13–15, where Moses relays the commands of God to Israel.

**[Q]** What does this passage tell you about God?

**[Q]** From what you read here, is God an arrogant hothead? Why or why not?

**[Q]** What do you think God means when he commands Israel to fear him (v. 13)?

**[Q]** Why do you think God is a jealous God (v. 15)? Is it for our ultimate good? Why or why not?

**[Q]** Why is destruction “from the face of the land” (v. 15) an appropriate response, on God’s part, to idolatry?

*Leader’s Note:* God described himself as “the LORD your God, who is among you.” He had shown himself as real, relational, compassionate, rescuing, and all-powerful. There was no question of his holiness. God must be worshiped as he describes himself. We must relate to him on his terms, as he deserves.

Read 2 Samuel 6:1–11.

**[Q]** Is God fair in this passage? Why or why not? Should we be scared of him?

*Leader’s Note:* Exodus 25:14–15 describes the correct method of moving the ark. Uzzah acted without reverence and treated this holy object as common.

**[Q]** What was God angry about here? What does this event tell you about God? His holiness? His commands?

**[Q]** In what ways does the church not take God’s righteous anger seriously? How do you try to tame him?

**[Q]** What should reverence toward God look like?

**[Q]** If this is how God reveals himself, how do we reflect God’s righteous anger in a sinful world?
Teaching point two: Righteous anger confronts evil.

In the 1976 film *Network*, television broadcaster Howard Beale rants about the state of the world and encourages viewers: “I want you to get up right now; sit up; go to your windows; open them and stick your head out and yell ‘I’m as mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore!’ Things have got to change. But first, you’ve gotta get mad!” Perhaps anger is simply a form of love. If we truly love God’s world, we will stand up and say, “This is not how things were meant to be, and, by God, they will change!” Perhaps courtesy and tolerance are sometimes just complacency and fear in disguise.

**Q** What makes you angry?

**Q** Was there ever a time when you were so angry about some injustice that you couldn’t keep quiet? If so, tell us about it.


**Q** What does this passage tell you about God’s heart?

**Q** What does it tell you about the value he places on people—especially the hurting and oppressed?

**Q** Does God’s punishment fit the crimes (v. 24)? Why or why not?

Read John 2:13–22.

**Q** Garret Keizer writes, “I am unable to commit to any Messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.” Is this true for you? Why or why not?

**Q** Does this account make you uncomfortable? If so, how?

**Q** What specific actions and words did Jesus utilize? What does this tell you about Jesus?

**Q** Why did he take this sort of action? What was being devalued?

**Q** How did Jesus’ actions affect the merchants? The disciples? The Jews?

**Q** Again, Keizer writes, “Anger is grace both when Christ is cleansing the temple and when he is cleansing the lepers.” How so?

**Q** In what instances of injustice does zeal for God consume you and move you toward action?

**Q** What situations (in your church, your community, your world) should cause righteous anger in you? In light of Jesus’ zeal, how could you act and speak out against these situations? What prevents you from doing so?

**Optional Activity:** Distribute a newspaper or weekly news magazine to each member. Scan through the pages together and point out stories that might arouse godly anger. Maybe there
are reports of white-collar crime that affect employees, or systemic injustice that oppresses the poor, or actions that devalue life, etc. Pray as a group for these situations and people. Pray that your hearts would reflect God's heart of righteous anger. Does your small group or church—or certain individuals—need to speak out or take action?

Teaching point three: Righteous anger recognizes God as judge.

Righteous anger reflects God’s heart, and it can motivate us to confront injustice like Jesus did. But, we have all seen Christians—or been Christians—who take this as license to be judge, jury, and executioner. We can rest in the fact that God is the just and ultimate Judge.

[Q] In your opinion, when have Christians taken righteous anger too far?

Read Ephesians 4:26–27.

[Q] Paul referred to Psalm 4:4 when he wrote, “In your anger do not sin.” What kind of anger would not cross the line into sin?

[Q] What would it look like to not let the sun go down while you are angry?

_Leader’s Note:_ This command suggests the good practice of keeping “short accounts” with those we are angry with. But it is also a directive to lay even our righteous anger before God the just judge.

[Q] How could our anger, specifically righteous anger, lead to a foothold for Satan if we are not careful?

Read Psalm 4.

[Q] What comfort comes from knowing that God is a righteous God (v. 1), especially in light of injustice?

[Q] What is the distress from which David is seeking relief (vv. 2–3)?

_Leader’s Note:_ It seems that David had been falsely accused or slandered by idolaters.

[Q] Theologian and teacher Bob Deffinbaugh suggests that “verses 4 and 5 seem … to be a kind of ‘self talk.’ Here David addresses himself ….” If this is so, what was David urging himself to do regarding his righteous anger?

[Q] As David turns over his righteous anger and distress to God in the face of injustice, what are the results (vv. 6–8)?

[Q] What instances of righteous anger do you need to trust God for (v. 5)?

[Q] How would trust in a righteous God allow you to rest peacefully despite the injustice around you (v. 8)?
PART 3

Apply your findings:

Tennant writes that “only a Lover can” confront corruption, injustice, and deadened souls. “Someone [who is] angry enough to look a conniver in the eyes and tell him the truth, or to throw over a few tables.” We can be thankful that our Holy God is a righteous, loving God who is angry over sin and injustice. From that understanding we can and must confront evil with word and deed. We are compelled by Christ to be “furious with love.”

[Q] How have you or your church acted upon righteous anger? What more might you need to say or do?

[Q] What in your life has served to deaden your sense of indignation? What has stirred it?

[Q] Who do you know that has modeled true righteous anger?

[Q] Where do you need to feel the weight of God’s righteous anger? Where have you been unjust or disobedient lately?

Action plan:

Take time to repent of instances where righteous anger was not acted upon because of fear or indifference, or where righteous anger turned into sin.

Commit to taking the next step in a situation where you have experienced righteous anger. Maybe it means writing a letter, confronting someone, or volunteering with a relief agency, but take the next step.

Invite some people who have acted upon righteous anger to address your small group. Maybe it’s a missionary, an activist, or a visionary high school student. Invite them to share their hearts with your group.

Study by Kyle White, director of Neighbors’ House, a ministry to at-risk kids in DeKalb, Illinois

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com - What’s Fueling Your Anger?


To Russia with Fury

Sometimes charity means anger.

By Agnieszka Tennant, for the study, “The Righteous Side of Anger”

When Russian President Vladimir Putin walks up to a kid in Red Square and—as if ad hoc—lifts the kid’s shirt and smooches his belly, as Putin did this summer, remember this: His government hired the giant American PR firm Ketchum to make Russia look good.

A winsome reputation is not easy to come by in a place where not only are oil profits skyrocketing, but so are less flattering things—numbers of skinheads, homeless orphans, violent crimes against minorities, AIDS infections, and incidents of religious discrimination. Then there’s the leprosy of the Russian soul—the corruption permeating all levels of society. What PR campaign could pretty it up?

I got a glimpse of this turpitude at the airport in the famous south Russian resort town of Mineralnye Vody, on the northern edge of the Caucasus, Europe’s tallest, austerely beautiful mountains. A band of airport security and police officers there shake down foreigners for bribes.

When they’re handed a foreign passport, the uniformed mafiosos look for a piece of paper issued to all visitor entering Russia. Hotel desk employees are supposed to stamp it for the purpose of tracking. For some reason, they often fail to do that. (Would it be paranoid to wonder if the area hotel desk workers could be in cahoots with the airport gang?)

Upon finding gaps in the stamps, security officers call the airport police. The police take the foreigners to an office with heavy steel doors. They insist that the foreigners broke the law, even though they didn’t. When this happened to me and a friend last May, our Russian guide, Sergey Rakhuba, stepped inside the interrogation room to intervene. (He knew what he was dealing with: Not long ago, at the same airport, his brother, a Ukrainian pastor, was humiliated and stripped of all his cash.) A sheep among the wolves, Sergey tried respect, diplomacy, his knowledge of the law, and logic. They were of no use.
“It’s going to take at least a couple of days before we’re done looking into this serious problem,” the crooks deliberated, shaking their heads. “We’re going to have to call Immigration, and they’re always busy.” Then they began to close the sale: “The whole process is going to cost you all at least, say, 3,000 rubles.”

Sergey is a gentle, jovial man, but when he came out of the room, his face was flushed with fury. It struck me as the kind of anger evocatively described in *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on the Sometimes Deadly Sin* by Garret Kaizer, a book that leaves in the dust any psychobabble pulp on this complex emotion. The kind of anger God stirs up so that we would defy evil.

“The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God,” Kaizer writes. “I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any Messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.” And this: “Anger is grace both when Christ is cleansing the temple and when he is cleansing the lepers.”

What Sergey does for a living is more like cleansing Russia's lepers. But that day, some tables needed knocking over. Rightly or wrongly—I still don’t know—my friend and I decided to pay the bribe, because we needed to make a meeting that was largely the reason we were in Russia. (We also reckoned with the possibility that the officers could “discover” narcotics in our luggage if we didn’t pay.) Once the moneyed handshake was over, we were instantly free to go. I muttered obscenities; Sergey didn’t. He stayed behind. He looked his compatriot extortionists in the eyes. All he said—and all he needed to say—was this: “You bring shame on our country.”

The officers shrugged, cold to the lovers’ quarrel.

Would it have made a difference if they’d known that we had just come from Beslan, the site of the 2004 school siege in which 344 people, mostly school children, died in a way that made many wonder if God was all fury and no love? What if they had recalled that unimaginative cops like them waved the Beslan-bound murderers through security checkpoints all the way from Chechnya after getting bribed to forget asking for the terrorists’ papers? And what if the officers had known that Sergey is vice president of Russian Ministries, which put crisis counselors in Beslan for a year? Or if they’d known that we had just returned from meetings in which both the vice mullah and the head of the government of Ossetia, the republic where Beslan is located, thanked Russian Ministries for its loyal care in the region?

I don’t know. Conscience-dulling maladies are hard to cure.

Putin’s PR people joined the Beslan parents in a collective sigh of relief last July, when Russian forces killed Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, who planned the Beslan siege.
It’s up to someone else to take on the deadening of the Russian soul. Only a lover can do it. Only a Lover can. Someone angry enough to look a conniver in the eyes and tell him the truth, or to throw over a few tables.

Someone furious with love.

—Agnieszka Tennant

“To Russia With Fury,” by Agnieszka Tennant, Christianity Today, October 2006
LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 12

The Value of Human Life
What is human life really worth?

It costs $65,000 a year to keep Charles Colson’s autistic grandson Max in a special-needs school. Utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer would decry this expenditure as a giant waste, because Max will never lead a normal life, and he and other students like him completely disrupt the lives of their caregivers. Besides, think of all that could be purchased with that $65,000—medicines for African AIDS victims, meals for the homeless, childcare for single mothers, new police cars for violent neighborhoods. Investing so much in the education of one autistic boy makes no logical sense, but Colson believes it’s the right thing to do.

How much is life worth? Why is every life precious? How does an ethic of love work in the real world? We’ll explore these questions in this study.

Lesson #12

Scripture:
Psalm 8; Ecclesiastes 2:1–11; Matthew 10:28–31; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 10:38–42; Romans 8:31–32; Philippians 3:7–10

Based on:
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “The $65,000 Question” from Christianity Today magazine (included at the end of this study).

Questions about the value of human life confront us constantly in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. Is having a child worth the $190,000 that the U.S. government estimates it will cost to rear her for 18 years? How about the hundreds or thousands of dollars an infertile couple could pay just to conceive (or adopt) the child? Costs pile up at the end of life, too, with hospitalizations, medications, and care facilities. And even when we don’t see the bills, we all share the costs for keeping others alive through Medicaid, Medicare, and private insurers.

Fortunately, most of us never have to assign a specific dollar amount to another’s existence. Lawyer Kenneth R. Feinberg did. Congress put him solely in charge of the 9/11-victim compensation fund, which meant he had to distribute more than $7 billion to more than 5,000 families. It was his job to decide the cash value of every injury or death sustained in the attacks. Injury awards averaged $400,000 and death awards averaged $2 million, but actual compensation ranged from $500 to $8.5 million. “It’s not easy being asked to do Solomon’s work, and that’s what this was about,” Feinberg told an interviewer. His book about his experiences is titled What Is Life Worth?—but he does not claim to have the answer.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Feinberg’s formula for calculating an award was lost income, plus a flat amount for suffering, minus a collateral source of income like life insurance. What other formulae might one use to decide what a life is worth?

[Q] Describe a time you had to decide the value of someone else’s life or comfort. (Examples might include serving on a jury, choosing a school or healthcare facility, considering fertility treatments or adoption, voting on a referendum to raise taxes for social services, and deciding whether or not to support a charitable cause.) How did you make your assessment?

[Q] What is the biggest investment you have made in the life of another person?

[Q] Have you ever been involved in caring for someone with special needs? What were the circumstances, and what did you learn from the experience?

Optional activity: Using Feinberg’s formula, ask each group member to calculate his or her “worth.” (Assign any value you think reasonable for pain and suffering.) Does the number seem high, low, or simply incomprehensible?
PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The pursuit of happiness is not the purpose of life.

Colson writes, “If pleasure and happiness are the purpose or true end of life, morality must consist in rationally apportioning pleasure and happiness to those most able to experience them. Even many Christians have embraced this proposition because it sounds so reasonable.” True, it’s hard to argue against happiness—who doesn’t prefer comfort and pleasure to pain and sorrow? The scriptural corrective isn’t to assert that happiness is bad, but to recognize that happiness is not as surpassingly important as most people think. Passages such as Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 and Philippians 3:7–10 put pleasure in godly perspective.

[Q] Why is the author of Ecclesiastes unhappy?

[Q] In verses 4–9, the author outlines his pleasure-seeking resume. What activities would appear on your pleasure-seeking resume?

[Q] Some of the author’s sources of pleasure are clearly excessive (his harem, for example), while others, like undertaking “great projects,” seem reasonable, even laudable. How can seemingly noble pursuits lead to misery?

[Q] How does the Philippians passage turn common notions of profit and loss on their heads? What does Paul want more of, and what does he want less of?

[Q] When was the last time you deliberately chose against your own happiness? What greater good did this choice serve?

[Q] How often do you pray for material success or ask God to make something “go smoothly”? What might be a better way to pray?

Teaching point two: Life is priceless because God gives it.

Disabled lawyer Harriet McBryde Johnson lost her debate with Peter Singer, Colson argued, because the debate took place in a moral vacuum: “Once she agreed that the issue is quality of life—that there is no objective standard, only subjective judgment about what constitutes a life worthy to be lived—she forfeited any chance of winning.” By contrast, Christians do believe in an objective standard, the infinite worth of God’s highest creation. Support for this standard can be found in Psalm 8, Matthew 10:28–31, and Romans 8:31–32.

[Q] How, according to the Psalm 8, do humans function in God’s creation? How is their glory (verse 5) related to God’s glory (verse 1)?

[Q] How does the worldview of the psalmist differ from the Utilitarian worldview?

[Q] What arguments for the value of human life does Matthew 10:28–31 add? How does the concept of the soul make earthly (bodily) life both more important and less important?
In what ways do Christ’s incarnation and death present the ultimate case for the value of human life?

When you look at other people, do you see beings created a little lower than the angels, endowed with souls, and worthy of the death of God himself? Is this what you see when you look at yourself?

Teaching point three: Love defies logic.

“Love is the beginning and the end of the good life,” Colson writes, “and it’s in love that our lives must be centered. Truth matters because without truth, love is unreal. It’s just another sentimentality. But we know in our hearts that within us is a love that calls out to the Love that we believe formed the universe. Otherwise, we’re lost.” Sometimes a life centered in love looks foolish from the outside, but the Bible repeatedly affirms those who love without regard for appearances, as in Mark 14:3–9 and Luke 10:38–42.

What surprising things does Jesus say and do in Mark 14:3–9? Why is this unusual story worth retelling “wherever the gospel is preached”?

Why was the mystery woman able to understand Jesus’ message and mission better than his own disciples?

Read Luke 10:38–42. What is the “one thing” needed (Luke 10:42) that Mary caught and Martha missed?

Do you more often show love like Mary or Martha? How are both kinds of love exemplified in Colson’s article? Why is Mary’s love better, and what does Jesus mean when he says that what she has chosen “will not be taken away from her”?

Martha and the frustrated disciples have many heirs in churches today. How can Christians discern which seemingly necessary tasks are busywork and which seemingly lavish expenses are justified?

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

As Colson points out, utilitarianism pervades our society, influencing us in ways we do not even recognize. Fighting this philosophy with an ethic of love requires heart, soul, mind, and strength. These questions offer ideas of where to start.

Think of a ministry opportunity you declined because it seemed too expensive in terms of money or time. Even if you still cannot commit fully to the ministry, how might you contribute something to the good cause it serves?

“Choose Life” is a popular bumper sticker proclaiming the driver’s opposition to abortion. What are some other applications for the slogan? In other words, how can you “choose life” today, this month, or this year?
What daily choices do you make with the purpose of maximizing your happiness or the happiness of your family? Would these choices be different if your primary goal were living an ethic of love?

What would be your equivalent of anointing Jesus with priceless perfume?

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of Christian History.

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - Souls on Ice
  - Life-and-Death Decisions
  - Genetic Testing: How Far Is Too Far?
  - Is Family Planning Okay?
  - A Christian View of the Disabled


- Interview with Kenneth Feinberg, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week901/interview.html

- After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997; ISBN 0268006113)

- Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics, Steve Wilkens (InterVarsity, 1995; ISBN 0830815279)


The $65,000 Question
And the answer my autistic grandson gives.

From a new book by Charles Colson with Harold Fickett, for the study, “The Value of Human Life”

My wife, Patty, and I had a disturbing reminder of why the truth matters when we visited our autistic grandson’s special-needs school one afternoon. The school, Melmark, is housed in a two-story, clay-red brick building, located at the intersection of two main arteries about 20 miles from Boston. Max’s school is on the first floor, where school officials have managed to rent enough space to take care of 80 special-needs children, most of them seriously autistic.

Autism is not the same thing as Down syndrome or congenital birth defects that result in physical deformity. Most autistic kids are as normal looking as their peers. Some do have a vacant, distant stare; others walk with an awkward gait from motor damage. Several of the kids carried computerized speaking pads that allow them to answer questions. These children have suffered so much neurological damage that they would be effectively mute if not for these devices.

When Max saw us, he broke into a big smile and started skipping with arms wide, looking for a hug. He’s a very loving kid, and we were glad to shower him with affection. He then grabbed both Patty’s hand and mine and started to pull us into the school, excited at the prospect of showing us where he studied and eager for us to meet his teachers.

At the end of each school day, when the students are dismissed at three o’clock, the teachers’ workday is far from over. The faculty members gather to discuss the behavior of each student, meticulously planning the next day’s activities. The student-faculty ratio is high: four teachers staff Max’s class of seven. The job requires great physical stamina. The kids can be aggressive at times and must be gently restrained. Gentleness in this situation often demands as much force as several people can muster. Max weighs 140 pounds, and sometimes, when he doesn’t know how to make his needs or dissatisfactions clear, he’ll flop down over his desk or onto the floor and refuse to move. The physical demands Max makes on his teachers are mild compared to many of his classmates’ demands.
The mostly female faculty members were all remarkably cheerful. In fact, they radiated joy. Where do they get people like this to work in these schools? I wondered. A survey of teacher satisfaction revealed that helping the children was the teachers’ primary motivation; altruism is alive and well in this profession.

I understood their joy. I also have felt it as I’ve learned to love through taking care of Max. My grandson has taught me a lot more than I have taught him; he’s schooled me in being a grandfather. When my kids were growing up, I was gone most of the time—too busy trying to save the world. Now, when Max is visiting or we’re visiting him, my life focuses solely on him. There’s no leaving him in front of the television while I go to my desk. At night, I can’t just read him a book, say a prayer, pat him on the head, and tell him to go to sleep. In order to help him get to sleep, I play repetitive games with him, sometimes for hours. When Max visits, my schedule is Max’s schedule.

The Max schedule makes me examine my priorities. It makes me think about the time I devote to doing—a lot of it simply indulging in distraction—versus how much time I give to being.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

As I was standing in the classroom, alone for a moment, an unwelcome thought came to mind. A question really. Why do we as a society take such trouble with these kids? Why does the school system spend as much as $65,000 per year to tend kids like Max? Max is never going to graduate and go to college and get a productive job. Likely, he will always be dependent on his family and the state. Simply to keep him busy, entertained, and comfortable creates a huge financial drain. Even if he weren’t in school, institutionalization alone would run more than $50,000 per year.

I couldn’t help but think of Peter Singer, the Princeton ethicist who argues that the governing philosophy for a society ought to be creating the maximum happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of creatures, human and animal alike. Singer has been described by The New Yorker as the most influential philosopher alive. Think about how much pleasure or happiness we could create for tens of thousands of starving African children with the $65,000 it costs to keep Max in this school. A chill came over me as I realized how powerful—how natural—Singer’s argument sounds.

Singer’s moral philosophy is a form of utilitarianism, which in its modern form evolved from the 19th-century writings of John Stuart Mill. Mill has profoundly affected modern liberal thought, which views freedom as the absence of constraints. Morality, as one sympathetic writer described Singer’s view, doesn’t come from heaven or the stars; it comes from giving as many as possible what they want and need. Most atheists and the majority of people in the post-religious societies of Europe accept this as the most reasonable way to serve the social needs of society; if pleasure
and happiness are the purpose or true end of life, morality must consist in rationally apportioning pleasure and happiness to those most able to experience them. Even many Christians have embraced this proposition because it sounds so reasonable.

Singer characterizes his philosophy as ethics catching up with the inevitable conclusions of Darwinism, and he carries his thinking to its logical conclusions. For example, he advocates infanticide for children born with defects. Singer minces no words: “All I say about severely disabled babies is that when life is so miserable that it’s not worth living, then it is permissible to give it a lethal injection.” He asks rhetorically, “Why limit the killing to the womb?” As if to answer his own question, he says, “Infanticide … should not be ruled out any more than abortion.”

Singer’s view is entirely logical, although most would find it intuitively repugnant—at least for now. Singer dismisses objections to his philosophy as mere sentimentality.

What do you do, though, with kids like Max and all of his schoolmates who somehow survived abortionists’ forceps or the doctors’ lethal injections? Max, after all, is a human being, a teenager, a beautiful bouncing kid who loves life and other people. Surely you would not eliminate him.

But think again about what you could do with that $65,000 a year, every year, not just for starving kids in Africa, but for American inner-city kids who need better public schools. Just think about how that money could be used in the Medicaid system, which is always starved for cash.

Those who think humanity would never take severely disabled persons, particularly kids, and get rid of them are simply unaware of the history of Western civilization in the enlightened 20th century. For example, take Germany in the 1930s, even before Hitler’s regime took hold. The brightest and best-educated people in Europe were openly advocating eugenics—selective human reproduction and elimination of the disabled. Doctors and educators and cultural leaders discussed how to rid Germany of the “traditional compassionate 19th-century attitudes toward the chronically ill,” as one doctor put it. The sterilization and euthanasia of persons with chronic medical illnesses became a topic of great interest in German medical journals. A propaganda campaign began to encourage the German people to adopt a utilitarian point of view. Children were not immune from the campaign. A high school text entitled Mathematics in the Service of National Political Education contained math problems dealing with the care of the chronically sick and crippled. The very question that so troubled me that day in Max’s classroom was asked of these impressionable students: “How much money would be available for marriage allowance loans and to help newlywed couples if the state could save the money on the ‘crippled, the criminal, and the insane’?” The story of what that led to—the Holocaust—has been often told.

Speaking of the eugenics practiced in Germany or the infanticide and sex-selection abortion in China or India today—and speculating about what might happen here—
lets us off the hook too easily. Peter Singer's utilitarian point of view already rules our own health-care system in significant respects.

What I'm about to say may well strike close to home. In fact, it will resonate disturbingly in millions of homes across America and Europe. Nearly every young couple having a baby today receives information about the potential health-care needs of their unborn child. Ultrasound, amniocentesis, and other tests are informing parents of a growing list of medical conditions—some 450 at this writing—in their unborn children. Doctors are afraid not to perform such tests lest they face suits for not fully informing parents of an unborn child's medical problems while the unborn child may still be aborted.

Think of the practical dilemma faced by a pregnant woman and her husband after they arrive home from a doctor's appointment. They have just been informed that their child may have neurological damage, which could display itself in a number of ways, including autism. The doctor has asked them whether they want to abort their unborn child.

What would you do? How would you reason about the decision? Would it make any difference if your health-insurance provider informed you that it would not pay for treatment of complications discovered in the testing? According to some reports, 90 percent of the couples confronted with this dilemma abort their unborn children.

Would you bring a child like Max into the world? If not, why not? And if you found out about your child's severely impaired future a day or two after the birth and if the doctor offered you the option of infanticide, what would you do then? As laudable as places like Max's school may seem, why should such efforts continue if it's in our power to make them unnecessary? That's the utilitarian voice constantly whispering in our ear these days.

The person who says yes to Max now and in the future can reason only on the basis of something completely other than a cost-benefit analysis.

Tragically, the cold calculus of dollars and cents already determines many life-and-death choices being made in America and Western Europe today. In March 2004, many people in England were horrified to learn that an unborn child who was more than 24 weeks old—at the point of viability outside the womb—was aborted for “severe disability” because the child had a cleft palate. This case brought to Parliament's attention that since 1990 there has been an inexorable rise in the number of viable unborn children aborted because they had “severe disabilities.” Since severe disability isn't defined in the United Kingdom's laws, this means that a child with any medical condition, even a treatable one such as a cleft palate, may be aborted at any point in a pregnancy. Of course, pro-choice purists question why we would even make such distinctions about the fetus's condition. Why not abort anyone we choose? This debate is currently under way.
These aren’t just intellectual issues. They’re deeply personal and anguishing decisions that we’re forced to contend with in the course of life. As I looked around Max’s classroom and ran my hands over the scarred wooden desk that he sits at each day, my thoughts turned quickly to another logical extension of Singer’s thoughts: Why keep people alive when they’re miserable? Why not give them the opportunity to be an organ donor and give someone else life? If we get to the point where we agree with that, then why would we not just destroy the miserable person?

With a combination of machines, we can soon, if not already, keep people alive under almost any circumstances. What about the cost? Families can’t pay this. The Medicare system will be broke in a few decades, sustainable only if taxes are greatly increased. The demographic shifts in America are so dramatic that while at the moment four workers are paying to support one person on Medicare, by 2030 it will be 2.3 workers. Should we expect hardworking, middle-class Americans to be paying an ever-increasing share of their earnings to keep me alive while my “quality of life”—watch that term—deteriorates?

If you’ve been around the bedside of someone severely ill, you know the pressures on the family, the agony, the continuous vigil. In the back of some people’s minds are questions about the cost: How are we going to pay for all of this? Friends and relatives are grief stricken over the pain their loved one endures. They’re tired, exhausted. A doctor appears in a white coat, bigger than life—a professional, committed to curing the sick. We’re ready for him or her to tell us what to do in this terrible, agonizing moment.

Life and death become judgment calls, subject in some cases to ethics committees’ determinations and hospital guidelines. But who decides what our ethics will be? If there is no truth, there are no true ethics, only prudential standards that reasonable people try to apply. So the best-intentioned doctors in the world have to make judgment calls, ever aware of the costs involved for the hospital in which they are staff members. Aware of the patient’s suffering, pressured to handle as many cases as possible, embroiled in a quality-of-life matrix, the white-coated doctor becomes god, with nothing like God’s wisdom.

Most of us refuse to think we are really measuring life on the basis of cost. We don’t like utilitarian reasoning when we’re forced to face it. There is something deeply, deeply wrong about this whole mindset, in which so many of us are already profoundly implicated. But there’s that terrible voice in the back of our minds that says: I know what the right answer should be, but I’m sure glad that if I were in that situation, I’d have an out. So how does one answer Singer’s seductive logic?
Not-So-Great Debate

Disabilities-rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson made a valiant attempt to do so. Peter Singer invited Johnson to speak at one of his classes at Princeton and to debate him in an open forum, which she later described in a moving New York Times Magazine piece.

Johnson, a lawyer, suffers from a muscle-wasting disease and describes herself as a “jumble of bones in a floppy bag of skin.” In her 40s, paralyzed in most of her body, Johnson weighs about 70 pounds. Her spine is a tightly reversing S-curve. She sits up in her chair by letting her ribs fall on her lap, with her elbows planted on her knees. This position has become natural to her, and she suffers no discomfort from it. Her life entails other restrictions, though. She can eat only purees, soft bread, and easily chewable fruit like grapes. She needs help getting dressed, using a bedpan, bathing, and doing morning exercises that keep her limber.

Johnson spoke first, building her case on the grounds that as a person with disabilities, she is a member of a discriminated-against minority and that the presence or absence of a disability does not define the quality of life. She described how much she enjoys riding in her wheelchair—the exhilaration of feeling the breeze blow through her hair.

Singer was, she observed, “surprisingly soft in his response.” He reframed the issues almost clinically before opening the discussion to students. From time to time, Singer interjected his views. He asked if an “individual is totally unconscious and … we can know absolutely that the individual will never regain consciousness … assuming all that, don’t you think continuing to take care of that individual would be a bit weird?” Johnson responded that caregiving can be a beautiful thing. She could not specify exactly why this should be the case, though, and her assertion left Singer blank. The nobility of caregiving could not survive Singer’s argument that happiness is based on preference, and despite the powerful argument of Johnson’s presence, Singer’s arguments clearly won over the students.

The eerie thing about the whole encounter for Johnson was that she did not find Singer the neo-Nazi devil that her disabled friends had painted him to be on the basis of his writing. The classroom exchanges and those that followed at dinner with the faculty were, by Johnson’s account, amazingly civil. She found Singer’s verbal facility dazzling; he was so “respectful, so free of condescension, so focused on the argument, that by the time the show is over, I’m not exactly angry with him.”

Despite herself, Johnson came away from their encounter with enormous respect for Singer. She writes that he is “a man of unusual gifts, reaching for the heights.” She virtually applauds his “trying to create a system of ethics derived from fact and reason that largely throws off the perspectives of religion, place, family, tribe, community, and maybe even species.” She sees him as taking “the point of view of the universe,”
concluding that his is a “grand heroic undertaking.” His weakness, she argues, is his unexamined assumption that disabled people are inherently “worse off,” which she described as prejudice.

In essence, Johnson did not disagree with Singer’s fundamental premise, only with what constitutes a good life and whose preferences must be respected. Once she agreed that the issue is quality of life—that there is no objective standard, only subjective judgment about what constitutes a life worthy to be lived—she forfeited any chance of winning the debate.

The enchantment that Singer’s benevolent-sounding reason worked on Harriet McBryde Johnson is a clear example of how we have fallen under the sway of the well-spoken, highly intelligent enemies of truth. If there truly is such a thing as evil, do you think it would present itself in its true character, as vicious and destructive? No. Most of the time, evil comes to us as the hand on the shoulder and the kind voice that says, “Let me help you.”

**Drawing on Life**

Without a view of God, or at the very least a transcendent natural order, there is no intrinsic significance to life. Which is why Singer was so curious as to how someone like Johnson, who is as good an atheist as he is, could disagree with his entirely reasonable views. No one, no matter how skilled a lawyer, is going to be able to win an argument with Singer without questioning his Darwinian premise that life came about by chance. This is precisely what makes Singer and his kind so dangerous.

When it was about time to leave Max’s school, Max showed me one of his drawings. It reminded me once again how important making art together has become for my daughter and Max. It plays a pivotal role in their communication, providing a bridge to Max’s otherwise-unknown thoughts, emotions, and memories.

Every parent experiences anxiety about what a child may be thinking and feeling. Does my little boy’s sudden dislike of kickball stem from a bad experience on the playground? Are my daughter’s new friends the result of an unhappy rivalry among the old friends? Will my child ever tell me? With autistic kids, this universal problem is much, much worse. Max will often become suddenly uncooperative for absolutely mysterious reasons. He’ll throw himself around the room, exhibiting an agony about which he’s absolutely powerless to speak; he can’t express in words what he’s thinking and feeling.

My daughter, Emily, has discovered that if she draws for Max, supplying images that serve as bridges to his inner world, he is able to make sense of what’s happening around him. She’s able to connect Max’s throwing himself around the room with his having a headache or being unhappy with an unexpected rearrangement of his room.
Through her drawings, Emily has had phenomenal success in helping Max understand things that happened to him when he was two and three years old, events that frightened him because he was unable to interpret their significance. Through the drawing he’s able to ask Emily what these events were about and whether he needs to be afraid of them any longer. Emily takes a brush or crayon and adds a flourish to Max’s picture, giving the piece a happy look. Max doesn’t need to be haunted by the episode any longer. The two draw together in tears, celebrating their discovery and the new freedom it has brought into Max’s life.

In a utilitarian accounting, such an experience is meaningless because Max’s life is meaningless. Why, then, does Emily feel profound joy when she is drawing and talking with Max, reaching him at a deep level? Why can I say that Max has taught me ever so much more than I have taught him, as if Max is a gift to me? I don’t want to be misunderstood here. Max’s autism is not a good thing—it’s part of the world’s brokenness. Yet that brokenness has been used to enlarge my capacity to love. That’s a very great gift. Paradoxically, Max has introduced joy into the lives of his teachers, his mother, his grandparents, and many others because of these costs, these sacrifices. How should one account for that?

How should Max account for himself, and why should he have to? Max is more than happy to be alive, thank you very much. Max knows a joy and wonder that puts me to shame. Why is that?

Let me just suggest at this point it’s because the good life is not about the sum total of what we contribute to the world. It’s about loving. Utilitarianism knows nothing of love. Love is the beginning and the end of the good life, however, and it’s in love that our lives must be centered. Truth matters because without truth, love is unreal. It’s just another sentimentality. But we know in our hearts that within us is a love that calls out to the Love that we believe formed the universe. Otherwise, we’re lost. Failing to acknowledge this love beyond self caused the gifted Harriet McBryde Johnson to lose her debate with Singer. Without love, anyone would.

—Charles Colson is a Christianity Today columnist, and author, with Harold Fickett, of The Good Life: Seeking Purpose, Meaning, and Truth in Your Life (Tyndale, 2005), from which this article is excerpted and condensed.

LEADER’S GUIDE FOR STUDY 13
Feeding on Lies
What is behind our battle with weight?

We go to extremes to bring our sizes down a couple of numbers. We follow diets that promise results for life. We read success stories of people who have found their way over to the thin side. Yet even more stories tell of people who have lost their excess weight just to regain it, plus some. It’s no wonder the battle with weight is a never-ending one.

Psychologists tell us that to change any behavior we need to find out what our beliefs are. Once we understand our beliefs, we can challenge our thoughts. Many times our beliefs are laden with lies. We cannot expect to change our behaviors until those lies are challenged and refuted. To combat these lies, this study will ask: What are we hungering for? Can food ever fill us? Do our looks determine our worth? How does self-discipline fit in?

Lesson #13

Scripture:
1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 103:14; 139:13–14; John 15:4–5; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4; Galatians 5:16

Based on:
“If Your Stomach Offend Thee …” by Lisa Ann Cockrel, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, December 2005, Vol. 49, No. 12, Page 64
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article “If Your Stomach Offends Thee ...” from Christianity Today magazine (included at the end of this study).

Sitting in front of the television, you’re bombarded with images of how society thinks you should look. At the same time, food parades before your eyes in all shapes and forms, giving you a mixed message. One commercial tells you, “You deserve a break today,” as another one shows how someone lost 100 pounds by eating the right sandwiches. Thin people look happy, so we translate: If I want to be happy, then I need to be thin. Or as one person put it, “Nothing tastes as good as being thin.”

Food is everywhere we look. It has become huge to us, and in the process some of us have become larger than ever. Lisa Ann Cockrel shares, “It’s impossible to exaggerate the extent to which food has defined my person—for good and for bad.” Many people could echo those words. Every month magazines run articles dealing with some aspect of food. If it’s not giving a tantalizing low-fat recipe, it’s telling you how to walk away those extra pounds.

Food in itself is not bad. It is necessary for sustenance. Many complain that losing weight is even harder than trying to quit smoking. With smoking you can stop cold turkey, but with food you don’t have that option. We need to eat.

It isn’t the food that’s the problem; it’s not being able to stop when we’ve had enough. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12. Paul tells us he won’t be brought under the power of anything, and yet, sometimes we give food power.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Have you ever successfully lost weight? How?

[Q] Do churches support efforts to live a healthy lifestyle? Explain.

[Q] When you were in school, were any of your classmates overweight? How were they treated?

[Q] Are there any particular foods you struggle with? Name the hardest time of the day for you when it comes to food.

[Q] If losing weight has been a life-long struggle, share some things you think have contributed to that struggle.
PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Food cannot fill us.

From the time a baby enters the world, we comfort him with food. As the child grows, we substitute cookies for bottles and find ourselves using food as a bargaining tool: “If you finish your dinner, then you can have dessert.” And how many of us ran to our moms exchanging our tears for food of some sort? We may not be able to describe the food pyramid, but we know every kind of comfort food there is. Instead of using food for sustenance, as God intended, some of us use food to fill our emotional holes. But it doesn’t work. At first you are cheered, but after the food is consumed, you feel worse. Not only has your situation remained the same, but you’ve added guilt to your negative feelings. Your holes are still there and now you’re stuffed.

Some people use food for loneliness. They actually have a relationship with food. In the ’80s a popular greeting card said, “He was a chocolate chip cookie, but the only one I loved.” We laugh, but there may be some truth to it. Sadly, many of us spend nights alone with our favorite foods. We were not meant to find our comfort in food.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–4. God doesn’t want us going to food for comfort; he wants us to come to him. If my child is hurt, I don’t want her seeking comfort from someone or something else when I am standing nearby with open arms. Only God can fill the holes within us.

[Q] Have you turned to food for your comfort? How long did you feel comforted? How did you feel afterwards? What other emotions send people to the kitchen?

[Q] If only God can fill the holes within us, why don’t we go to him? What other things do people use to fill their holes?

[Q] When you attempt to lose weight, do people around you support your efforts? How or how not?

[Q] Describe sitting around your table at mealtime when you were growing up. Compare it with your present eating experiences at home. What are the similarities? Differences?

Teaching point two: My worth is not based on my appearance.

Read Psalm 139:13–14. God the Father fashioned these bodies of ours and intricately chose each part. Read Psalm 103:14. God knows our strengths and our weaknesses. The things of this world are temporal; they pass away. The things of God are eternal. The things God is working in us are contrary to the things of this world. For instance, the world says, “This is the only life there is, so grab all you can.” If we understand the Bible, we know this is not true.

Read 1 Samuel 16:7. The world focuses on outward appearances. God, on the other hand, cares about our hearts. Some people go to great lengths to change the way they look. Recently a young woman being interviewed on television said she had undergone at least 25 cosmetic surgeries. Her goal was not to improve her looks, nor was it corrective surgery following an accident. This young woman’s goal was to look like a Barbie doll! With more surgeries planned in her future, she was delighted with her looks and plans to maintain her appearance.

Lisa Ann Cockrel shares that her friend who lost half of her weight said, “Lisa, you’ve got to talk to your doctor...Really, you need to consider having a gastric bypass. I feel fabulous.” How
many times have friends who have succeeded at weight loss tried to get us to come aboard? Many of us follow programs precisely yet don’t get the results others get, which negatively affects our self-esteem. Sadly, some programs degrade a person who isn’t losing weight. Shame is never a good motivator.

[Q] Share if you, or someone you know, has struggled with either bulimia or anorexia nervosa. How do people end up with these eating disorders?

[Q] It has been said that a person who struggles with an eating disorder has a false body image. What is a body image?

[Q] Sometimes people who struggle with their weight will turn to exercise to balance it. Is there ever a time when exercise is not a good thing? Explain.

[Q] Some time ago airlines considered charging obese passengers the price of two tickets. What are your views on this?

[Q] How close is the weight on your driver’s license to your actual weight? When you are dieting, how often do you get on the scale?

Teaching point three: Self-discipline is a fruit of the Spirit.

When we come to know Jesus Christ as our Savior, God develops fruit in our lives. Read Galatians 5:16. Self-discipline is one of the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit results from allowing God to work in our lives. For instance, when God wants to teach us patience, he often gives us trials. The more trials we experience, little by little, the more we gain patience. That’s growth. When God wants to produce gentleness in our lives, he often gives us circumstances that cause us to feel critical toward others. When we choose to respond gently instead, our hard hearts become softer. An apple does not have to think about being an apple; it just is. The longer we walk with the Lord, the more we will display his fruit. How many times have you heard someone say, “He looks just like his father”? That’s our goal: family resemblance.

Read John 15:4–5. If Jesus is the vine and we are branches, all we need to do is hang around on the vine. The fruit is God’s responsibility. We display self-discipline every time we say no to our flesh. Since self-discipline is a fruit of his Spirit, I know it is something God desires to see in me. Therefore, I can ask him to help me say no to my flesh.

For example, if God wants me to work on my relationship with my spouse, he points out which of my words are not edifying. After working on my spoken words, God wants me to work on my unspoken words. When I am tempted to say something unkind, God gently tells me to stop. All I need to do at that point is respond to him.

Similarly, I can have that kind of success in disciplined eating. God wants me to stop when I’ve had enough. But sometimes I let my stubbornness get in the way. Ultimately what I say to God at that point is, “Listen, I don’t care what you want; I want this and I’m going to have it.” The choice is really ours to make, but he will help us, if we simply ask.

[Q] Do you snack as you are preparing a meal, or do you sit down hungry? Do you skip meals?

[Q] Share about an area of your life where you are disciplined. How did you get that way?
Respond to the statement, “All it takes is will power to lose weight.”

Share some things you have been told while you were attempting to lose weight. What was helpful to you?

**Teaching point four: God is a jealous God.**

Food is good. But our thoughts about food, dieting, or our appearance can turn into obsessions. This can be true of someone who isn’t overweight at all, yet thinks about food constantly. God is a jealous God, and he doesn’t want to share his throne with anyone else. He shouldn’t have to. When I cannot stop thinking about food or how I look, then at that moment I am saying, “Yes God, you are important; it’s just that right now this is more important.”

It’s easy to idolize other things. We need to acknowledge our idolatry. God can help us put other things in their rightful place. God needs to be the biggest thing in our lives, because he is.

What priority does God have in your life? Would others agree?

What did you idolize as a teenager? How has that changed?

What other kinds of things do people tend to idolize? Is it wrong to have idols if we give God top billing? Why or why not?

Concerning our battle to lose weight, what other things do we idolize besides food?

What does it mean to exalt something? What things have you exalted, other than God?

**PART 3**

**Apply Your Findings**

Obviously weight loss is more complex than simply not eating too much. The reasons we overeat are numerous and sometimes complicated. In addition, some medical conditions can cause weight gain or make weight loss difficult.

We have looked at some lies we tend to believe, and we’ve looked at some of God’s truths. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. God promises a way out when we are facing temptation. Some have found removing themselves from their source of temptation imperative. Journaling may be another option. Talking out loud to the food can be helpful (preferably when you’re alone). Say things like, “I don’t have to eat you” or “You don’t have control over me.”

A humorous piece of advice is: “If you have trouble with any food, just treat it like fresh fruit: rinse it before you eat it.” Somehow when you hold that piece of cake under the faucet, it loses its appeal. All of us have heard, “You need to clean your plate” or “You shouldn’t waste food.” So take less and realize that if you eat more than you need, you’re still wasting food.

If you have an eating disorder, this issue is more complicated. Perhaps you have become obsessed with not eating food. If this is the case, you do not need self-discipline, you need help in dealing with the underlying causes of your obsession.
In the beginning of time, God made the world and everything in it. Putting Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden, he offered them everything, except one tree. And of course we know the story; that’s what they wanted. It wasn’t good for them, but that didn’t matter. If we could trust our loving Father, we would be fine. He intricately formed us, takes care of us day-to-day, looks after us while we sleep, and thinks about us all the time. Only that kind of love can fill our longings.

**[Q]** Describe some of your relationships. Are there times you turn to food because you are lonely?

**[Q]** Do you have one safe person you can be totally open with? Have you shared your struggles with this person?

**[Q]** What verses come to mind to help you say no to temptation? Do you have any memorized?

**[Q]** Lisa Ann Cockrel writes, “I just wanted a body that will better engage with the world God put me in—to be able to take long walks through Manhattan with my best friend, to spend a day gardening with my mom…” Share some of the reasons you have wanted to lose weight.

**[Q]** What is it about God that draws you to him and satisfies your heart?

—Study prepared by Anne Peterson, poet, speaker, and regular contributor to *CHRISTIAN BIBLE STUDIES*.

### Recommended Resources

- [ChristianBibleStudies.com](https://www.christianbiblestudies.com)
  - Where Do We Get Self-Worth?
  - Healthy Body, Healthy Spirit
  - [Self-Esteem: Devotions by Christian Musicians](https://www.christianbiblestudies.com)


- [Losing Weight Permanently](https://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com), Gregory L. Jantz, PhD (Baker, 2004; ISBN 080078720X)


- [The Monster Within: Facing an Eating Disorder](https://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com), Cynthia Rowland McClure (Baker, 2002; ISBN 0800758021)

If Thy Stomach Offends Thee…
Weight loss for me isn’t about beauty or health.

By Lisa Ann Cockrel, for the study, “Feeding on Lies”

There she was, walking toward me up the church aisle. Mary gave me my first job as a teenager—modeling clothes at fashion shows for her plus-size boutique—and I’d heard she had gastric bypass surgery since I’d last seen her. Indeed, half of the Mary I’d known approached.

“Lisa, you’ve got to talk to your doctor,” she said. “Really, you should consider having a gastric bypass. I feel fabulous.” Mary was nothing if not to the point.

“I’d rather die!” I told my sister.

Five years later, I almost did die after having weight-loss surgery. I woke up in the recovery room to strains of America’s “Sister Golden Hair,” an auspicious start if ever there was one. But within hours, I was pale and fainting. Eventually, I was diagnosed with a blood clot in my lungs. And over the following months, I contracted pneumonia, hemorrhaged, and needed three blood transfusions.

One-and-a-half years later and 100 pounds lighter, I still feel ambivalent about going under the knife in a bid to lose weight. The hard questions that led up to surgery still linger.

I’ve long been aware of the extent to which food has defined my person—for good and for bad. Considering surgery meant considering the death, or at least the maiming, of the vision of myself to which I’d grown accustomed.

But fear of losing my identity quickly gave way to questions about the theological ramifications of surgery: What would it mean to have a doctor section off a portion of my stomach and then reroute my digestive system?

Gnostic heresies be damned; bodies matter. God took one on. The resurrection of one is the locus of my salvation. Would seeking to control my own in this heavy-handed manner signal a loathing of my physical self?
On the other hand, in Matthew 5, doesn’t Jesus advocate doing away with physical appendages that cause us to sin? Most scholars quickly add that Jesus isn’t advocating amputation; the problem is with the heart. But this vivid picture resonated with me as I considered a gastric bypass. After all, a host of ascetics throughout church history advocated serious deprivation, even torture, of the body in a bid for increased holiness.

I was at a stalemate.

That’s when I heard about a procedure called gastric banding, in which a doctor places an adjustable band around the stomach. Food passes through the constriction slowly, so you feel full quicker and for a longer period. The weight loss is slower, but there is no damage done to the natural working of internal organs—no rejection of the self.

After asking myself one key question—“What woman doesn’t have a pair of control-top pantyhose tucked away in her underwear drawer?”—I let a doctor slip on this internal girdle.

Despite losing 100 pounds, I still have a lot of weight to lose. And I’ve recently encountered another snag: Part of the implanted device has flipped. This will mean another surgery.

In the meantime, ads remind me every day that no money or energy should be spared in order to avoid having a body like mine. Yet, I’ve never hated my arms and legs and everything that’s connected to them. I am sometimes embarrassed by my girth; my frailty is writ large in the stretch marks etched across my body’s surface. But my body is me. And I am loved by my Creator. Therefore, my body has the same intrinsic value shared by all bodies—skinny, short, missing an arm, featuring webbed toes and a big nose, or otherwise.

It’s that belief that made the idea of having weight-loss surgery so difficult to swallow. But it’s also that belief that motivates me to strive to live the best possible way in this body today. My ongoing bid to lose weight really isn’t about beauty or health, goals those ads often advocate. I’m happy to believe I possess at least some unique measure of beauty, and I’ve never been more ill than when in pursuit of skinniness.

Instead, I want a body that will allow me to better engage the world God put me in—to be able to take long walks through Manhattan with my best friend, to spend a day gardening with my mom, to play a game of pickup basketball with my brothers.

For all the sensory pleasure God provides through food, there is more of his creation to be experienced. I’m trying to trade some of the known (Christmas cookies) for some of the unknown (a bike ride along Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive). I want to
move from that which takes me into myself to that which promotes a loving relationship with God’s world and the people in it.

I think that’s pretty much what the Christian life is about—whether you’re fat, skinny, or somewhere in between.

—Lisa Ann Cockrel is associate editor of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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