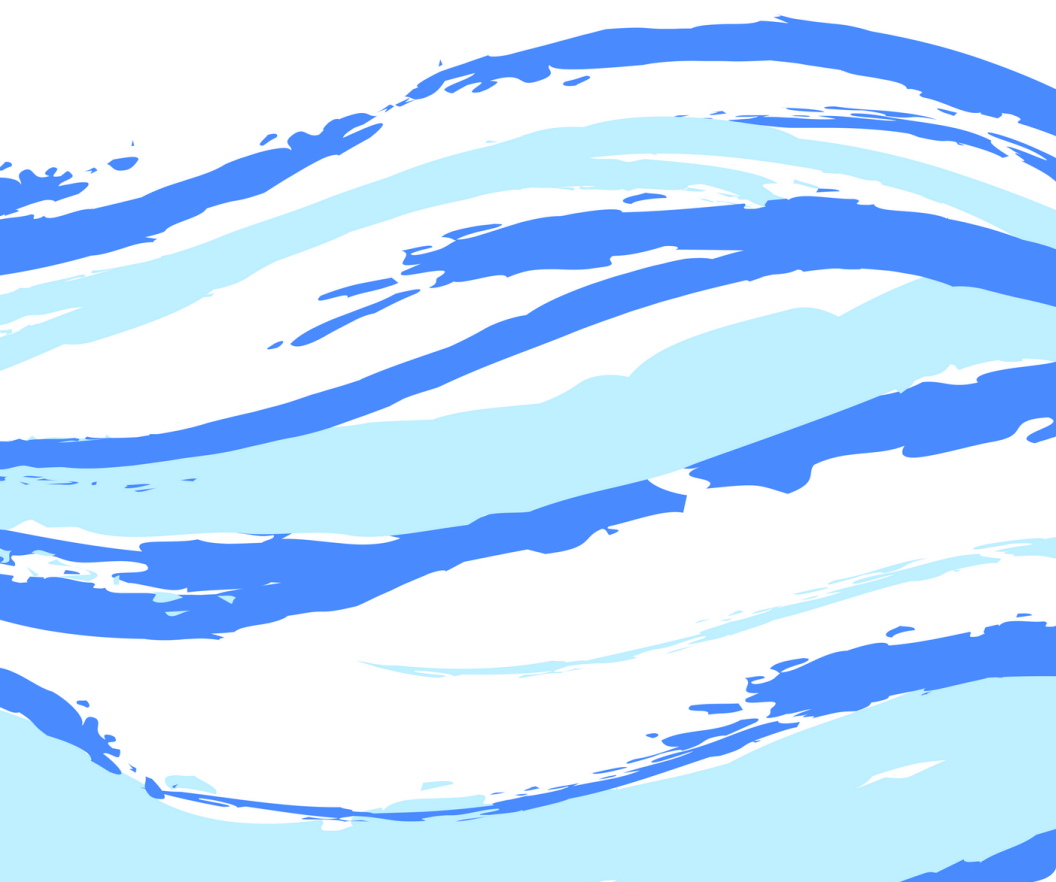


CULTURAL CURRENTS

NAVIGATING OUR CULTURE
FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

SEAN FINNEGAN



Cultural Currents:

Navigating Our Culture from a Christian Perspective

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Sean Finnegan runs Restitutio, a website that provides resources, including a podcast, a blog, articles, and classes to get you thinking about biblical and historical Christianity, to inspire you to follow Christ, and to convict you to lead a consecrated life. Subscribe to the Restitutio podcast at restitutio.org/get-podcast and keep up to date.

1 Seeing the Filter

A couple of years ago, I learned how to surf at Jacksonville Beach in Florida. While I was in the ocean, I constantly battled the waves pushing me towards the beach and the undertow pulling me back towards the sea. However, it was not until I came out of the water a quarter of a mile down from our place on the beach that I realized a subtler current pulling me sideways the whole time. This is a good illustration of how our culture slowly moves us over time. We spot the audacious behavior of celebrities and politicians easily enough while missing the subtle currents pulling us sideways, away from what God says is right. Even so, we cannot allow this world to squeeze us into its mold:

Romans 12.1-2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We have two options: either we will be conformed or we will be transformed. We must wage the mental warfare of constant renewal or else we will never

experience the transformation God wants for us. We need to test and discern. We cannot remain passive, deceiving ourselves into believing we are impervious to the culture's constant tug. If we do not hone our ability to identify and combat cultural narratives, then we will fall out of tune with God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

How Does the Culture Affect You?

Our culture is in the air we breathe. It is impossible to escape, unless you go live in a cabin in the woods, I suppose. Billboards, TV shows, books, viral videos, memes, magazines in the checkout aisle, our friends, the news, and a thousand other outlets bring our world's way of thinking into our lives. This constant bombardment adjusts our sense of what's normal, reprogramming our minds slowly over time. For example, when skinny jeans first came out, my friends and I ridiculed them for how uncomfortable they looked. After they had been popular for a little while, I remember hearing a Pandora ad that went something like this:

“Tired of girls ignoring you? Are you still wearing those outdated baggy jeans? It's time to get back in the game with skinny jeans.”

I vividly recall how this silly message struck me. It was the first time the whole idea of wearing skinny jeans sounded plausible to me. Before that, it was just a joke. After a couple of more years, I started feeling uncomfortable in my old baggy jeans as everyone

around me converted to skinny or slim jeans. This slow cultural pressure rewrote my sense of style in this area. I never verbally agreed or even mentally assented to this change, but it happened nonetheless, and today I don't have saggy jeans anymore. Obviously, this is a trite example, but it shows how subtly the culture influences us.

Now, our culture is not all bad. Early twenty-first century Americans do have some admirable ideals as well. For example, people generally believe that bullying is wrong, humanitarian aid is good, drunk driving is bad, and cooperation is good. However, our world also believes that Christianity is intolerant, everything is ok if it doesn't hurt anyone, and cohabitation before marriage is good. Thus, we have to learn to discern between the good and the bad. Here is how Walter Brueggemann framed this problem:

1. Everybody lives by a script. The script may be implicit or explicit. It may be recognized or unrecognized, but everybody has a script.
2. We get scripted. All of us get scripted through the process of nurture and formation and socialization, and it happens to us without our knowing it.
3. The dominant scripting in our society is a script of technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism that socializes us all, liberal and conservative.
4. That script, enacted through advertising and propaganda and ideology especially on the

liturgies of television, promises to make us safe and to make us happy.

5. That script has failed... the script of military consumerism cannot make us safe and it cannot make us happy. We may be the unhappiest society in the world.
6. Health for our society depends on disengagement from and relinquishment of that script of military consumerism. This is a disengagement and relinquishment that we mostly resist and about which we are profoundly ambiguous.
7. It is the task of ministry to de-script that script among us. That is, to enable persons to relinquish a world that no longer exists and indeed never did exist.
8. The task of de-scripting, relinquishment, and disengagement is accomplished by a steady patient intentional articulation of an alternative script that we say can make us happy and make us safe.
9. The alternative script is rooted in the bible and is enacted through the tradition of the Church. It is an offer of a counter-metanarrative, counter to the script of technological therapeutic military consumerism.¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "19 Theses" in *The Emergent Theological Conversation*, 2005, accessed May 5, 2016 on <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/04/walter-brueggemanns-19-thesis-revisited-a-clarification-from-brueggemann-himself.html>

The world is scripting you; rewriting what you think can make you safe and happy. We hear that if we just kill the right people, the world will be "safe for democracy;" that if we just find the right self-help regimen, then we'll be happy; that if we can just buy the right thing, then we'll feel good about ourselves; that if we can just invent the right technology, then we can solve the world's problems. These ideas are all around us, and they profoundly affect how we think. Here is a story to help put this into perspective.

A husband and wife move into a new house. At breakfast, the wife sees the neighbor's laundry hanging outside. She remarks to her husband, "Wow, their clothes are not very clean." The next morning, she looks out and sees a similar scene and says, "Maybe I should go over there and tell her what laundry detergent I use." However, the third day, she looks out and sees very clean laundry hanging up. She says, "Wow! I guess our neighbor figured out how to do laundry properly." Her husband replies, "This morning, I got up early and cleaned the windows."

What happened here is the wife did not realize that she was experiencing the backyard through a filter—dirty windows. She was convinced that she could see clearly and had an accurate assessment of objective reality, but in actuality, her neighbor was completely competent at doing the laundry the whole time. The problem is two-fold: (1) there's a filter distorting reality and (2) she didn't know it was there. This is our problem. We look at

the world and think we see it clearly. We believe our opinions and theologies are patently true and those who disagree with us are naïve, deceived, or crazy. This is even more startling when it comes to the bible. We read it and come away with doubts; some parts of it begin to seem far-fetched. Perhaps we reinterpret these passages to conform to what we know is right; maybe we ignore them; possibly, we even lose faith as a result. We do not realize that cultural forces are foisting a filter over our eyes, distorting our view of reality.

Defeaters and Implausibility

Christianity never lines up perfectly with any culture. There will always be areas of overlap and conflict. Thus, a particular culture's "common sense" makes it hard for people to comprehend or commit to the gospel message. Beliefs that contradict a particular idea are defeaters. Tim Keller provides a helpful example of how defeaters vary from place to place:

[I]n the West it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief there can't be just one "true" religion. But in the Middle East, people have absolutely no problem with the idea that there is just one true religion. That doesn't seem implausible at all. Rather there it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief that American culture, based on Christianity, is unjust and corrupt. (Skeptics ought to realize, then, that the objections they have to the Christian faith are

culturally relative!) So each culture has its own set of *culturally-based doubt-generators* which people call 'objections' or 'problems' with Christianity.²

This leads to the next problem. We imbibe a worldview throughout our lives as the world socializes us. When we first become Christians, we retain our old worldviews and adapt Christianity to our way of thinking. We all come to Christ because of a need we feel he can meet. However, if we haven't allowed the bible to reshape our worldview, when Christianity causes problems in our lives, we are likely to ditch it and go on looking for the next spiritual understanding that can help us cope with life. We need to *adopt* Christianity and then let it *adapt* our minds to its worldview—God's worldview.

Jesus as an Example

Jesus is the quintessential man, the only one who always obeyed God. He's God's messiah, son, and the greatest rabbi who ever lived. Thus, it makes perfect sense that we should look to him as our example for how to deal with culture. Even so, Jesus lived in a much more homogeneous society than ours. First century Jews in Galilee and Judea shared a tremendous amount of mental furniture. For example, everyone agreed that God is the creator, that they should obey the Torah, and that idolatry was wrong. Nonetheless, Jesus' ministry was constantly beset with conflict. They criticized him

² Tim Keller, "Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ" *Redeemer Presbyterian Church*, accessed May 4, 2016, http://www.case.edu.au/images/uploads/03_pdfs/keller-deconstructing-defeater.pdf, p. 1

for his interpretation of the Law (Sabbath, purity, divorce); they challenged his legitimacy, attributing his exorcisms to Beelzebul and demanding a sign; they balked at his style of ministry (forgiving sins, associating with sinners, etc.). In return, Jesus rebuked his enemies for their pride, greed, and hypocrisy. So, even in a bible-based culture, Jesus didn't fit in completely. So, if Jesus, who lived better than anyone before or after him, had to constantly challenge the reigning paradigms of his day, should we expect two millennia later in a post-Christian, post-modern, post-everything society that we can just go with the flow? Of course not! We need to put in the effort to detect the filters our society is always putting over our eyes so that we can (1) understand our own doubts better and (2) share the gospel with others in a way that makes sense.

Evangelism

This all brings me to the issue of sharing the gospel with outsiders. If we share our faith in our own categories of thought, that person's eyes will probably just glaze over as we wax eloquent on sin, justification, and eternal life. What if instead, we told the old story in such a way that the unbeliever found it attractive? Keller puts it this way:

First, the gospel must be presented briefly but so vividly and attractively (and so hooked into the culture's base-line cultural narratives) that the

listener is virtually compelled to say, "*It would be wonderful if that were true, but it can't be!*"³

Next, you can go to work asking about the person's defeaters to Christianity. You can deconstruct them and show how the culture's way of thinking doesn't work whereas what God says really does. Lastly, you can share the gospel with them in all its glory. This simple strategy, what Keller calls "a sandwich of three layers," can really help you reach people with God's magnificent message of salvation today. Here is an example conversation for how this might play out, based on the cultural issue of living together in harmony:

Christian: "The God of the bible plans to heal the world in the age to come when he will have people from every tribe, race, and language united, living in harmony enjoying his glory in a renewed world. Jesus died to heal the breach between us and God so that we could become one with God and each other. God raised him from the dead proving that Jesus is the qualified leader who can teach us and show us how to get along in a conflicted world."

Non-Christian: "That sounds wonderful, but I can't believe it's true."

Christian: "Why not?"

Non-Christian: "Well, isn't Christianity all about excluding people like the LGBT community? Don't

³ ibidem, p. 3.

Christians think they are the only ones who are saved? In fact, I would say Christianity is part of the problem with the world since it divides people from each other.”

Christian: “I hear what you are saying. How do *you* suggest we deal with this issue?”

Non-Christian: “I think if we could all just recognize that we are part of the same human family, then we could get along with each other. If people could realize that they are all brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, regardless of their skin color, nationality, or religion, then the world could enjoy peace.”

Christian: “I’m not sure that message has the power to change lives. For example, what about when one member of that human family enjoys bullying those who are weaker? Do you think telling such a person that he is a member of the human family will change his heart? Do you think we could visit a maximum security prison and tell a rapist this, and it will turn everything around for him? Will he say, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize that my victim was part of the human family? Now that I know that, I’ll stop raping women.’”

Non-Christian: “I suppose it might not work for everyone.”

Christian: “Let me tell you my story. I was hopelessly narcissistic, not caring a lick about anyone unless I could get something from them. When I came to Christ, he showed me true love and it changed me from the inside

out without counseling, drugs, or prison. Today, when I see a Muslim or a homosexual or a bully, do you know what I think? I think, ‘How I can help them experience what I experienced.’ I’m not better than they are. My sins are probably worse.”

Non-Christian: “Yeah, but what if they don’t want your message? What then?”

Christian: “If they don’t want the message, Jesus teaches me to love them. Even if they make themselves out to be my enemies, I should show them love, and if necessary die for them because that’s the example of Jesus. How would you like to join a community of those whose mission it is to give the world a foretaste of the healing God intends to bring about when his son returns?”

Obviously, this conversation is a tad artificial, but it shows how hooking our gospel presentation to the culture can help us deliver the message in a way that pulls people in. It also demonstrates one of the most effective ways of dealing with defectors. Rather than starting by giving evidence or logical argumentation for your position, first ask them what their proposed solution is. Doing so focuses the conversation on what really matters to the person and helps to surface their own personal philosophy that blocks them from perceiving the gospel as plausible.

In the following chapters, we’ll work through several cultural currents that are pushing us all around in an

effort to detect them, deconstruct them, and see how Christianity offers a better way.

2 Hyper-Individualism

In the last chapter, “Seeing the Filter,” we considered how the culture is constantly nudging our sense of what’s normal by scripting and re-scripting what we think will make us safe and happy. The world puts filters over our eyes to color how we perceive everything without us even noticing it. Such deception is insidious because we think we can see clearly even though we can’t. We’re all convinced that our take on life is unique and self-derived. However, this is far from true. We are much more like soft Jell-O than hard molds.

Over the next several short chapters, I will point out some of the filters our culture pushes on us. Before going on I want acknowledge Tim Keller for including a chapter on the late modern mind in his little book on preaching that opened my eyes to several of these cultural currents. In some ways this eBook is an expansion of the ideas he laid out originally, though in much greater detail.

For now, let’s begin by looking at one of the most insidious and influential filters: hyper-individualism. Typically, hyper-individualism works in two stages.

1. Self-discovery: Learn what your inmost desires are. Look within yourself at your deepest longings to find the true you.
2. Self-actualization: Find a way to realize your dreams and reach your full potential. Don't let external realities stifle you.

Before going on to evaluate hyper-individualism logically and biblically, I want to look at two cultural examples. First, consider the words to the mega hit "Let it Go" by Robert and Kristen Lopez from the Disney movie, *Frozen*. Right before this song, Elsa "came out" or rather was forced out by her sister as someone with ice powers. When this happened, an old stodgy character accused her of sorcery. (Later, he went so far as to call her a monster.) As she fled, she inadvertently triggered an ice age. She left her old community behind and enjoyed a moment of self-realization alone.

Cultural Example 1: "Let It Go" from *Frozen*

...The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
 Couldn't keep it in, heaven knows I tried!

Don't let them in, don't let them see
 Be the good girl you always have to be
 Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
 Well, now they know!

Let it go, let it go
 Can't hold it back anymore
 Let it go, let it go

Turn away and slam the door!

I don't care
 What they're going to say
 Let the storm rage on,
 The cold never bothered me anyway!

...And the fears that once controlled me
 Can't get to me at all!

It's time to see what I can do
 To test the limits and break through
 No right, no wrong, no rules for me I'm free!

...Let it go, let it go
 You'll never see me cry!

...And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
 I'm never going back,
 The past is in the past!

...Let it go, let it go
 That perfect girl is gone!...

These lyrics drip with hyper-individualism. Elsa looks within and heroically expresses her true self over against what anyone else thinks. No longer will she be the perfect girl or even care about right or wrong. She's realized her authentic self, and now she's free. She can never go back to repressing her true self. Now, to be clear, I'm not accusing the Lopezes or Disney of igniting

some anti-God cultural movement. This song is not about gay pride, school shootings, or adultery; it's about a snow queen with magical powers. Even so, what makes "Let It Go" so fascinating is how popular it became. It reached the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, won an Academy Award for best original song, and earned a Grammy Award for best song written for visual media. This sort of reception occurs when a song connects with the culture. Let me give you one more example before looking more closely at hyper-individualism.

Cultural Example 2: Avicii "Wake Me Up" Music Video

The first two verses are:

Feeling my way through the darkness
Guided by a beating heart
I can't tell where the journey will end
But I know where to start

They tell me I'm too young to understand
They say I'm caught up in a dream
Well life will pass me by if I don't open up my eyes
Well that's fine by me

In this video, we see how the characters wake up in a repressed, poor, dingy, country hamlet with plain people dressed drably giving them ugly looks. They don't know why everyone dislikes them. The lead character goes to the city and finds young, happy, stylish, good looking people who have the same identity marker (tattoo) on them. They enjoy music and dance and use technology. After she comes home, she gets her daughter (or sister?)

and says she's found a place where they belong. Like "Let It Go," this video is not just a minor cultural artifact; it has close to a billion views on YouTube. This music video is not just catchy; it resonates with the culture in a powerful way. People feel repressed, like society is holding them back, keeping them from truly being themselves. External realities should not trump internal longings. If people won't let you "do you," then you should just move to the city so you can find others with whom you belong.

Other examples of hyper-individualism abound in our world. For example, my alma mater, Boston University, uses the motto "be you," a play on the initials, BU. In other words, come to BU so you can be you. Ten years ago, such a campaign would never have had appeal. Prospective students don't want to go away to college and spend thousands of dollars so they can just be themselves. They wanted to improve themselves, gain an education, and get a job. Another example of hyper-individualism is the common practice of people declaring to the social media universe, "I'm doing this for me." In other words, I realize others might not like what I'm doing, but I need to do this for myself. One last example is the monomyth or hero's journey we see played out in movies. The character finds out he or she is somehow different, goes on a journey to discover who they really are, then after facing resistance they self-actualize their latent true self and overcome (usually saving the world in the process), eventually returning to normal society but in a new role.

Benefits of Individualism

Before offering some criticisms and then considering the biblical perspective, let's consider the benefits and detriments of this mindset. Although individualism, especially hyper-individualism, has major flaws, it also has worthwhile benefits. For example, in Western culture many years ago, children generally followed in the footsteps of their parents. Women had very little vocational opportunity apart from raising children, and men typically carried on the family business, such as farming, carpentry, or some other trade. Individualism has changed all of this. Nowadays, especially in America, people believe they should follow their dreams. They can be whoever they want to be. Obviously, this kind of thinking has limitations, but it shows the liberating effect of individualism on a society.

Another benefit relates to hypocrisy. During much of the past, people, more or less, all went to church in the west, whether they followed Christ or not. Cultural pressure or even legal requirements ensured that everybody conformed to an external Christian piety. Because of the Protestant Reformation and, in particular, the courageous Anabaptists, church attendance became voluntary. This, I argue, is a good change because it reduced the number of hypocrites. In my own context, upstate New York, a small percentage of people go to church on a regular basis. In fact, the Barna Group labeled Albany the most post-Christian city in America. What's great about that, though, is that

people don't feel such a pressure to fake it. Either they are genuine or they aren't. They are free to be who they really are religiously.

A third benefit of individualism relates to exceptionally talented people. If everyone merely maintained the status quo or followed in the footsteps of the culture, we would never have had someone like Martin Luther King Jr. His dream for American equality drove him to realize it no matter the cost. Likewise, in the business world for example, we find innovators and dreamers who change how we do things. Technology leaders like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk could never get their start if they weren't self-motivated enough to defy the naysayers and do what had never been done before. So, individualism can have significant benefits.

Detriments of Individualism

Here I will just mention two arenas where hyper-individualism erodes society before going on to offer some criticisms of this way of thinking in general. When it comes to marriage, two people come together to make a family unit. Oftentimes, people get married to fulfill their own deepest longings for companionship, sex, or having children. They want to find someone who won't change them, who will be compatible with their tastes, and who will complete them. However, if I enter marriage, solely for selfish reasons, then I am unlikely to stick around when conflict inevitably arises or I cross paths with someone with whom I am more compatible

than my present spouse. Such a mindset often leads to relational pain, infidelity, and/or divorce.

Similarly, parenting requires you to subordinate your own desires and longings to the needs of another person. If I have children solely to satisfy my own yearnings, then when the children are recalcitrant or don't live up to my expectations, I will withdraw or even abandon them. Rather than staying relational and disciplining them, I bail because they no longer fulfill me. Sadly, this scenario plays out too frequently today, leaving in its wake psychologically damaged children who instinctively blame themselves rather than recognizing their parents were in the wrong to put their individual needs over them.

Criticisms

Now that I've looked at some of the benefits and detriments of individualism, I want to offer four criticisms of hyper-individualism as a philosophy of life. The first is that basing my identity on my deepest inner longings is unstable because I change over time. Secondly, my desires often conflict with one another. For example, say someone wants to be an astronaut, but she also takes delight in long hours of lounging at the beach. Who is she really? Is she a beach bum or an astronaut? How does she choose which passion to pursue? If she loafs around on the beach, she will not put in the countless hours required to get into a good college for aerospace engineering. If she studies relentlessly, she'll never find the time to make trips to

the beach and soak in the rays that satisfy her soul. Furthermore, what if neither is really best for her? What if she doesn't have what it takes to outperform all the other astronaut candidates and she's predisposed to have skin cancer? Is she just lost in this case? Has she no meaning in life because there's no way for her to truly "do her?"

A third problem with hyper-individualism is that our hearts are not very good sources of morality. For example, a serial rapist looks within his heart and finds an overwhelming desire to dominate and defile others. More than any other impulse, this is what brings him true fulfillment. He mentions this self-discovery to a friend who tries to convince him to repress this desire. He says, "You can't just go rape women. Not only is it wrong to hurt others, but you'll end up in jail as well." The rapist replies, "You're just trying to impose your own sense of morality on me. I'm not like other people; I'm unique. I've been stifling this desire for too long. I need to wake up to who I really am and let it go. It's time for me to be me." Obviously, this is an extreme example, but it illustrates how dangerous it is to follow our hearts as the guide for morality.

Lastly, hyper-individualism is really just an illusion. Often we have competing desires, and we decide which to pursue and which to suppress on the basis of inherited cultural norms. Tim Keller explains:

Imagine an Anglo-Saxon warrior in Britain in AD 800. He has two very strong inner impulses and feelings. One is aggression. He loves to smash and kill people when they show him disrespect. Living in a shame-and-honor culture with its warrior ethic, he will identify with that feeling. He will say to himself, *That's me! That's who I am! I will express that.* The other feeling he senses is same-sex attraction. To that he will say, *That's not me. I will control and suppress that impulse.* Now imagine a young man walking around Manhattan today. He has the same two inward impulses, both equally strong, both difficult to control. What will he say? He will look at the aggression and think, *This is not who I want to be,* and will seek deliverance in therapy and anger-management programs. He will look at his sexual desire, however, and conclude, *That is who I am.*

So, if the whole premise of hyper-individualism is for me to “be me,” and yet I choose which me to be on the basis of socially constructed ideals I’ve inherited from the culture, then in reality I’m merely conforming to my culture. I think I’m being radical and I’m totally unique, but I’m really just picking which longings to amplify or suppress based on what my culture says is acceptable. I might think I’m free, but I’m just another deluded slave to my environment.

What Does the Bible Say?

My last criticism of this way of thinking is that it flatly

contradicts what scripture says. Our moral compasses rarely point to true north. Here’s what Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 17.7-10

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

We can either trust in God and enjoy the stability that results from having a reliable external source, or we can look within ourselves and follow our deceitful and desperately sick hearts. The bible tells us that it is not, in fact, heroic to give in to our lusts; it’s just weakness masquerading as courage. If we give in to our fleshly passions, we lose true freedom and end up slaves to sin.

Romans 6.12-13

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

From a Christian perspective, sin is not merely some external force, but something deceptive and internal. Even so, that doesn't mean every thought that pops into our heads is evil. That's precisely the problem. Sometimes my heart urges me toward kindness and other times vengeance. As a result of all this inner confusion, I need an external guide to help me. But, so long as I pick and choose which aspects of what God says to obey and which to ignore, I am still piloting my life based on my inner desires. The only way to truly liberate ourselves from the deceptiveness of sin is to subordinate our own will to God's. This is why Jesus would tell those interested in following him to deny themselves and take up their crosses (Luke 9.23-24). As Jesus completely submitted to God's will, he calls us to do the same. When we obey God's agent, Jesus, we find deliverance from our depraved instincts and empowerment to act on the good through the indwelling of God's spirit.

Adopting such a submissive mindset towards God sounds awfully stifling and scary. How can we be sure God is trustworthy? How can we be sure God genuinely has our good at heart? How do I know he won't take advantage of me or abuse that level of trust? These are important questions to wrestle with for each of us. What we often do when trying to determine if someone will be trustworthy is to look at his or her track record. When we examine God's dealings with humanity, we find an exceedingly patient father who loves us and longs to have a relationship with us. The cross, in

particular, demonstrates God's supremely self-sacrificial love for us. He allowed his son, his only-begotten son, to die for us. He's given everything for us. He is worthy of our trust.

Conclusion

We need an external accurate perspective to help us sift and filter what our hearts are telling us. Without such guidance, we are like dinner guests, dressed in our finest, thinking we have made it to the pinnacle of self-realization without realizing the mighty ship we stand upon is the Titanic and that in a few short hours it will be on the bottom of the icy ocean. If God made us, then it makes sense that he would have the best perspective on how to live, just like an inventor best knows how an invention should work. Can you trust him? Will you trust him? You will become your greatest you by repressing those inner longings that he says are wrong and amplifying those he says are right.

3

Tolerance

Tolerance, as our culture defines it, is the idea that everyone should have the freedom to be themselves. You shouldn't try to change people or hold them to your standards. You certainly shouldn't push your religion on

others. Faith is a private matter, so proselytizing is immoral. You shouldn't label, define, or stereotype people. Since your view of morality is personal, you can't judge others for thinking differently. Instead, you should accept people for who they are, regardless of their beliefs or lifestyle. Slogans like "don't judge me" and "live and let live" express the concept of tolerance. Whereas hyper-individualism focuses on realizing one's own desires, tolerance extends freedom to others. While hyper-individualism says, "I'll do me," tolerance says, "You do you." Before looking at the benefits and detriments of this way of thinking, I want to first illustrate it using two examples. Lastly, I'll present a biblical perspective on tolerance that challenges our culture and us to love courageously.

Cultural Example 1: Judging Homeless People

Some time ago, I came across this moving and challenging video about a homeless man in an Asian

country.⁴ The scene opens with a dirty man with long, unkempt hair and no shoes sleeping on the sidewalk outside a little shop. The door to the shop opens, and the owner comes out with a bucket of water and douses the sleeping vagrant. In shock, the man recoils, struggles to his feet, and runs away terrified while the shopkeeper shouts at him. The next day, the scene repeats, although this time he uses a broom to wake him up and chase him away. Day after day, the owner chases away the homeless man, unwilling to give him the smallest morsel of food or show the slightest bit of kindness. Then one day, the poor man is gone. Days pass, and he doesn't come back. Each day, the owner opens the door and looks for him, somewhat forlorn now, and is disappointed he's not there. Then he remembers that he has a video camera installed and checks the footage. What he sees completely shocks him.

He watches his own treatment of the down-and-out and feels ashamed of his intolerance. Then he sees what happened at night while he was sleeping. The homeless man cleaned up trash in front of the shop; he chased vandals away seeking to graffiti the door; he ran off a man who was peeing on the door; he confronted a couple of thieves as they attempted to break in and got stabbed. That's why he never came back. The video ends with the message "There's much more truth that you are blind to" and then pitches the sale of Vizer video cameras. The hardworking shop owner judged and

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3277BLKDqpE>

mistreated the homeless man because he thought of him as a lazy nuisance. However, he learned that this homeless man was the shop's nocturnal protector. This video shows how wrong it is to express intolerance toward others who are different than we are, especially in light of our limited knowledge of the situation.

Cultural Example 2: Things Everybody Does

In this light-hearted BuzzFeed video⁵ aimed at convincing people to sign up for health insurance, we see the President Obama doing all kinds of mundane activities like trying out new looks in the mirror, sketching pictures of his girl, using a selfie stick to take pictures, blaming the president when he can't dip a cookie in his glass of milk. Last of all the video shows Obama in his office pretending to make the game winning shot at the end of basketball game when his aid walks in. He shoots him a quizzical look and says, "Mr. President." Obama replies, "Can I live?" The aid replies, "You do you." Here the point is that you shouldn't pigeonhole Obama into a rigid presidential role. He's does normal guy stuff too. Let him be himself. Before evaluating tolerance and looking at the biblical perspective, let's first think through both the benefits and detriments of tolerance.

Benefits of Tolerance

Tolerance has quite a few benefits worthy of admiration – the first of which is that a tolerant society respects people's freedom of choice rather than forcing them

⁵ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewgauthier/the-president-uses-a-selfie-stick>

into a particular mold based on family trade, social status, or religion. Extending people freedom to be themselves facilitates a more colorful and interesting society where people can express their uniqueness. For example, under the Puritan theocracy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the government so clamped down on religious freedom that they persecuted bible-believing Christians who diverged from their way of thinking. For example, they ran Roger Williams out even though he was a conservative Baptist. Ironically, Christianity has withered in countries that continued to have state-sponsored churches whereas America's religious toleration has led to incredible flourishing. In addition, a pluralistic society cuts down on hypocrisy, arguably the behavior that irritated Jesus more than any other. Other benefits include a diminishment of racism, increased opportunity for employment, and avoidance of hurtful stereotyping.

Detriments of Tolerance

However, this system of tolerance also can lead to disengagement from society. Rather than working for a better world, we should "live and let live." For example, how does tolerance help us when it comes to issues like income inequality? The rich are not harming the poor nor are they demonstrating intolerance, but they may exercise a disproportionate control over everyone's lives both in terms of corporate and political influence. Shouldn't we "let them do them?" A second detriment of tolerance is that it reduces morality to behaviors that affect others. What if someone is hurting himself, slowly

digging himself into debt with a gambling addiction? Should we just let him sink without intervening? Lastly, we've witnessed how society has used tolerance as a stick to beat others who are intolerant. For example, when Dan Cathy, the COO of Chick-fil-A, explained why he didn't support gay marriage, activists organized boycotts and protests. Public shaming and corporate intolerance contribute to a culture of outrage that increasingly limits freedom of expression. Christians oftentimes feel they need to stay in the closet about their beliefs for fear of getting ridiculed or fired.

Evaluating the Tolerance Ethic

Now that we've looked at the pros and cons of tolerance, let's examine the idea a little more closely. According to Merriam-Webster, tolerance is a "willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different than your own." However, very few actually live according to this definition. We like to think of ourselves as tolerant, magnanimous people, but in reality we all put limitations on tolerance. For example, our society doesn't tolerate murder, rape, or child abuse. Thus, "tolerance" is a neutral concept, not a virtue in itself. It can be used for good or ill. For example, I should not tolerate my child torturing the dog for fun. I should express intolerance. Why? Well, it is wrong to torture animals. So, here we see the true nature of tolerance. It doesn't exist in a vacuum, but it depends on underlying moral commitments and beliefs about human flourishing. This is why tolerance sometimes ties itself into a knot. For example, if you

believe everyone should practice tolerance, but you run into someone who is really intolerant, you can't help but shaming them. Thus, tolerance often transforms into intolerance, precisely what it opposes, especially when it encounters intolerance.

Our culture tends to put two main limitations on tolerance:

1. No harm: you are free to do as you like so long as it doesn't harm others.
2. No intolerance: you should never express intolerance toward others.

People generally agree that the no-harm principle should limit tolerance. Thus, we should not tolerate behaviors that hurt others. But, how do we know what behaviors qualify as harm? That will depend on what our deeper moral commitments are. For example, is it harmful for a man to watch pornography regularly? He's not hurting anyone else? He's supporting an industry of hard-working actors, which, in turn, benefits the economy, right? Well, he's also retraining his mind to objectify women, which will skew his future relationships and possibly result in significant anti-social behavior. Consider a second example: should women have the right to choose to have an abortion? Here tolerance can't help us at all, since the situation pits two freedoms against one-another. Who should have freedom: the mother or the baby? If we grant the fetus freedom then the mother must carry it to term. If we grant the mother freedom then the child must die. So,

how do we know which side to take? Once again, tolerance depends on deeper moral commitments. Ironically, in our society today, those who push for tolerance most vehemently often end up curtailing the human rights of children in the womb. These examples show how the no-harm principle fails to guide us. In addition, it is not clear whether we should act for immediate harm or ultimate harm. For example, should someone lie to avoid hurting her boyfriend or should she tell the truth? If she is worried about immediate harm, then she should lie, but if she wants the relationship to workout ultimately, lying will probably erode relational trust, causing problems down the road. Once again, the no-harm principle is not enough to go on to make moral choices.

Consider too how belief in God plays into the situation. Why should an atheist care about the no-harm principle at all? Obviously, our cultural milieu pressures him to play along as if he believes this way, but he can certainly cheat whenever it's to his advantage (especially if he knows he can get away with it). But, if someone believes in God, then doesn't the no-harm principle extend to her? Shouldn't we care about hurting God? For example, with any sin I commit, I defy what God says is right. Even if my sin does not affect other people, it still disregards God. Thus, whether one believes in God or not, the no-harm principle fails to provide us with consistent guidance.

Let's examine tolerance a bit further. Tolerance is all about extending freedom to others, especially those who are different from you. As Americans, we think of freedom as an inalienable human right. In olden times, we wanted to be free to choose a career, a spouse, or where to live (over against communism, for example). Now, in the culture of tolerance, we tend to absolutize freedom and to argue that people should be free to do whatever they want, however they want, with whomever they want, so long as it is not illegal. However, such a view of freedom is naïve at best and self-destructive at worst. We all have limitations and need to assess the trade-offs when freedoms come into conflict. For example, say a woman wants to be free to enjoy her lover without worrying about sexually transmitted diseases, but he won't limit his freedom to sleep around with others. In this case, his freedom inhibits hers. It's difficult to see which side would be right here based on tolerance alone. If they got married and practiced sexual fidelity, she could enjoy her freedom, but this would curb his. When freedoms come into conflict, how do we decide which should take priority? Consider Tim Keller's take on this:

A sixty-year-old man may have a strong desire to eat fatty foods, but if he regularly exercises his freedom to give in to that desire, his life will be curtailed in some way. He must choose to lose a lesser freedom (to eat these foods he enjoys) for a greater freedom (health and long life). If you want the freedoms that comes with being a great

musician—the ability to move people with your music and to make a good living for your family—you will have to give up your freedom to do other things in order to practice eight hours a day for years. Freedom is not, then, simply the absence of restrictions, but rather consists of finding the right, liberating restrictions. Put another way, we must actively take tactical freedom losses in order to receive strategic freedom gains. You grow only as you lose some lower kinds of freedom to gain higher kinds. So there is no absolute negative freedom.⁶

So tolerance cannot make it on its own since it is unclear when to express it and when to limit it. We need some deeper principle to guide us when choosing what to tolerate in ourselves and others. Now, let's turn to see how the bible can provide some guidance.

A Biblical Perspective

Jesus said the two greatest moral principles are to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. However, true love requires sacrificing some freedom in order to create a trusting relationship. If we give up our self-sovereignty in an effort to love and obey God, we gain freedom from having to figure out everything on our own, and we get to enjoy fellowship with God. By giving up some lower freedoms, we gain a trusting relationship with God that can both satisfy our souls and help us be more harmonious members of society. The greatest choice

⁶ Tim Keller, *Preaching* (NY: Viking 2015), pp. 144-5.

you can make is to sublimate your will to God's by committing to and following after his anointed one, Jesus Christ. When we do that, we limit our autonomy, resulting in liberation from the selfishness that constantly spurs us on towards sin. Here is how Jesus, himself, put it:

John 8.31-36

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Sin is very deceptive. We think we are free moral agents, but we are full of competing impulses, some dark and some light. We need God's help to figure out our true selves so that we can lead authentic godly and fulfilling lives. When we try to become free from social constraints and traditional values, we may correct some errors, but we may also find ourselves enslaved to an insidious selfishness. Like food in your teeth, selfishness, though visible to those close to us, is often impossible for us to spot without some external mirror to show us what we really look like. This is why the

Christian ethic requires humility. Although sometimes lampooned as arrogant, Christian morality actually begins by recognizing our limitations to discern right from wrong. We do not go around saying we know better than society about abortion, gay marriage, or pre-marital sex. No, the genuine Christian says, "I don't know. I can't trust my own moral compass, and I certainly can't just go along with whatever the culture says. I need help. I need some external, accurate perspective to guide me." This is where scripture steps in. It tells us what God thinks about how we should live. This is really the best of both worlds because we can find out what is right and wrong with confidence but without thinking we are better than anyone else.

Even so, Christ does not call us to take over the world's governments and impose our morality on everyone else. Taking into consideration Jesus' own cultural and political setting, we see a man who never forced his will on others. He did not try to protest the Roman occupation as an outsider or campaign for a position in the government as an insider. He told people the gospel about the kingdom; he called people to repentance; he liberated people from oppression. He did not try to change the divorce law, even though he disagreed with the reigning interpretations of the day. Instead, he told people what God said about the subject, appealing to their hearts. Christians may take different positions on the degree to which we should participate in government, but we all agree that genuine lasting change has to come from within.

So, pulling this all together, Christianity is pro-tolerance, but not with the same limitations as our culture. Instead of shaming people for their lack of tolerance or intervening only when they harm others, the Christian view looks to humility and love, while considering Jesus as our example of how to deal with conflict. We recognize our own finitude and leave defining morality to the creator. Then we look for ways to love God and others as ourselves. The standard is quite high:

Philippians 2.3-4

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

This is far more difficult than just tolerating people. True love is deep because it gives of itself. It is active rather than passive. We get involved in people's lives, helping them to find their creator so they can enter into a relationship with him. Once someone meets God and comes to grips with his outrageous love, he or she is much more open to what God says on a particular moral issue. It just won't do to lecture others about godly morality while they are alienated from him. It would be like an anonymous girl telling you to give her the phone number for your spouse. Why should you listen to a stranger? What gives her the right to tell you what to do? Yet, as soon as you realize it is your daughter asking, you don't hesitate to give her the number.

Relationship changes everything. So too, it is with God. The goal is not to force outsiders to do what he says, but to invite them to become insiders.

4

Progress

Over the course of time, humanity has made incredible progress. Slavery was once a widespread and accepted institution, but it is almost universally outlawed today. Workers' rights, including child labor and equal opportunity employment, have made great strides in the last century. The realm of medicine has made remarkable progress over the last couple of centuries due to advances in antibiotics and vaccines as well as improved diagnostic tools like x-ray and MRI machines. Inventions like automobiles, washing machines, furnaces, and indoor plumbing have revolutionized civilization, automating basic tasks and greatly improving the quality of life for countless people. Looking over the eons of recorded history, it is hard not to believe in some sort of invisible force, moving us ever onward towards a better world. Statements like "newer is better" or "they were so primitive" or "we don't want to be on the wrong side of history" express this general idea of progress. In fact, it's hard to study history without encountering some practice or notion that the ancients accepted as normal, but appears utterly barbarous by modern standards. Of course, I don't deny these examples of progress, but at the same time I'm hesitant to accept newer developments as obviously

superior to what came before. In what follows, I intend to consider the idea of progress, deconstruct it, and offer a critique from a Christian perspective.

Cultural Example 1: Biology

I will begin with two cultural examples. Consider this Wikipedia entry on evolution:

Evolution by natural selection is a process demonstrated by the observation that more offspring are produced than can possibly survive, along with three facts about populations: 1) traits vary among individuals... 2) different traits confer different rates of survival and reproduction... 3) traits can be passed from generation to generation (heritability of fitness). Thus, in successive generations members of a population are replaced by progeny of parents better adapted to survive and reproduce in the biophysical environment in which natural selection takes place.

Is evolution anything more than the idea of progress applied to biology? From amoeba to artichokes to aardvarks to Americans, evolution posits a gradual increase of complexity over time. In fact, Charles Darwin, himself, lived during the Enlightenment period when optimism about progress had reached a fever pitch. Here's another cultural example, drawn from a recent public announcement.

Cultural Example 2: Morality

This is Bruce Springsteen's official statement, explaining why he cancelled his 2016 concert in North Carolina:

As you, my fans, know I'm scheduled to play in Greensboro, North Carolina this Sunday. As we also know, North Carolina has just passed HB2, which the media are referring to as the "bathroom" law. HB2 — known officially as the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act — dictates which bathrooms transgender people are permitted to use. Just as important, the law also attacks the rights of LGBT citizens to sue when their human rights are violated in the workplace. No other group of North Carolinians faces such a burden. To my mind, it's an attempt by people who cannot stand the progress our country has made in recognizing the human rights of all of our citizens to overturn that progress. Right now, there are many groups, businesses, and individuals in North Carolina working to oppose and overcome these negative developments. Taking all of this into account, I feel that this is a time for me and the band to show solidarity for those freedom fighters. As a result, and with deepest apologies to our dedicated fans in Greensboro, we have canceled our show scheduled for Sunday, April 10th. Some things are more important than a rock show and this fight against prejudice and bigotry — which is happening as I write — is one of them. It is the strongest means I have for raising my voice in

opposition to those who continue to push us backwards instead of forwards.⁷

Springsteen here condemns the North Carolina law that forbids people to enter bathrooms of the opposite biological gender. He calls this law a “negative development” that we must overcome so that our country can have “progress.” He says those who fight against progress are backwards as if progress itself is a virtue. Whether you agree with evolution or Springsteen’s statement is not my point here. I’m merely illustrating the pervasiveness of this general notion of progressivism in the culture. Now, before analyzing this principle closely, I want to review some benefits and detriments to this way of thinking.

Benefits of Progress

Believing that humanity is progressing has several interesting benefits. It inspires optimism that, in turn, can help someone persevere through tough times. Even if the situation is not going the way we’d like now, we know somewhere deep in our bones that even if the arc of the moral universe is long and we cannot see where it ends at long last it bends towards justice.⁸ Such optimism not only benefits the individual, but it’s also contagious. Secondly, an orientation towards progress encourages innovation and risk-taking as inventors, artists, and entrepreneurs contribute to a better

⁷ <http://bruce.springsteen.net/news/2016/a-statement-from-bruce-springsteen-on-north-carolina>

⁸ Several have expressed this mindset including Theodore Parker (1853), Martin Luther King Jr. (1964), and Barack Obama (2009).

tomorrow. In contrast, societies that believe in a steady-state universe or the preservation of barriers between classes tend to stagnate while hindering equality.

Detriments of Progress

Always thinking the future will be better than the present can cause us to look down on the past. We may think history has nothing to teach us. Furthermore, adopting the progress mindset can contribute to a haughty attitude that can’t help but sneer at other primitive or backwards cultures. For example, the Amish may be perfectly happy, but because of their apparent freeze on progress, we pity them at best and disparage them at worst. Furthermore, when a segment of the population refuses to get with the times, we tend to coerce them using public shaming or legal intervention. Another detriment of progressivism is apathy. We can be so convinced that the world is going a certain way that we disengage completely and sit on the sideline. Lastly, an optimistic view towards human history can lead to uncritically accepting whatever ideas are popular while leaving behind old ones that are out of date, regardless of their merit.

Deconstructing Progress

I’m convinced progress, like tolerance, is too neutral to adequately function as a moral principle. First of all, the idea isn’t even true. New technology is not always better. For example, nuclear bombs are “better” than conventional bombs because they do more damage, but

they are worse because of how they poison the landscape with radiation for decades to come. Furthermore, as we saw in the Cold War, advances in weaponry can lead to an arms race that both siphons resources from improving the lives of citizens as well as the stockpiling of weapons, which could potentially lead to global destruction. Another way that technology could cause regression rather than progression relates to terrorism. Say, a city like New York automates its sewage system using computers. Now suppose a terrorist organization hacks the system, disabling it. What sort of health hazard would result with eight million people needing access to working toilets multiple times a day? (See Ted Koppel's book *Lights Out* for a realistic assessment of how vulnerable our power grids are to cyber-attack.) In this case progress in networking and automation could potentially lead to a major collapse society.

Another major flaw in thinking about progress as a virtue is that it leads to ethnocentrism and arrogance. We should be careful not to judge other cultures as unenlightened or backwards, simply because they choose to live differently than we do. Such people may live longer, be happier, and have more meaningful relationships. They may enjoy a more moral and stable society than ours, precisely because they reject the technology that exacerbates impatience in our "instant gratification" culture. Furthermore, progressivism fuels the West's idolization of youth, which can lead to

marginalizing the elderly because they are out of touch with the latest advances.

Besides, newer is not always better. For example, I have a 30 year old John Deere snow blower. When I brought it in to get a tune up a couple of years ago, the mechanic mocked the brand name and said he wouldn't service it. When I told him how old it was, he totally changed his tune. He said, "So you've got one of the real John Deers?" He gladly worked on it, marveling to me, "They don't make 'em like this anymore." The machine is made of metal rather than plastic and it can handle any kind of snow that upstate New York can throw at it. Many consumer goods have diminished in durability over the last 30 years. Perhaps companies don't want to make products that last or are easy to repair so we will throw them out and buy new ones. Planned obsolescence works much better as a business model. Consequently, we live in a disposable society. Most electronics are not worth fixing so we toss them and they molder in a manmade mountain somewhere, polluting the environment.

Honestly, progress depends on the eye of the beholder. For example, if someone thinks abortion is wrong, then passing laws restricting abortion in Texas is progress. Or consider the alleged connection between the legalization of abortion in the 1970s and the decrease in crime in the 1990s that Steven Levitt put forward in *Freakonomics*. He argues:

But because of *Roe v. Wade*, these [at risk] children *weren't* being born. This powerful cause would have a drastic, distant effect: years later, just as these unborn children would have entered their criminal primes, the rate of crime began to plummet. It wasn't gun control or a strong economy or new police strategies that finally blunted the American crime wave. It was, among other factors, the reality that the pool of potential criminals had dramatically shrunk.⁹

Now, if you think abortion is ok, then this sounds like progress for society, but for those of us who believe it is wrong, we can't help but think that killing millions of at-risk people just to reduce crime twenty years later is a severe regression towards barbarity, hearkening back to the eugenics policies of the early twentieth century.

Another major reason why progressivism doesn't work relates to how we view history. C. S. Lewis summarized the problem well:

[H]is counterattacks destroyed forever two elements in my own thought. In the first place he made short work of what I have called my "chronological snobbery," the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom,

⁹ Steven Levitt, Stephen Dubner, *Freakonomics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), pp. 4-5.

where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also "a period," and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.¹⁰

Progressivism confuses the accumulation of knowledge for actual intelligence. People today are probably not much smarter or dumber than we were in the past. We might have a more sophisticated and accurate view of reality, but that does not mean that individuals are getting smarter. If you think ancient people lacked cognitive capacity, you haven't read many of them. Whether you pick up a book from the 1800s like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* or one from the 300s BC like Plato's *Republic*, you can't help but feel intellectually inadequate. We can easily amass further evidence against thinking humanity is smarter today by looking at any number of street interviews on shows like *Jimmy Kimmel*.

A Christian Perspective

Now that we've seen some inadequacies of progressivism, let's take a look at how Christianity provides a more satisfying and realistic framework for

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1955), pp. 207-8. See also Art Lindsley's article, "[C. S. Lewis on Chronological Snobbery](#)."

thinking about history. The bible itself contains a progressive arc from the widespread chaotic violence of the antediluvian period to establishment of Israel as a Torah-centered society to the advent of Christ to teach us about love to the outpouring of the spirit to enable us to live out the new covenant. Thus, as Christians we can clearly and unequivocally affirm the progressive nature of history of redemption. However, the bible does not anywhere explicitly endorse any kind of linear progressivism. Rather, progress seems to come in stages, culminating with paradise on earth. In the end, the bible provides a stunning picture of what God plans to do with the world:

Revelation 21.3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

As a result of kingdom prophecies like this one, Christians cannot hope but embrace a robust optimism for how history will progress when Christ returns.

However, the bible also contains realistic portrayals of human frailty and sinfulness. Here is one of the most pessimistic statements found anywhere in scripture:

Romans 3.10-18

As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no

one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The apostle Paul stitched together this montage of quotations to make the point that we are all guilty before God, whether Jew or Gentile. Although the psalmists who had penned these words died centuries earlier, Paul saw no need to modify them or ameliorate their force. People in his time were still flawed and prone to curse, shed blood, and neglect God, and so they are in ours as well.

We do find some mentions in the bible of how matters will get worse, especially towards the end. Here is an example:

1 Timothy 4.1-5

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything

created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Owing to texts like these, many Christians embrace the opposite of progressivism: historical pessimism. This is the idea that each successive generation grows more wicked than the last. Typically historical pessimists appeal to the moral decay they've witnessed during their own lifetimes as evidence for a regressive view of history. This may well be true, but the situation is a bit more complicated than that, since at the same time pornography exploded on the scene so also did antibiotics. While Hollywood slowly slid down the tubes, workplace conditions have improved. Even as the American government has become more secular, racism has diminished. Our society is always shifting up and down and side to side. Some of what happens is good and much of it is bad. What we know for sure from the bible is that just before Christ comes to establish God's kingdom the world will turn against Christians in a major way. Nonetheless, we have no idea when that will happen (though some folks keep trying to predict it). So, we should not just assert that each generation is worse than the last. Diocletian used the full force of the Roman government to roundup, torture, and execute Christians in the fourth century. How is 21st century America worse than that?

In the end, Christianity has a complicated relationship with progressivism. We deny that there is an impersonal force moving humanity upwards over time, but we do

believe God has worked and continues to work with in history to bring about mighty improvements over time. We put our trust in God's promise about setting right everything wrong with the world in the kingdom age, but simultaneously we recognize the horrifying depravity of the human soul. Tim Keller said, "Christianity is at the same time *both* far more pessimistic about history and the human race than any other worldview *and* far more optimistic about the material world's future than any other worldview."¹¹ So let's celebrate it when our civilization makes progress and mourn when they move away from God without losing touch with the fact that our purpose is to reach individuals with the gospel message that alone can lead to regeneration in their hearts and lasting change.

¹¹ Tim Keller, *Preaching* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 154.

5

Scientism

So far, we've examined several cultural currents that are constantly nudging us to think a certain way. In this chapter, I'd like to address the relationship of science and faith by looking at scientism.

Scientism is the idea that the kind of information gained from the scientific method is superior to all other means of acquiring knowledge (if there are any other legitimate means). Scientism exalts empirical data and analysis over intuition, logic, emotion, and revelation. Before staking showing the flaws of this narrow-minded approach to reality, I want to begin by looking at some of the benefits of this way of thinking. Last of all, we'll take a look at how Christianity and science have worked together historically.

Benefits of Scientism

It's hard to deny that science has furnished our world with several significant benefits. One is that science can help us avoid superstition. For example, we can do experiments to find out whether throwing salt over your left shoulder actually diminishes bad luck. Over enough trials, we can compare the results with a control group to find out if there is a statistical effect. Once disproved, we can save a good deal of salt. Another of science's advantages is that it avoids making value judgments.

For example, when a chemist nitrates glycerol, the process works the same every time, regardless if he uses the resultant nitroglycerin to help someone with chronic heart failure or to build a bomb to kill his enemies. Science works in a completely value-neutral way. Thus, science functions universally—independent of culture, language, or bias. It produces repeatable and reliable results. For example, we can do the same experiment in a cave in Africa that we do on a mountaintop in Pakistan, and it will function according to the same scientific principles. We've capitalized on the reliability and universal applicability of science in engineering projects from bridges to skyscrapers as well as all manner of technology.

Detriments of Scientism

However, science, especially when divorced from other limiting philosophies, can have significant detriments. Because science is value-neutral, it can lead to human rights violations. For example, both the holocaust in Germany and forced sterilizations in America resulted from applying Darwinism to society. In addition, scientific professionals like medical doctors tend to dehumanize people, seeing them as interacting systems (respiratory, muscular, neural, etc.) rather than individuals who deserve respect. Those who embrace scientific knowledge as the only valid epistemology can't help but look down on religious people and even curtail their rights (e.g. perhaps by forcing children to take comparative religion classes with a secular bent). Furthermore, scientism tends towards an arrogant

ethnocentric view that disregards the contributions of other cultures that do not have the same level of scientific understanding.

Deconstructing Scientism

Although science obviously has a place, scientism has severe limitations. First of all, scientism is a self-contradictory notion. We cannot say that all knowledge must come from the scientific method because we did not get the scientific method from the scientific method. Furthermore, in order to do physics, for example, you have to have faith that what you observe actually exists, that the universe is rational, and that we can generalize repeated observations into laws. Thirdly, since the rules of logic do not depend on empirical observation, scientism can't be adequate. For example, how could we design an experiment to prove the law of non-contradiction?

Science also falls short in helping us in many other areas of life. What is the science of love? How can science teach me to have a better marriage or appreciate beauty? In fact, the more I think about it, the more I realize how limited science is. It can tell us about the laws that govern the physical world, but humans are free agents capable of acting in unpredictable, illogical, and contradictory ways. This is partly why human history and relationships are so fascinating as well as resistant to scientific analysis.

Beyond science's limitations, there is the issue of reductionism. This is the practice of constantly reducing the macro to the micro in order to explain it. For example, the only reason you like chocolate is that your taste buds react with the chemicals and send a signal to your brain. Here is how C. S. Lewis critiqued reductionism:

Up to that point, the kind of explanation which explains things away may give us something, though at a heavy cost. But you cannot go on 'explaining away' forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to 'see through' first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.¹²

Even if science helps us to understand a myriad of phenomena, it does not do well making sense of the big picture. So, providing a scientific description of why chocolate tastes good doesn't come close to actually explaining the chocolate experience. I may like chocolate because it takes me back to my childhood when my mom made me a special birthday cake. Chocolate may taste good because my wife bought it for

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper One, 2001), pp. 80-1.

me and it reflects her consideration and love for me. I may like chocolate because I want to fit in with other people who love chocolate. We cannot simply reduce it to chemistry, though that is part of the picture.

A Christian Perspective

Since the bible was around many centuries before modern science came about, it never addresses the subject directly. However, it emphatically teaches us that God created the universe. Within just the first two chapters of the first book, God calls his creation good seven times! Although the world fell into corruption when our first parents rebelled, it still retains much of its primordial grandeur and goodness. As a result, looking at the “natural” world has caused believers throughout history to praise God for His mighty works. Here are two examples from Psalms:

Psalm 8.3-4

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

Psalm 19.1-6

1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. 2 Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. 4 Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for

the sun, 5 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

It just makes sense that studying the creation would lead to an increased admiration of the creator; just like examining a painting would garner more appreciation for a painter. But, for many centuries, the world’s most sophisticated thinkers believed in a steady state universe. This is the idea that the world had always been here without beginning or cause. Even Albert Einstein himself couldn’t accept the implications of his equations governing the theory of General Relativity. He inserted a “fudge factor” to keep them from supporting an expanding universe. When Edwin Hubble proved definitively that the universe was expanding, the scientific community balked at the implications. In fact, it was an atheist scientist that coined the term “big bang” to make fun of the idea. He thought the notion smacked of creation *ex nihilo*, a distinctly biblical view. And yet, the whole time Genesis was there, in thousands of copies, clearly stating, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1.1). Bang!

Sadly, our culture is always telling us that God and science have been at war with one another forever. In fact, this idea is rather recent. For example, consider these myths from Jeffrey Koperski’s *The Physics of Theism: God, Physics, and the Philosophy of Science*.

1. Science and religion have been at war with one another since the Catholic Inquisition tortured Galileo.
2. Christians taught the world was flat until Christopher Columbus proved otherwise.
3. The scientific revolution freed Europe from the grip of religion.

None of these is true! Science and religion have not historically been at war with each other. In fact, the opposite is the case. Religion, Christianity in particular, gave birth to modern science. The great pioneers of science believed in God. In fact, it was precisely their belief in God that led them to seek the laws by which He governed the world. But, don't take my word for it. Here are quotes from some of the most influential scientists of the last five hundred years:¹³

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) put forward the heliocentric model of the universe, triggering the Copernican Revolution:

“To know the mighty works of God, to comprehend his wisdom and majesty and power; to appreciate, in degree, the wonderful workings of his laws, surely all this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship to the Most High, to whom ignorance cannot be more grateful than knowledge.”

¹³ Visit this site for more information on these quotes:
<http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/sciencefaith.html>

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) discovered laws of planetary motion:

“Those laws are within the grasp of the human mind. God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts.”

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) derived the equations governing gravity, built the first reflecting telescope, and made major contributions to calculus and optics:

“In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.”
 “I have a fundamental belief in the bible as the Word of God, written by those who were inspired. I study the bible daily.”

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) originated the theory of evolution via natural selection:

“Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.”

Lord William Kelvin (1824-1907) formulated the first and second laws of thermodynamics and engineered the electric telegraph, including the transatlantic project:

“If you study science deep enough and long enough, it will force you to believe in God.”

James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) formulated the classical theory of electromagnetism in his Maxwell’s equations:

“I have looked into most philosophical systems and I have seen that none will work without God.”

“Science is incompetent to reason upon the creation of matter itself out of nothing. We have reached the utmost limit of our thinking faculties when we have admitted that because matter cannot be eternal and self-existent it must have been created.”

Nikola Tesla (1856-1943) was an inventor who is best known for his work on electricity, including designing the supply system for alternating current, developing x-ray imaging, and building a wirelessly controlled boat:

“The gift of mental power comes from God, divine being, and if we concentrate our minds on that truth, we become in tune with this great power.”

Max Planck (1858-1947) won a Nobel Prize in physics for his seminal work on quantum theory:

“There can never be any real opposition between religion and science; for the one is the complement of the other. Every serious and

reflective person realizes, I think, that the religious element in his nature must be recognized and cultivated if all the powers of the human soul are to act together in perfect balance and harmony. And indeed it was not by accident that the greatest thinkers of all ages were deeply religious souls.”

What I love about these quotations is that they obliterate so much mythology about how Christians oppose science. So often, we hear people driving a wedge between faith and reason as if faith is believing in something despite evidence to the contrary, whereas reason only trusts in what can be proved. True faith does not oppose evidence but embraces it in order to trust someone or something. Consider this example from John Lennox:

If I go into my bank manager with a project of making money, the issue for the bank manager is can he place his faith in me? Can he trust me? ...Now he will want reasons to trust me. He will want evidence on which to base his faith in me. And he will ask me a whole series of very penetrating questions in order to see whether his faith is justified. And that applies right across the board. When we say we have faith in something, we trust it; we believe in it. The next logical question is, “What reasons have you got? What evidence have you got for believing it?” So if I say, “God is the creator of the universe,” you are perfectly justified in saying, “What reasons have

you got?" So we need to distinguish faith from blind faith. ...A man's faith in his wife is not blind.... It is evidence-based faith, but it is nonetheless faith. So to say that all faith is blind faith is simply wrong using faith in its general context, but it's also wrong using faith in its specifically religious context."¹⁴

Furthermore, Jesus does not expect people just to believe in him blindly. He repeatedly points to his works as evidence for his words. He says:

John 10.37-38

37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

John 14.10-11

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

Whether speaking to his disciples or to outsiders, Jesus is consistent. He does not demand faith, but requests it on the basis of evidence. In fact, he says we shouldn't believe in him if he doesn't do the works of his father.

Later on when John explains his own evangelistic purpose in writing his Gospel, he says:

John 20.30-31

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In other words, he presents this specific evidence so that we would have good reason to believe that Jesus truly is the Christ. He doesn't just say, "Take it on faith." He says that this is what happened. Jesus did these things. He believes Jesus is the Christ because of this, and so should you.

As Christians, we believe God can reveal his truth to people both directly (through revelation) and indirectly (through creation). So, in the end, the Christian perspective embraces science while rejecting scientism. It is not helpful or necessary to reduce how we gain knowledge to only what the scientific method says. Life is far too complicated for that. Besides, science needs a value system to guide it. Christianity provides the moral compass to help science become a force for good in our world.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4YuMxRpY1M>

6

Consumerism

Consumerism capitalizes on the thrill of buying something new even when you don't need it. In order to keep people buying, advertisers craft penetrating messages to inspire

dissatisfaction or fear that buying their product or service can assuage. Consumers must purchase more stuff in order to feel happier, safer, and more successful. Consumerism is a powerful attitude that not only fuels our American economy, bombarding us with ads, but also adjusts our value system, making us think newer is better, more is better, and that shopping will help us get what we want out of life.

Benefits of Consumerism

Although consumerism has many detriments, we must admit that it has driven our society to unprecedented levels of economic prosperity. Products are remarkably inexpensive and accessible. How an average American lives today is probably better than most nobility of history, with access to hot and cold running water, climate controlled heating and air conditioning, instant communication, a wardrobe of dozens of garments, an incredible variety of foods, and swift private transportation. Furthermore, the sheer variety of

products available lends to greater and more differentiated self-expression. Instead of everyone buying the same kind of shirt, each individual chooses which shirt to buy as a reflection of his or her own unique sense of style. In a non-hierarchical society (excepting celebrities), consumerism enables average people to distinguish themselves based on the quality and conspicuousness of the goods and services they purchase. Besides all of this, consumerism is thrilling, whether the purchase of something new and shiny or the gratification that accompanies finding a good deal.

Detriments of Consumerism

Consumerism has several significant detriments as well. Disposable products combined with planned obsolescence generate a tremendous amount of waste. Secondly, consumerism can lead to debt. For example, each time a new Apple product comes out, a group of super fans lines up to purchase it using credit cards, even if their old product met their needs. Going into debt restricts freedom and also results in paying more than the original cost. The primary driving force behind consumerism is advertising, which is itself intrusive and annoying. Just think of how billboards infect the landscape or how commercials interrupt our TV shows. Advertising often attempts to manipulate you by inspiring discontentment and fear or it makes false promises (i.e. by this convertible and bikini clad women will like you). Consumerism fuels selfishness while diminishing compassion and generosity toward others. Lastly, an economy based on consuming tends to exploit

resource rich countries while benefiting only wealthy folks in an unsustainable spiral of greed and waste.

Deconstructing Consumerism

Consumerism functions on sleight of hand, trading the “good life” for the “goods life.” Acquiring more or better stuff simply does not make us happier over time. Sure, in the moment we experience the thrill of getting something new or finding a good deal, but once this shopper’s high wears off, we have another thing that seems mundane or even dissatisfying. In his Ted talk, Tim Jackson pointed out the absurdity of consumerism when he said the point is “to spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need to create impressions that won’t last on people we don’t care about.”¹⁵ Jackson went on to describe a social experiment he conducted with students in Canada and Uganda. He wanted to determine if giving someone money and telling them to spend it on themselves would make them happier than having them spend it on others. Over and over he found that people were happier when they spent it on others instead of themselves. In this way Jackson proved Jesus’ statement, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20.35), a fact which significantly undermines consumerism.

Other than failing to deliver what it promises, consumerism can leech into our relationships, resulting

¹⁵ Tim Jackson, “An Economic Reality Check,” July 2010, Oxford, England, online at ted.com/talks/tim_jackson_s_economic_reality_check, accessed June 26, 2017.

in dehumanization. For example, a telemarketer calls to sell his product. Rather than treating his prospect like a genuine person, he launches into a canned pitch. Then, because of this abrupt and disingenuous behavior, the consumer dehumanizes the telemarketer by hanging up on him or telling him off. Consider this example from the TV show *Seinfeld*:

(The phone rings. Jerry answers.)

Jerry: “Hello”

Telemarketer: “Hi. Would you be interested in switching over to TMI long distance service?”

Jerry: “Oh gee, I can’t talk right now. Why don’t you give me your home number and I’ll call you later?”

Telemarketer: “Uh. I’m sorry. We are not allowed to do that.”

Jerry: “Oh, I guess you don’t want people calling you at home.”

Telemarketer: (pause) “No.”

Jerry: “Well, now you know how I feel.” (hangs up the phone.)

Although this is a silly example it gets at how dehumanizing consumerism can be to both retailers and consumers. This is not to say that buying and selling are inherently problematic, but it does mean that the consumer relationship can easily result in objectifying people, which, in turn, can open the door to unjustified rudeness, depression, and conflict.

Furthermore, bringing the consumer mindset into marriage or parenting can lead to acute relational pain and disappointment. Tim Keller explains:

Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit—that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back—then we “cut our losses” and drop the relationship. This has also been called “commodification,” a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of “covenant” is disappearing in our culture. Covenant is therefore a concept that is increasingly foreign to us, and yet the bible says it is the essence of marriage...¹⁶

Now we turn to see the Christian perspective on consumerism.

A Christian Perspective

Right from the Ten Commandments, God tells his people not to covet their neighbors’ houses, wives, servants, or possessions (Ex 20.17). Ironically, corporations spend

¹⁶ Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011), pp. 84-5.

billions of dollars in advertising to inspire covetousness in potential consumers. Their aim is to make you feel dissatisfied with what you have (or don’t have), creating a strong enough desire to have what they are selling that you end up buying it. However, God stops this before it can even get going by simply forbidding the attitude from the start. He says, “Don’t covet.” Period. Even so, this is not all that scripture has to teach us on this important subject. For example, Jesus told a parable to warn his hearers about the danger of getting confused about what gives value to their lives.

Luke 12.15-21

15 And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” 16 And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ 20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Whether we have much or little, our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. Jesus doesn’t say

we should have no possessions, but he is saying that laying up treasures for ourselves on earth is foolhardy so long as we are not rich toward God. In other words, we need to find our value in what God says about us and lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven by doing what God says is right (Mat 6.19-20).

In a similar way, Paul identifies the absurdity of living for possessions:

1 Timothy 6.6-11

6 But godliness with contentment is great gain, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. 11 But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

I love where Paul sets the bar. He says that our standard for contentment should be food and clothing. Just imagine how that would liberate us from the anxiety, debt, and disappointment that inevitably arise from giving into consumerism. If we limited our necessities to just food and clothing that would mean we could think of all our other possessions as bonuses. Rather than

worrying about how to get rich or give in to money's seductive allure, we should seek after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. It takes effort to "keep your life free from love of money" and to "be content with what you have," but if we take refuge in the fact that God promises, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" then we will enjoy better and more satisfying lives (Heb 13.5). Ultimately when God becomes the strength of your heart and your portion forever, you become free from the stranglehold of worshiping stuff (Ps 73.26).

Have you ever noticed how the bible twice calls covetousness idolatry? In fact, if we don't put the covetousness within us to death, it will keep us from inheriting the kingdom of God (Col 3.5; Eph 5.5). Instead of loving the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of possessions, we need to love God and people (1 John 2.15-17). If we aren't on guard against our tendencies towards greed, then slowly it will crowd God out of our lives. We can't orient our entire lives around the accumulation of possessions if we hope to stay true to God. However, we are not left without help. The double-edged sword that slices through greed is gratitude and generosity. Practicing contentment diffuses the manipulating power of advertising that we face on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis. By giving to the work of God or the needy, we break out of the straitjacket of avarice. Seeing through the fear-based thinking of never having enough and the absurd pressure to keep up with the Joneses (or the

Kardashians), we can prioritize what's really important: loving God and people rather than stuff.

7

Patriotism

As we finish up this little book on dealing with our culture, the time has come to consider patriotism, national identity, and allegiance. Patriotism is the feeling of love for one's native country, which encompasses a

spectrum from a mere love and gratitude to one's home country to swearing allegiance to support one's country regardless of what it does. Extreme patriotism can lead to the slogan "my country, right or wrong," which was one of the enablers of the Nazism in Germany. On the other hand, "cosmopolitanism," patriotism's opposite, is the idea of global citizenship where one regards all countries objectively on the basis of their virtues and vices without any sentimental attachment to the native homeland. Before looking at a Christian perspective on this issue, I want to first give two different examples of patriotism.

Cultural Example 1: Deutschland über Alles

One example of patriotism is the first stanza of Germany's national anthem from 1922. Although, since 1952, Germans no longer sing the first two stanzas, these words give us a flavor of what patriotism is. Here are the words in German and English:

Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,
Über alles in der Welt,
Wenn es stets zu Schutz und Trutze
Brüderlich zusammenhält.
Von der Maas bis an die Memel,
Von der Etsch bis an den Belt,
Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,
Über alles in der Welt!

Germany, Germany over all,
Over all in the world,
When, for protection and defense,
It always stands brotherly together.
From the Meuse to the Memel,
From the Adige to the Belt,
Germany, Germany over all,
Over all in the world!

Although these lyrics express nationalistic pride, after two World Wars, German patriotism is much more muted today. Germans tend to think of themselves in a much more cosmopolitan way.

Cultural Example 2: Kneeling During the National Anthem

In the summer of 2016, San Francisco 49er quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, kneeled during the national anthem before the football game began. According to NFL.com, Kaepernick said, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” His protest met a variety of

responses, but the movement continued to grow. President Donald Trump harshly condemned the practice and advised team owners to fire the protesting players in a series of tweets. However, on September 24, 2017 over two hundred players sat or kneeled. Pundits have taken a variety of positions both for and against this new practice. Many consider kneeling during the Star Spangled Banner as an affront to the country, the military, and the police. Others regard the protest as a legitimate practice of free expression, a major tenant that so many soldiers have fought to preserve. Regardless of the legitimacy of their decision, this provides us another example where patriotism plays a role in our culture. What’s a Christian to do? Before moving to offer a Christian perspective on these cultural currents, I want to take a moment and consider both the benefits and detriments of patriotism.

Benefits of Patriotism

From ancient philosophers to modern entertainers, many have lauded patriotism as a social good. It’s fairly easy to see why: people who care about their country are more likely to act in the country’s interest even when it requires self-sacrifice. Patriotism can foster social cohesion leading to cooperation. For example, in his 1961 inaugural address, John F. Kennedy famously said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Whether observing rationing policy in the time of war or working together to “put a man on the moon,” patriotism can galvanize a country’s citizens to work together selflessly. Secondly,

feeling gratitude toward one's native land, like any kind of gratitude, can lead to improved resiliency, optimism, productiveness, and happiness. The opposite point of view, entitlement, robs us of joy as we complain about how the country fails to live up to our standards.

Thirdly, patriotism can result in a more engaged citizenry. If people conceive of patriotism as keeping to the country's founding documents, it can provide a corrective to corruptions that threaten to undermine the nation's values. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. couched his famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech in language of patriotism:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of

opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.¹⁷

Detriments of Patriotism

Patriotism can have several detriments as well. It can cause intense divisiveness, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and racism. It can lead to the violation of human rights and war crimes, especially when combined with dehumanizing people from other countries or ethnicities. The infamous Nazi commander, Herman Göring explained how to manipulate people to go to war. Here is a transcript from an interview in 1946 during the Noremburg Trials:

Göring: Why, of course, the people don't want war. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.

Gilbert: There is one difference. In a democracy, the people have some say in the matter through

¹⁷ americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm

their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.

Göring: Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.

Such words expose the peer pressure that patriotism can exert on a people, resulting in the persecution of dissenters and the hasty rush to armed conflict.

Deconstructing Patriotism

Before taking a look at the rich wisdom that the Christian perspective brings to bear on this subject, let's take a moment to look at patriotism a little bit closer. National borders often owe more to historical conflict than geography or ideology. For example, people on either side of the Mexican-American border speak Spanish, practice Catholicism, prefer the same cuisine, and like similar music, yet the border artificially separates them, merely due to an ancient custom established by nations. Why should a man-made border determine how we think of a people on the other side?

We know that every person has human rights, but patriotism inspires a feeling of superiority over those from other nations. Now, we know it's wrong to look

down on others, but when it comes to nations we make an exception, especially during times of war. Patriotism can disguise arrogance when we think our country is the best. However, such nationalistic pride often oversimplifies matters. Take America for example. America excels in many areas from humanitarian aid to professional sports to technological innovation. However, at the same time, the United States also does much evil from the massive pornography industry to exploiting the poor of developing countries for cheap labor to waging unprovoked wars. Is America the best? In some ways it is, and in other ways it is not. It's complicated. Patriotism, however, ignores the bad while accentuating the good, just like a mother when she discusses her child's behavior with the school principal.

A Christian Perspective

So, given the complexity of the patriotism question, what can Christianity offer to help us navigate this issue? First off, it's important to understand that Jesus himself lived during a time of rising patriotism. How the Roman occupation must have aggravated the Jews of Jesus' day! They believed God had given them the Promised Land when Joshua led them in, over a millennium before the Romans came. They must have thought, "How dare these uncircumcised Gentiles take God's land from His chosen people? Who do they think they are?" Since religion and politics were not separate realms in their culture, discussions about politics were inherently religious as well. They believed God had delivered them

time and again from Egyptian ethnic cleansing, from Persian genocide, from Seleucid infanticide, just to list three examples. Each time God saved His people, they memorialized the event with a festival (i.e. Passover, Purim, and Chanukah). Celebrating these annual holidays ensured future generations would remember the remarkable feats of their covenant God. Passover, in particular, became a rallying point for nationalism, a fact the Roman governors took seriously in the time of Jesus. The Roman soldiers looked down from their perch in the Antonia fortress while countless pilgrims from all over the world brought lambs to slaughter in memory of when God brought the powerful Egyptians to their knees through the ten plagues. Looking up and seeing Roman soldiers at the ready must have exacerbated tensions as pious Jews couldn't help but make the connection between their current masters and their time of slavery in Egypt.

Revolts and protest movements broke out both before the period of Jesus' ministry and afterwards. It was only thirty years after his crucifixion that the Jews declared independence from the Roman Empire, which led to the great Jewish War. It took the Romans some 60,000 soldiers to defeat the Jews, resulting in a body count twice the American Civil War not to mention the enslavement of 100,000 survivors, and even the destruction of God's temple. What I'm saying is Jesus lived in a turbulent time with lots of patriotism swirling around so he can help us navigate this issue. The

question on peoples' minds was how to deal with the Roman occupation.

To entrap Jesus, they asked him publicly, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" (Mark 12.14). Jesus asked them for a coin, which they handed him. He inquired, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" (Mark 12.16). They said it was Caesar's image on the coin. Jesus responded, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12.17). This answer dumbfounded them, probably because of how well it avoided the carefully laid traps on either side of their question. Jesus endorsed giving Caesar his own money back, but he simultaneously taught that we should not compromise on giving God what we owe Him. We see the same position on taxes later when Paul writes, "For the authorities are ministers of God...Pay to all what is owed them: taxes to whom taxes are owed...respect to whom respect is owed" (Rom 13.6-7). Peter likewise says, "Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pet 2.17). Thus, Christianity teaches compliance even if the government is a foreign occupying force, while simultaneously recognizing that God is over all. So long as the government upholds justice, it is the servant of God (Rom 13.4), but when it makes demands that defy what God says, we must always prioritize our allegiance to God's kingdom.

After Jesus' resurrection, the missionary, Paul, travelled to Thessalonica, spreading the kingdom gospel message

over three weeks. He primarily preached in the synagogue and was able to persuade a number of folks, both Jews and Greeks, that “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” Out of jealousy, some stirred up a mob that went to Jason’s house, where Paul and Silas had been staying. Since they couldn’t find them, they dragged Jason and some others to the authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). Paul was preaching that Jesus was the Christ, and they equated that with saying Jesus was a king. Furthermore, they correctly perceived that such a claim violated the decrees of Caesar. I fear we have depoliticized Jesus because we have bought the myth that religion and politics are two mutually exclusive realms. Perhaps this is because words like “Christ” and “Lord” have lost their zing. Many of us think “Christ” is Jesus’ last name and “Lord” is synonymous with Savior. However, Christ is just the Greek way of saying messiah—the title for the one God anoints to rule the world as king. It is inherently political, and both the Jews and the Romans knew it. In fact, this was precisely how the Sanhedrin was able to force Pilate’s hand to order Jesus crucified.

John 19:12-16

From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” ...He said to the Jews,

“Behold your king!” They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your king?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Thus, Jesus was and remains not only a religious man but also a political figure. To be a king is to be a political leader. Consequently, it should not surprise us when situations arise forcing us to choose between God’s kingdom and our earthly nation. This has happened throughout the history of Christianity. The empire of the day executed Jesus for claiming to be the king of the Jews; they beheaded Paul for proclaiming Jesus as the rightful Lord of the world; they crucified Peter for preaching Jesus as resurrected messiah. Though they did not threaten the empire’s collection of taxes nor express disrespect towards the governing authorities, the empire still executed them. The blood of the martyrs flows deep and wide from empires to monarchies to caliphates.

One early example worthy of mention is Polycarp, the overseer of the church of Smyrna in the second century. The government tracked him down and arrested him when he was already a very old man. He stood there before the Roman proconsul in the arena while a mob was calling for his blood. Here is how their conversation went:

Proconsul: “Have respect for your age. Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent; say, ‘Away with the atheists!’”

Polycarp: (Motioning toward the people in the stadium) “Away with the atheists!”

Proconsul: “Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ.”

Polycarp: “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Proconsul: “Swear by the genius of Caesar.”

Polycarp: “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing.”

Proconsul: “Persuade the people.”

Polycarp: “You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God, as long as it does us no harm; but as for these, I do not think they are worthy, that I should have to defend myself before them.”¹⁸

What a fascinating exchange! How should we classify Polycarp? He is not a revolutionary, nor is he a loyalist. He will not swear by Caesar, nor will he deny that Jesus is his king. However, he believes that the very man who is about to give the order to burn him alive is appointed by God and so should receive proper respect. Polycarp’s

allegiance is firmly with his heavenly king, but this loyalty has earthly ramifications. In the end, Polycarp faced torture and martyrdom because he couldn’t hedge on his kingdom citizenship.

How should kingdom citizenship affect our lives today, especially as it relates to patriotism? I don’t think it means we can’t be patriotic, but it certainly limits it. It’s proper to feel an attachment to one’s homeland and gratitude for a country that enables human flourishing. The bible never speaks against loving one’s land. It’s appropriate to feel gratitude towards your native country, especially if it provided you with a stable government, access to education, and employment opportunities. However, at its heart Christianity is transnational, embracing believers from every tribe, nation, and language (Rev 5.9). So eat your apple pie, have a Super Bowl party, launch fireworks in July, but remember that God’s kingdom is “über alles, über alles in der Welt,” that is, “over all, over all in the world.”

¹⁸ Martyrdom of Polycarp 9.2-10.2 trans. Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 316-7.

Afterword

In this short book, we've looked at six cultural currents that are constantly tugging on all of us:

1. Hyper-individualism
2. Tolerance
3. Progress
4. Scientism
5. Consumerism
6. Patriotism

I have been careful not to dismiss the good aspects of each while simultaneously recognizing their problems. My aim with this book was not so much to thoroughly ferret out every way in which the world nudges us, but to model an approach of sober discernment. Most of us default into either jumping on the bandwagon or hiding out in the hermit's hut. Neither of these strategies will stay faithful to Jesus' instruction to be in the world but not of it. Here are our Lord's words, describing the balance he wants for us to have:

John 17.14-18

14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not

of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

In the end our goal is to be like Jesus. If no one would ever call you "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" then perhaps you've gone too far towards hermitage (Luke 7.34). But, if you primarily spend time with unbelievers and you think just like them, then you've climbed atop the bandwagon careening down to the pit of destruction. So, if we want to engage with non-Christians we should make an effort to understand them, and not just for the purpose of criticizing them or assuring ourselves. We need to genuinely care about the plight of our fellow human being. We must listen carefully to the longings of their hearts. Once we do that, we can we present the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. May God help you as you endeavor to stand for him today.

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