



Contemporary Issues Discussion Guide

ED CYZEWSKI

To My Grandparents Edward and Regalada Cyzewski

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FIRST THOUGHTS

What's your story? What follows is a thin slice of what makes me who I am.

I was raised in the northeast part of the United States on the northeast edge of Philadelphia in a middle-class family. In 2005, I moved to the southwest corner of Vermont, where I live in a small town down the road from Norman Rockwell's old house. My chances of running into a bear versus a person in my backyard are fifty-fifty.

Yes, my world is pretty rural. So rural that while cell phone companies crisscross even war-torn nations on the African continent with coverage, in my corner of the countryside, cell phones often only serve as emergency lights. In fact, that's exactly what we did with our cell phone once.¹ And we need a satellite dish just to get sluggish Internet.

I'm also a disgruntled Republican who wanders between the Democratic and Republican parties, valuing and despising parts of each. My occasional criticism of Republican policies stems more from the power that Republicans have enjoyed recently. Yet Democrats have their own catalogue of mistakes that deserve critique and scrutiny from Christians.

Your story might be a lot like mine, or it might be vastly different.

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE

I'm giving you a glimpse into my story because who we are significantly affects what we believe. That includes the views we hold when it comes to

theology. Who I am means that I can't pretend to have an objective, unbiased perspective about where I land theologically.

That's important for you to know as you begin this discussion guide, which serves as an accompaniment to the book *Coffeehouse Theology*. The goal of that book is to explore why and how it's essential that we do our job as Christians to learn from our own contexts and the contexts of others as we form theology in today's world. The goal of this guide is to help us start doing it. Theology influences how we approach the issues of our time, and in the following pages I want all of us to wrestle with the implications of theology in everyday life.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

To accomplish the goal of creating an applied theology that speaks to important issues Christians face today, I've organized each of the twelve sessions of this book as follows:

Terminology

Each session begins with a brief definition of the topic. In order to make these definitions as neutral as possible, yet also as contemporary as possible, I've adapted them from *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopedia written collaboratively by volunteers from around the world. The idea is to provide a snapshot of how current culture defines these terms. However, I urge you and your discussion group to question whether these definitions are too broad or narrow, to seek out additional sources for the meanings of these terms, and to discuss and arrive at your own definitions.

Ponder This

I've compiled the voices of historic Christians, global theologians, and a number of my friends and fellow bloggers who have been a part of my own theological growth. Although not a complete representation of the diverse Christian voices in our history and in our world, these men and women from a variety of countries and continents speak to the application of theology to some of the major issues in our world today.

Quote Interlude

I've included a few short quotes on each topic to further spark your thinking and to broaden the voices addressing each topic. Also, sometimes the pithiness of these quotes offers a humorous or a sobering take on the topic that the longer "Ponder This" excerpts miss.

My Thoughts

After examining the views of others from their context, I provide "My Thoughts," a commentary on the various contributions to each issue along with some insights from Scripture. Keep in mind that I'm writing from my own American (as in the United States of America) and New Englander perspective—rather than feigning a comprehensive knowledge of these complex issues—because all theology takes place within the limits of our own experiences in a particular context.

Your Thoughts

Each session ends with a series of discussion questions and ways to apply the teachings of Scripture and the insights of others to your own contexts. These aren't just "scan the session and fill in the blanks" questions. Rather, the goal is to push your boundaries a bit—to wrestle with the topic yourself and with your own group. That group might be just an informal gathering of friends, a small group from your church, a Sunday school class, or all the members of a house church.

Most of these "Your Thoughts" sections also include at least one question that involves research, contacting a local expert, or inviting a representative of an organization to speak to your Christian community. I challenge you to follow through on some of these. As a regular participant in the nonprofit organizations of my own community, I've discovered a treasure store of knowledge and experience on social justice and social action. One of the primary barriers to Christian social action is ignorance, and I believe the nonprofit sector can be a major player in reconnecting the church with its calling to identify with the poor. Keep in mind that the nonprofits in your area are the local experts; it would be foolish to overlook their place in our Christian mission.

ABOUT THE TOPICS

Regarding my selection of topics, I've asked theologians, Christian leaders, theology bloggers, and friends about the most important issues facing society today. I admit that my list isn't complete at all,² but hopefully it will move readers in the right direction for their own pursuit of contextual theology. The best I can offer is an honest appraisal of the world as I see it, while never assuming that my American treatment of these complex social and theological issues is the final answer. I recognize that I'm overlooking some significant issues, so I welcome additional discussion on my website <http://inamirrordimly.com>. For example, a wide range of sub-topics under the field of social justice are worthy of their own book, not to mention issues such as the AIDS crisis in Africa, the prison system, homelessness, abortion, education, the immigration woes of America, and the list could go on and on. We could also dig into weighty theological issues such as redemption, the work of the Holy Spirit, and divine foreknowledge. In choosing the topics in this guide, I'm simply addressing a few issues that I recognize as important but often overlooked in the American context. If we can at least learn how to start applying our theology to the issues presented in this guide, we'll be better prepared to address the rest of the issues we may face.

I'M NOT ALWAYS "FAIR"

I want to emphasize that while I do my best to be charitable and fair in presenting views other than my own for each of the topics in this guide, I would do readers a great disservice by feigning disinterest or an ability to be completely fair. In the interest of laying my cards on the table, I'll say this:

My theology is fairly conservative within the evangelical camp, yet it could be described most technically as post-conservative and emerging. I'm fully aware that I simply can never do justice to the broad scope of Christian voices in the world today, especially my brothers and sisters in Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches and in mainline denominations. Once again, this book is a first step toward greater diversity of our theology as we apply it to our lives. When I believe that certain policies or beliefs run counter to the

teachings of Scripture, I don't disguise my opinion but speak it clearly. Of course when we're dealing with the printed word, writers sometimes misrepresent themselves. While I want to challenge you to think about some tough topics, I never want to be combative or to drive a wedge into the body of Christ. I apologize in advance for any offense I might cause. If you take a different view from the one I take, I urge you to work out your thoughts in the discussion section, and my blog is also available to address angles or issues that I've likely overlooked. Provided that I have time and that the discussion is constructive and civil, I'll happily post appropriate comments from anyone who feels overlooked or misrepresented, along with my response. Drop me a note on my blog (<http://inamirrordimly.com>), and I'll do my best to respond to as many comments as possible.

THE PRESENT-FUTURE

You might also notice that the “already—not yet” tension of the kingdom of God is present throughout this guide. For example, I believe that God's ultimate goal of peace—turning swords into plowshares—for human history should tell us something about how God wants us to live today. Holding such a view is no doubt tricky. Of course, we can't assume that we can somehow bring about heaven on earth. At the same time, we can't simply sit on our hands and wait for God to act.

Scripture speaks of this age as a foretaste, and I believe that the in-breaking of God into our world means we must take the goals of God seriously, even if they're not completely fulfilled in the here and now. By carefully walking the line between the two possible extremes, Christians today can join God in his kingdom work already taking place in our world.

ONWARD

Now that I've explained myself, outlined the plan of this guide, perhaps made you a bit uncomfortable, and issued a call to action, I truly hope that you enjoy the discussions that follow!

Ed Czerwinski

Session 1

SOCIAL JUSTICE

TERMINOLOGY

Social justice refers to the concept of justice in every aspect of society. It's generally thought of as a situation in which individuals and groups are afforded fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society. However, different proponents of social justice hold different interpretations of what constitutes fair treatment and an impartial share.¹

PONDER THIS

Lucille Sider Dayton: from Wisdom of the Daughters

Author's note: The story of William and Catherine Booth is one of the more impressive examples of Christians who committed themselves not only to preach the gospel but also to bring about the justice and righteousness of God in their society. This husband and wife team labored in Christian ministry as preachers in mid-1800s England and eventually started the Salvation Army in 1878. Lucille Sider Dayton introduces us to William and Catherine's work among the poor.

Catherine was at ease with the rich as well as the poor. William had been reluctant to tackle the intellectuals of London until her success there convinced them in 1865 to open a mission which became the Salvation Army in 1878. Catherine preached to royalty and did not hesitate to lobby with Queen Victoria for changes in oppressive laws. She fearlessly castigated the wealthy for their irresponsibility to the poor: "Mr. Moneymaker may keep

scores of employees standing wearily 16 hours per day . . . and on salaries so small that all hope of marriage or home is denied them.”

At a time in England when the poor were without allies, Catherine and William Booth joined them. They opened inexpensive clothing and food stores; they started programs for prisoners, giving them the option of prison or a Salvation Army agency; they built orphanages for the homeless children, homes for unwed mothers, food and shelter depots for transients, labor bureaus for the unemployed; and they fought to change oppressive laws. Through mass meetings and a petition with 343,000 signatures, the Salvation Army was responsible for the Criminal Law Amendment which raised the age of consent in the white slave traffic from thirteen to sixteen.²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is in an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

“It would be nice if the poor were to get even half of the money that is spent in studying them.”

BILL VAUGHAN

“Love and business and family and religion and art and patriotism are nothing but shadows of words when a man’s starving.”

O. HENRY

“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

MAHATMA GANDHI

PONDER THIS***Leonardo Boff: from "The Trinity as Good News for the Poor"***

We need to go beyond the understanding of Trinity as logical mystery and see it as a saving mystery. The Trinity has to do with the lives of each of us, our daily experiences, our struggles to follow our conscience, our love and joy, our bearing the sufferings of the world and the tragedies of human existence; it also has to do with the struggle against social injustice, with efforts at building a more human form of society, with the sacrifices and martyrdoms that these endeavors so often bring. If we fail to include the Trinity in our personal and social odyssey, we shall have failed to show the saving mystery, failed in evangelization. If oppressed believers come to appreciate the fact that their struggles for life and liberty are also those of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working for the Kingdom of glory and eternal life, then they will have further motives for struggling and resisting; the meaning of their efforts will break out of the restricting framework of history and be inscribed in eternity, in the heart of the absolute Mystery itself. We are not condemned to live alone, cut off from one another; we are called to live together and to enter into the communion of the Trinity. Society is not ultimately set in its unjust and unequal relationships, but summoned to transform itself in the light of the open and egalitarian relationships that obtain in the communion of the Trinity, the goal of social and historical progress. If the Trinity is good news, then it is so particularly for the oppressed and those condemned to solitude.³

MY THOUGHTS

If you look back through the pages of history, Christians often made significant strides in righting the wrongs of society. In the past hundred years, however, many American Christians have lost their vision for social action. While a shift like this is complex and the exact causes are no doubt numerous, I see two main reasons why Christians—including myself—have lost our practical, social-justice edge.

First, many conservatives and evangelicals define Christianity as a doctrine to affirm or believe rather than a faith that we live out and

demonstrate in practical ways. In a class on intertestamental literature at Jerusalem University College, my professor chided Christians today for separating the beliefs of Christianity from the actual practice of righteousness. We toured the teachings of the Old Testament and Jewish writings from the time between Malachi and Matthew, especially the exhortations to give alms in the book of Tobit (a book all American Christians should read). These writings clearly link faith with a righteous way of living. This professor summed up his talk by calling us gnostics, a heretical group that believed secret religious knowledge is all that is necessary to be saved. After considering our simplistic “say the prayer to be saved” understanding of the gospel, we had to admit that he had a point.

Second, our theology of the end times—made popular by the *LEFT BEHIND* series—that focuses on the Rapture or escape from an earth engulfed by God’s fiery judgment, hasn’t exactly helped us remain active in social justice issues. This relatively recent theological phenomenon gained a solid footing in America⁴ after the Civil War, as some Christians shelved the myths of progress and the gradual advent of God’s kingdom. Instead, they began to view the world as hopelessly shattered and doomed for judgment. Salvation became synonymous with escaping the world. And conveniently, as Christians lost sight of their role in creation, the industrial revolution came along. Not only was the world doomed, but we could also attain temporary prosperity by exploiting the earth’s resources until the Rapture. When God comes down to scrap our broken world, he won’t have to worry about destroying any of the precious resources in the ground, only the hordes of sinners engulfed in worldwide conflict against the tribulation force. Perhaps I’m overstating my point. But as someone who used to champion this view, I think we need to wrestle with its implications even if they aren’t exactly verbalized and stated outright.

The mission of the Booths in starting the Salvation Army provides just one example of Christians uniting faith with social justice. Even in the early church, where Christians expected Jesus to return at any moment, believers distinguished themselves by addressing the needs of the poor in addition to remaining faithful amid persecution. Julian the Apostate, Roman emperor from AD 361–363, wrote of Christians who allegedly threatened Roman

imperial authority by, of all things, caring for the poor: “These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their agapae, they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes.”⁵ On another occasion, this same emperor wrote:

Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love-feasts, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes a contempt for our gods.⁶

Even through Julian’s negative characterization we can see that the early church went beyond simply preaching a message of repentance. Recognizing that the poor and those who hunger and thirst for justice are blessed, the early Christians stepped in where the government remained aloof.

While the Booths worked to meet almost every need imaginable among the poor, another Christian of the time, George Müller, worked tirelessly to provide orphanages for children in Bristol, England. Some counts place the number of children under his care at more than 10,000. With a simple reliance on God and the guidance of Scripture, Müller transformed the lives of thousands of children otherwise neglected by society.

Although Christians haven’t always served as shining examples in the realm of social justice, a number of contemporary Christian leaders are working toward justice in their communities. One is Shane Claiborne⁷, author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, a member of the Simple Way community (www.thesimpleway.org), and a resident of the Potter’s House in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Members of this faith community commit themselves to prayer, worship, and the study of Scripture, while also tutoring children, distributing food, and partnering with local nonprofit organizations.

The word *poor* comes up nearly 180 times in the NIV translation of the Bible. Throughout the books of the Law (especially Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy), God continually makes provisions for the poor of the land,

including leaving parts of the harvest in the field for the poor, returning all land to the original owners after fifty years, and giving loans without interest. Conditions deteriorate during the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the prophets rail against the corruption of the rulers who exploit the poor of the land. The writer of Proverbs states, “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (14:31), while the prophet Isaiah takes particular interest in God as a refuge for the poor (see Isaiah 14:30; 25:4). The New Testament continues these themes, with caring for the poor particularly prominent in the Luke-Acts narrative, not to mention that pesky passage in James 2 rebuking Christians for neglecting the poor and calling their faith useless without works. James says:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

When I was in seminary, my fellow students and I joked with one another at parting, “Keep warm and well fed.” In essence, we were making light that our heady theological study didn’t always translate into Christian action. As our truthful little jab indicates, it’s disturbingly easy to be a Bible-reading Christian and attend church every Sunday yet fail to help the poor. I don’t believe that Christians are selfish or negligent. Rather, most of us are either ignorant of the biblical commands or paralyzed by a lack of knowledge about what action to take.

Even as I read about God’s concern for the poor, I can’t help thinking to myself, *I believe the right things and try to avoid sin — isn’t that enough?* Of course, this thought serves as a good start. But it certainly flies in the face of our Christian heritage—a heritage that places Christians in the forefront of working to bring about God’s justice to our world.

One way we can think differently so that our salvation prods us toward

action is by reframing our narrative. Instead of God's yanking us out of a world doomed to destruction, what if we took the incarnation as our starting point? God essentially invaded our world, bringing his kingdom rule that conquered evil, but didn't completely banish it. Jesus was serious when he declared that those who hunger and thirst for justice are blessed. As prosperous Americans, perhaps the key to enjoying that blessing is to hunger and thirst for justice to be delivered to others. We join God in his mission to bring about his saving rule and justice to our broken world, so we must struggle with the implications that mission places on our wealth, possessions, employment, worship, consumption, politics, and every other facet of life. Instead of a salvage mission, we can be a part of God's redemption mission.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Why would Christian ministers such as William and Catherine Booth dedicate so much time to meeting the physical needs of their society?
- Do you think that serving the poor changes the gospel message? How? How could it change the way you share that message?
- Do you agree that over the past hundred years many American Christians have lost their focus on social justice? Why or why not?
- Reread James 2:14-17. What actions can you and other Christians take to apply these words today? How does this list change depending on your context (for example, if you live in an urban, suburban, or rural environment)?
- Look into the history of a major worldwide Christian social justice organization such as the Salvation Army, World Vision, or Samaritan's Purse. Discuss what you learn about the role of Christians in the pursuit of social justice.

- What social issues need to be addressed in your context (poverty, homelessness, unemployment, drug use, alcoholism, poor education, medical care, heating assistance, and so on)? Use a concordance or an online search at www.biblegateway.com to look up related verses. Talk about what you learn and what actions you might take.
- Find a social justice or social action organization in your area and invite a representative to speak at your church or small group. Even if the representative isn't a believer, ask that person to address what Christians can do to help the organization fulfill its mission.

Session 2

RACISM

TERMINOLOGY

Racism has many definitions, the most prevalent today being the belief that human beings consist of more than one race, with members of some races believing they are superior or inferior to members of other races.¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines racism in the following manner: “The belief that there are characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to each race.”²

PONDER THIS

Christianity Today: *from “One Last Gotham Visit for Billy Graham”*

[Billy] Graham further irked some Southern fundamentalists by inviting Martin Luther King Jr. to give an opening prayer at the crusade. . . .

Fundamentalist patriarch Bob Jones Sr. . . . defended segregation against King and warned Graham of the consequences of associating with the civil-rights leader. “Dr. Graham has declared emphatically that he would not hold a meeting anywhere, North or South, where the colored people and the white people would be segregated in the auditorium,” Jones said, “and I do not think any time in the foreseeable future the good Christian colored people and the good Christian white people would want to set aside an old established social and religious custom.”³

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“Lukewarm acceptance is more bewildering than outright rejection.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

“Racism, in the first place, is a weapon used by the wealthy to increase the profits they bring in by paying Black workers less for their work.”

ANGELA DAVIS

PONDER THIS

Anthony Smith: from An Emergent Manifesto of Hope

Dealing with the racial segregation of Christ’s body in overt biblical language such as Pentecost is not an attempt to bring external issues into the fold and give them Christian garb. Looking at this issue through the prism of Pentecost equips us to think more redemptively about it. . . .

Oftentimes the issue of race is seen as an issue for those who have an interest in it. Very rarely do we see it as a fundamental issue—an issue that is deeply grafted into the heart of the gospel’s call. That some of us see the issue of race as optional only reveals how wedded our theologizing is to the old age that crucified Christ. The issue of race is not optional. We must engage. We must claim the reality of racial fragmentation and the quest for racial/ethnic harmony in the body as a part of the core of the gospel. We must wrestle the concern over racial realities away from conservative and liberal ideologues and political pundits. We need to recognize that this issue is, at heart, a gospel issue.⁴

PONDER THIS

Paul Metzger: from “Race in the American Church Today”

Today we live with an updated version of segregation. Many Americans, including evangelicals, believe that race barriers and their impact on class are in the past because we no longer live under Jim Crow legislation, with its enforcement of separate living quarters, as well as separate public bathrooms and drinking fountains, based on the color of one’s skin. I would counter

that segregation is still a fact of life: though it is perhaps no longer based on enforced legal structures, it is based on the norms of consumer preference. Intentionally or not, many evangelical churches are guilty of setting up structures of church growth that foster segregation, such as appealing to consumer appetites and the like. . . . We need to leave the segregated table and its consumerist bacchanalia and gather at the table of repentance and reconciliation.⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Racism is a difficult topic to tackle in just a few words. This dark blight on our society and in our world appears in many forms, often simmering beneath the surface—out of sight yet still driving decisions, policies, life, and death.

As a white man, I can hardly begin to understand the challenges and suffering faced by African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Irish, and other immigrant and minority groups in America. On a larger scale, the racist policies of western colonialism destroyed the fabric of many societies around the world, sometimes merging together unrelated people groups into countries. The disruption of traditional rulers by colonial powers created an indigenous power vacuum later filled by dictators who crushed the fledgling democracies the colonial rulers had dropped into place. On the American home front, racism continues to surge through politics, business, education, immigration, and just about every other part of life.

Race comes up repeatedly in the Bible. Beginning with conflicts such as the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery to the policies of the nation of Israel in the land of Canaan, the Old Testament presents a complex and messy picture where God opposes other nations because of their idolatry and corruption, while instructing the Israelites to treat people from other lands with mercy. While we find it difficult to piece together a unified ethic of race from the Old Testament, Jesus points his contemporaries—supposed experts on the Old Testament—to the higher road of justice, mercy, and love that runs throughout these ancient books.

The writers of the New Testament lived in a world where racism and

oppression ran rampant. Luke and Matthew paid particular attention to their respective Gentile and Jewish readers, while Paul, Peter, and Barnabas repeatedly encountered the complexities of making one people out of the Jews and Gentiles who hated one another. While Paul provided some regulations for Christian slaves and slave owners (see 1 Corinthians 7:20-22 and Ephesians 6:5-9), he challenged the accepted norms of his time by pleading with Philemon for the release of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Some New Testament interpreters believe the direction of biblical interpretation indicates that Paul was challenging the norms of his time, creating a situation wherein slavery could not last long.⁶ We should also keep in mind that slavery in New Testament times didn't fall along strictly racial lines. Instead, slavery was typically connected to economic circumstances and military defeat.⁷ These circumstances made slavery a terrible tragedy but not typically a matter of race. In fact, the word most commonly translated "slave" in many of our English versions of Scripture is sometimes better translated "bondservant." While these individuals weren't necessarily free to come and go, their status was more like lifetime employees than slaves.

Perhaps the definitive biblical statement regarding race—and while we're at it, issues of gender, nationality, and any other element of this world that divides us—is Paul's letter to the "foolish Galatians," where the apostle argues that Christ demolishes our earthly divisions. He states, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). While Paul's words refer to Christians, this theology represents God's present and coming kingdom, the end that all history is heading toward.

The lordship of Christ changes our human relationships. In Christ, a reconciling takes place—a reconciliation that includes race. No matter what social customs we follow, the kingdom of God provides a new identity that overcomes all other factors through the clothing of Christ.

As I look back at the controversy Billy Graham stirred up by establishing partnerships with mainline churches and with Martin Luther King, I can't help but realize how we've tamed the portrait of this giant of the

Christian faith. Far from simply preaching the gospel, Graham broke from the establishment and followed the Lord's leading for a new course, a path that included denominational and racial reconciliation. Even though we don't think of him as an activist, Graham did something incredible in his own time when he reached across the breach between fundamentalists and liberals,⁸ and between conservative theologians and proponents of the social gospel. He wasn't satisfied with preaching to whites alone. And he refused to minister alongside only conservative theologians. Billy Graham challenged the cultural norms of that era and forged a new way forward for Christianity. Some might say that he didn't accomplish enough in the social arena, but considering what he was up against, Graham certainly provides a valuable example for us as we face our own challenges.

By tackling the connections between consumer culture and race, Paul Metzger speaks to the racial problems facing the church today—problems that Anthony Smith reminds us are inherently tied to Pentecost and the gospel. Unfortunately, the very way churches recruit new members through niche marketing to particular groups only contributes to the racial divides within the church.⁹ Perhaps you've even heard the expression that Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated times in America. Perhaps we can attribute some of this to the style and traditions of worship. But for the most part, many Christians remain unaware of the very real racial divides that exist. The fact that a major Christian publishing house recently published—and swiftly recalled—Sunday school materials that included an assortment of offensive Asian stereotypes reveals that racism in fact survives within Christian ranks.¹⁰

As Christians, we often try to focus on simply preaching salvation in Christ while avoiding racism. Within this often undetected wedding of Christianity to some of the racist elements in our culture, as Smith points out, our racial errors clang and ring out so loud no one can hear what we are preaching. As a result, we miss out on the basic reconciliation that should come about because of the gospel.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- What types of racism exist in your community? Don't answer this glibly—give it some serious thought!
- How do economics and fear connect with issues of race?
- How would you interpret and apply Paul's statement in Galatians 3:26-28? Do you think I've misapplied it?
- In what ways do Christian communities contribute to the racial divide through their outreach programs and ministries?
- What changes would your own Christian community need to make in order to bring about greater racial reconciliation?
- What cultural assumptions about race in your context need to be challenged?
- Do you know Christians from other ethnic groups? If you do, invite them to dialogue with you about some of the issues raised in this chapter. If you don't, dig online for Christian bloggers who are from a different race than you. Read what they write and try dropping in to comment from time to time. Some places to start: <http://postmoderneegro.wordpress.com>, www.djchuang.com, or www.shermankuek.net.

Session 3

GENDER

TERMINOLOGY

Within the social sciences, *gender* refers to the differences between men and women, more specifically, to the social differences known as gender roles. This is distinct from the term *sex* in that *sex* most often refers to actual biological expressions of male and female, whereas *gender* refers primarily to one's concept of oneself as male or female and the roles one claims as a result. Though many historical ideologies purport that gender roles arise directly from the biological differences between the sexes, other schools of thought, primarily feminism, refute this claim, professing instead that such roles are purely socially constructed.¹

PONDER THIS

Makeesha Fisher: from "Why I AM an Egalitarian"

I have noticed that when people from conservative evangelical camps start talking about the gender issue, they often demonstrate a reluctance to take up with groups who, in their traditions, are generally rejected as liberal in either a political, cultural, or theological sense. In other words, men from a conservative evangelical background who no longer subscribe to a theology that subjugates women still will not call themselves egalitarians and still deny feminism respect because when they did subscribe to their previous theology, they were given misinformation about those groups.

Recently, I found this happening with the term *egalitarian*. I personally call myself and my marriage egalitarian. I am not concerned about whether others do, but I do get concerned when the beliefs and heart of egalitarianism are misrepresented. Let's start with a working definition of *egalitarianism* courtesy of Wikipedia, which has a pretty good section on the issue:

Egalitarianism (derived from the French word *égal*, meaning *equal* or *level*) is the moral doctrine that people should be treated as equals, in some respect. Generally it applies to being held equal under the law, the church, and society at large. In actual practice, one may be considered an egalitarian in most areas listed above, even if not subscribing to equality in every possible area of individual difference. For example, one might support equal rights in race matters but not in gender issues, or vice versa.

Egalitarianism is essentially the philosophical position that all humans, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. deserve the same human rights while maintaining their distinct gender, race, ethnicity, etc. No person should have to become something else or give up what is inherently theirs in order to be treated with dignity and equality. In regard to gender in the context of Christianity, this basically means that:

- Women should not be denied ordination, theological education, or be treated as “less than” in board meetings, conversations, etc. simply because they were born female.
- A woman should not be treated as an object, a novelty, or a resource.
- A woman should be allowed to maintain her distinct gender identity (whatever that means for her) and should not be expected or required to sacrifice that in order to obtain a voice, role, or position.
- A woman should not be required to bow to gender roles assigned by society and should not be castigated when she chooses a path that is seen as “male.”
- A woman is a complete individual without a man, and a man is a complete individual without a woman, but as humanity we are at our

best when men and women are both encouraged to be fully who they are in community—men and women together with full equality in the eyes of each other and the community at large collaborating with Christ.

- Women do not owe men anything on the basis of their gender.

I am an egalitarian because I believe in equality of human rights and opportunity and there is nothing in the foundational principles and meaning of egalitarianism that contradicts this as far as I can see. I have an egalitarian marriage because neither my husband nor myself is “in charge” or has the final say in decisions. We lead in our strengths, always submitting to one another mutually, exalting the other. We strive both to love and to serve the other and in our weaknesses, we yield to the other. We need the other to experience the fullness of what we have together, but we are also complete in our individual identity with God—which is also the mystery of the Trinity. So why we can’t accept this mystery in Christianity in regard to gender is beyond me.

There are some who lay claim to the term *egalitarian* who hold ideas I do not agree with. There are some women who lay claim to the term *feminist* that I don’t agree with. But that does not take away, in any form or fashion, from the foundational tenets of egalitarianism or feminism.

Finally, a few things egalitarianism isn’t:

- Nowhere in egalitarianism is it stated that men and women aren’t different.
- Nowhere is it stated that women should seek to battle men and win as the dominant gender (that would betray the very definition of *egalitarian* and therefore no longer be egalitarian).
- Nowhere is it stated that women should be encouraged to “be like men” (whatever that means anyway).
- Nowhere does it state that we are at war with complementarians.

I think this is important because egalitarianism speaks to the issue of justice. At this time, egalitarianism is really the only defined philosophy that

speaks strongly to the issue of equality in terms of gender. It does justice a disservice when those who believe in a form of gender equality attempt to dismantle or discredit egalitarianism when they have nothing to offer in its place. Can the philosophy of egalitarianism be improved? Yes. But to attempt to improve upon it by first denying it would be dangerous because many women are still feeling the injustice of oppression in and outside the Christian world and have found hope amongst those who call themselves egalitarian.²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mat or a prostitute.”

REBECCA WEST

“All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority belong to the private-school stage of human existence where there are sides, and it is necessary for one side to beat another side.”

VIRGINIA WOOLF

“Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote. The relative positions to be assumed by man and woman in the working out of our civilization were assigned long ago by a higher intelligence than ours.”

GROVER CLEVELAND

MY THOUGHTS

I wanted to include my friend Makeesha in this volume because women both inside and outside of Christian circles can face incredibly frustrating circumstances, especially when excluded from leadership or other important positions because of blanket stereotypes labeling them as too emotional, weak,

unable to lead, given to gossip, and so on. In fact, when a woman responds by exhibiting even the tiniest shred of anger at these labels, critics respond, “See, I told you women are too emotional and angry to be effective Christian leaders.” To a certain degree, women find themselves in an almost impossible position. So I asked Makeesha to contribute because I’ve found her a consistently fair voice in support of equality for women. She never comes across as enraged, even if she has a good reason to be angry. And she works closely with her husband in the ministry, living out what they preach.

Among Christians, the status of women is extremely complex. Interestingly, some Christians who disagree with gender equality actually end up living day to day in much the same way as an egalitarian such as Makeesha or me. They find a way for a husband to be in authority over his wife without being abusive or harmful to her. I’ve seen several husbands lovingly care for their wives; approaching their position as “head” of the home from a standpoint of responsibility and a burden they must bear rather than a power to wield.

Still, a culture of male headship exists in some Christian circles that ties a cultural understanding of male headship directly with a supposedly biblical interpretation of gender relations. One Christian told me before my marriage that the man has the “primary calling” in the home. And after a wedding where the pastor drove home the principal position of the husband, several Christian women shared with me afterward that they were deeply troubled by the pastor’s theology.

In confronting this struggle to determine the relationship of husbands and wives or men and women, the Bible offers a complex picture. Paul clearly makes statements about the separate places of men and women in Christian worship, not to mention his general claim that husbands are in the place of “head” over wives. In another passage, Paul seems to imply interdependence between men and women—saying that men were created first and that women were deceived by the serpent, yet insinuating that the scales have been balanced by the fact that men are born from women. Paul also refers to prominent women leaders within the church at the end of his epistles.

To further cloud the issue, influential women supported Jesus, and he repeatedly included women at key points of his ministry. For example, one of

the only times he blatantly revealed himself as the Messiah was in a conversation with an outcast Samaritan woman. In addition, he entrusted the proclamation of his resurrection to the women who followed him, particularly Mary Magdalene. Although Jesus didn't appoint women among his twelve disciples, we should acknowledge that he consistently pushed the boundaries of his time concerning women.

Today, we must try to wrestle with these biblical complexities. Do we take the few statements made by biblical writers as an exact model for the way we live today, or should we look for a redemptive trend in the way they related to the conventions of their times?³

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Look up Amnesty International at www.amnesty.org. What are some ways that women are undervalued in today's world?
- Read Ephesians 5 and pay attention to the comparison of wives to the church. What is Paul trying to say by drawing this connection? Do you think we can apply this passage to the issue of gender equality?
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Write out your own outline of Paul's reasoning here. How does this passage apply to discussions about gender equality?
- What challenges do women face in your context? What are some ways the Bible speaks to these challenges?
- Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of husband "headship" versus egalitarianism or equality in the home.
- How do you feel about women in Christian ministry, particularly about women serving as pastor? How important are these feelings and beliefs when you consider joining a church?

Session 4

HOMOSEXUALITY

TERMINOLOGY

Homosexuality can refer to attraction or sexual behavior between members of the same sex or to a specific sexual orientation, which encompasses a broader definition of the word that includes a person's concept of his or her sexuality—in other words, the ongoing emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to the same sex—outside the confines of actual sexual behavior. Homosexuality is contrasted with heterosexuality (attraction, behavior, or orientation between opposite sexes), bisexuality (both sexes), and asexuality (neither sex).¹

PONDER THIS

Jamie Arpin-Ricci: from emergentvoyageurs.blog.com

During high school, I became aware that my sexual orientation was not the same as that of the other guys I knew. Where they would joke about being disgusted by the very idea of each other naked, I didn't share that response (though I would pretend I did). When they would get distracted by the maturing figures of our female classmates, I would be drawn to the athlete forms of the guys. Before long I was confronted with the reality that I was different. While I had never acted on it, by my orientation, I realized, *I'm gay*.

That terrifying revelation came crashing down on me like the weight of the world. Here I was, a scrawny teenage boy who hated sports and loved

poetry, part of a traditional evangelical church in a rural community filled with farmers, hunters, and hockey players. Needless to say, at the best of times this is not an easy thing to come to terms with, let alone in such circumstances. It has been a tough journey since that day, but as you can see, this was by no means theoretical or abstract.

As most of you know, I am happily married to a beautiful Aussie girl. So, was it a passing phase, common to adolescent sexual development? No. Did God heal me, freeing me forever of the homosexual attractions? No. The fact is that my sexual orientation, while obviously having a healthy attraction for women, is still also drawn to the same sex. It is a daily reality that I live and wrestle with.

Beyond the struggle with the attraction, I also wrestle with the theological realities of this issue. Don't get me wrong; it is not that I am questioning the theology for personal reasons—I am very much in love with my wife, have a healthy sex life, and have no desire to embrace a different sexuality. Rather, it is not an uncommon occurrence in Christian history that our moral and theological confidence is more a reflection of cultural prejudices than biblical exegesis (i.e. slavery, women in ministry, etc.).

While he took a great deal of heat on the issue, I can understand and appreciate Brian McLaren's hesitancy to make sweeping public statements on homosexuality. His pastoral sensitivity, combined with his uncertainty on traditional interpretations of Scripture, cause him to pause in making a stand on the issue (this is my take on his position, so don't quote me on this). In many ways, though I understand some of what the critics say, I appreciate McLaren's stance.

Unfortunately, I do not have that freedom. To maintain an open mind and heart on the issue of homosexuality had (and has) deep-rooted implications for me. In order to move forward with my life, I had to decide which course to take and, for me, that meant deciding what I believe about the issue. Does this mean I have no uncertainty or confusion about it? Of course not. I am not sure I will ever truly be sure this side of heaven. However, I believe that practicing homosexuality is inconsistent with Christianity.

Please understand that it pains me deeply to make such a bold, sweeping statement. After all, wouldn't it be easier and smarter of me to simply say that

“for me it’s wrong”? Isn’t it enough to say that while I believe it is a choice I cannot make, I will not state it as a universal? Sure, it is only my conviction of what is true, and yes, I can be, have been, and will be wrong in many aspects of life and faith. Yet, by stating it in such relative terms while attempting to reflect a chastened certainty, I leave myself and others in a torturous position. Besides, if I say it is only true for me, am I not suggesting that it is a matter of personal choice, one I could have made as equally in the other direction?

Let me be clear here: I did not marry my wife because I had to come to terms with my beliefs about homosexuality. I married her because I love her, I am attracted to her and, should I decide today that I was wrong about this issue, it would not change for a minute my confidence that I am forever with the person I love more than anyone else in the world.

That being said, I also believe, and with far more conviction, that the church has failed miserably in our treatment of this issue and more specifically (and tragically) our treatment of the people who are homosexual, by orientation and/or by practice. Not everyone knows this about me, but not because I am ashamed or afraid to tell people. Rather, it is far easier than dealing with the awkwardness, ignorance, and judgment that is far too common when people learn about it. Even writing this is a major step out in vulnerability.

My hope in writing this is that in some small way, by sharing my story, Christians will begin to engage this issue with a sensitivity that this is a real issue that affects real people very personally. This is true for those who very publicly attack homosexuality as wrong but lose sight of the fragile and precious people for whom this is a daily reality. It is equally true for those who seek to be cautious about making moralizing judgments or absolute statements, but can add terrible uncertainty for those who are desperate to understand what to believe and what to do.²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“The Bible contains six admonishments to homosexuals and 362 admonishments to heterosexuals. That doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love heterosexuals. It’s just that they need more supervision.”

LYNN LAVNER

“What are you trying to protect heterosexual marriages from? There isn’t a limited amount of love in Iowa. It isn’t a non-renewable resource. If Amy and Barbara or Mike and Steve love each other, it doesn’t mean that John and Mary can’t.”

ED FALLON

MY THOUGHTS

Jamie does the church a tremendous service with his transparency and willingness to wrestle with this important topic. In many quarters, America has been torn asunder by individuals and groups who attempt to oversimplify this issue. For example, homosexuality threatens the unity of the Episcopal Church in the United States. And Americans list homophobia as one of the least attractive parts of Christianity.³ Even if extreme groups brandishing “God hates fags” signs are an exception to the norm, the most well-meaning churches can still alienate homosexuals.

Jamie touches on the most important topics the church must face today: the nature of homosexual desires (permanent or changing), the commitment to love people no matter what their sexual orientation, and the biblical witness about homosexuality. I personally believe this is one of the most challenging issues facing the church today.

As a resident of the state of Vermont, I face the issue of homosexuality on a regular basis. Vermont was among the first states to legalize homosexual civil unions, and it’s not uncommon to meet homosexual couples in churches. Because I know several homosexuals, I find dealing with the theology of this issue particularly daunting. I haven’t stood in their shoes, and I don’t know what challenges they face. And I’d rather not say someone is sinning unless I’m 100 percent sure. From David Sedaris’s humorous accounts of discovering homosexuality during his youth in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* to the story of Philip Yancey’s friend who could not overcome his desire for men in *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, I believe the issue of homosexuality is much more multifaceted than we think.

Can someone be freed from homosexual desires? Possibly. However, some

claim healing while others believe they are beyond healing. Still others say that trying to “heal” homosexuals is cruel. Have Christians made grievous errors in the past concerning seemingly clear statements in the Bible about issues such as slavery, women’s rights, and racism? Yes, we certainly have. Have Christians failed to love homosexuals in order to somehow protect the institution of marriage despite ridiculously high divorce rates? Unfortunately, again the answer is yes.

Perhaps the saddest part of the issue of homosexuality is the uniting of politics and religion. In America, Democrats embrace an activist homosexual agenda, while Republicans court socially conservative Christians and oppose legislation for gay rights under the premise of supporting the cause of the Christian right. Though Democrats might be guilty on some accounts of exploitation, many Christians have become pawns of the Republican party as politicians dangle the carrot of moral legislation in order to win elections. The 2004 presidential election might well have been decided by Republican efforts to place the “defense of marriage” from gay couples at the center of local and state debates, leaving two wars, health care, education, and countless other pressing issues out of the election’s spotlight. However, I believe that Republicans will never be able to do much of anything to ban gay marriages, and for that matter, I don’t believe many politicians ever intended to do much about it.⁴ Republican strategists simply rallied their base by raising this divisive issue, and many Christians gladly played along, blinded to the other issues worthy of their consideration.

This attempt to legislate “Christian” morality—rather than preaching the lordship of Jesus Christ and embodying the changes God brings to our society—isolates Christian Republicans from any real dialogue and discussion concerning homosexuality, a mistake many are working to correct. The fear of God’s retribution on a sinful nation (as in a nation that tolerates or even approves of homosexuality) and the allegiance to Republican policies make it nearly impossible for some Christians to love individuals who are homosexuals. While we must seriously wrestle with biblical texts prohibiting homosexual behavior—and Romans 1 does a very thorough job of classifying homosexual behavior as sin—we desperately need to drop the political visage of this issue. Though there may be political dimensions to consider,

Christians have a foremost responsibility to address the theological angle of this issue.

If homosexual behavior is a sin, there's no need to elevate it over any other sin that individuals commit. Instead, we need to approach it with compassion—we all are sinners, after all, and homosexuals face a difficult, lonely struggle—and a call to repentance and discipleship. If God wanted to rain down fiery judgment on America, many other grievous sins seem far more serious in the grand scheme than homosexuality. Christians have to do their theological homework in passages such as Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 in order to determine how we should approach homosexuality.

If some Christians believe that homosexual behavior is sin, and others believe it is accepted by God, where do we go with this issue? Let me describe where I've landed as a possible first step. I believe that people like Jamie who have homosexual desires must lead the discussion. As someone completely unfamiliar with this realm of desire, I'm content to work on creating a healthy space for discussions, and then to let those with firsthand knowledge take the floor. I can't speak for the different sides of this debate, but I'm committed to removing some of the clutter that hinders our discussions.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Read 1 Corinthians 6, paying particular attention to verse 9. Christians who approve of homosexual behavior interpret Paul's condemnation as a restriction on homosexual temple prostitutes. Why is this a valid or invalid interpretation of this passage?
- Write a brief (100–200 word) response to Jamie's essay. Does this glimpse into his life change your views about homosexuality?
- In Romans 1 (especially verses 24–27), Paul speaks a great deal about idolatry and its effects. How do you think this relates to the issue of homosexual behavior?

- Genesis 19 and Judges 19 both reference homosexual behavior in a wider context of gang rape and lawlessness. Explain why we should or should not consider these passages when discussing whether or not homosexual orientation is approved by the Bible.
- During his earthly ministry, Jesus spent time with the outcasts of the day. Do you think Christians today have made homosexuals into outcasts even if society accepts them? What, if anything, needs to change?
- Do you believe that political parties have used the issue of homosexuality to gain support for their candidates? How does this issue influence which party you support or which candidate receives your vote?
- Do you think that banning homosexual unions protects the institution of marriage? Aside from the issue of homosexuality, in what ways has society already damaged marriage? How has the church hurt the institution of marriage?
- Do an online search to find the writings of a Christian or call a Christian minister or theologian who takes a view opposite your own on homosexuality. Note how this person interprets biblical passages such as Romans 1 and write your own evaluation of this perspective.
- Provide an example from your own context about how Christians fail to show the love of Christ to individuals in the homosexual community. Why do you think this happens?
- In the “My Thoughts” section, I refuse to take a firm stand on this issue, and instead defer the conversation to Jamie. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
- Take some time to pray about the way you and your Christian community approach homosexuals. Do you welcome these

individuals even if you don't approve of their practices? What could you do to make them feel more welcome? Ask God to reveal ways you can more clearly live out the gospel in front of them.

Session 5

CONSUMERISM

TERMINOLOGY

Consumerism most often describes the tendency of a society to pursue material possessions beyond those actually needed for survival as a means to achieve happiness. In a purely economic sense, consumerism refers to economic policy that encourages consumption as a means to promoting economic growth or to the premise that consumer demand should drive production, rather than the other way around.¹

PONDER THIS

John Wesley: Money

If then a doubt should at any time arise in your mind concerning what you are going to expend, either on yourself or any part of your family, you have an easy way to remove it. Calmly and seriously inquire:

1. In expending this, am I acting according to my character? Am I acting herein, not as a proprietor, but as a steward of my Lord's goods?
2. Am I doing this in obedience to his Word? In what Scripture does he require me so to do?
3. Can I offer up this action, this expense, as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?

4. Have I reason to believe that for this very work I shall have a reward at the resurrection of the just?²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“Wealth is the parent of luxury and indolence, and poverty of meanness and viciousness, and both of discontent.”

PLATO

“The trouble with us in America isn’t that the poetry of life has turned to prose, but that it has turned to advertising copy.”

LOUIS KRONENBERGER

“Money won’t make you happy . . . but everybody wants to find out for themselves.”

ZIG ZIGLAR

“We have grown literally afraid to be poor. We despise anyone who elects to be poor in order to simplify and save his inner life. If he does not join the general scramble and pant with the money-making street, we deem him spiritless and lacking in ambition.”

WILLIAM JAMES

PONDER THIS

Ruth Padilla DeBorst: from “Liberate My People”

I don’t think it’s very useful to say, I’m sorry I have so much power. I wish I didn’t have it. Or for individual Americans to try to erase that inequality personally. You could step out of the grid, but the grid still exists. Rather, I think you need to say, *I do have power. Whom is it supposed to serve?*

The free-trade agreements between our countries are supposedly about giving people opportunity. There’s something to that: Part of human dignity is the capacity to work. But people need to be granted that option. How can free-trade agreements really be free when this country subsidizes its

agriculture and other industries in order to favor its own interests? American Christians can do something about this with their political power—by calling for trade agreements that are both free and fair.

But there is more to life than money and comfort. The resources some of these poor people have for coping with life and for understanding others make them very rich—in another currency. The best experiences, to me, of Americans that have joined us in Latin America have taken place when people have recognized that. They may come with wealth and education. But they encounter brothers and sisters with valuable strengths and insights they don't have, and they are willing to learn in order to partner in God's mission.³

PONDER THIS

William Dyrness: The Poor in Liberation Theology

[Gustavo] Guterrez goes on to elaborate . . . : “Christian poverty, an expression of love, is solidarity *with the poor* and is protest *against poverty*” (1973:300–301, his emphasis). Christian poverty in Latin America is solidarity and protest.

So reflection on poverty in Latin America is, in the first place, a part of the necessary commitment (they would argue the precommitment) that is a prerequisite to doing theology in that setting. The Gospel must be preached and Scriptures must be read from this point of view. This line of thinking has led them to define what is called the “preferential option for the poor.”

Liberation thinkers define this preference primarily in theological terms. That is, God, because of his justice and mercy, is drawn to the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez has argued recently that the real meaning of the poor is to be found in God himself. Since God is just and people are made in his image, when this image is effaced, God's glory is hidden. God is especially concerned about the poor, Guterrez notes, not because they are good, but because he is good. God loves the poor because he is God.⁴

MY THOUGHTS

“I'm so blessed.”

American Christians have been known to say this in reference to their possessions or to a particularly good situation in life. I caught myself doing

this when I found a good job two months after moving to Vermont without any real job prospects. Of course one “blessing” of gainful employment led to many others: a computer, fresh paint on the walls of our new home, a comfy sofa, and the list goes on. I sometimes sit in our small ranch house, look out to the mountains and river in our valley, and can’t help thinking of myself as blessed.

The narrative of American culture runs something like this: material possessions = blessed.

Of course I am overstating my point to a certain extent. My job, home, books, rabbits, and kayaks really do serve as blessings to some degree, even when one blessing (toothy rabbits) tries to destroy another (vulnerable lower-shelf books). However, Americans run into trouble when we speak of wealth and prosperity as clear-cut indicators of blessing. It never enters our minds that our wealth might be a hindrance when it comes to God’s kingdom. We forget about that rich, sullen young man in Matthew 19:16-30.

So what happens if we lose a home, if we’re forced to live in poverty because of unemployment, or if we don’t have the cash to go grocery shopping? Can we still claim to be blessed? Sure, the Bible says something about the poor being blessed (see Luke 6:20-21), but dealing with the possibility that we might be poor flies in the face of the prosperity narrative that dominates our consumer culture.

If Jesus really did command that rich young man to sell everything before becoming a disciple, we have some critical thinking ahead of us. “Get all you can” doesn’t work well with “give up all you have.” Jesus’ unfiltered words have a jolting effect on the sleepy narrative of the prosperity gospel that infects so many of us. All along, we’ve assumed that consumption is just a natural part of life and that God surely wants us to have more. Keep in mind that Jesus clearly did allow some of his disciples to hang on to their possessions and money (for example, the wealthy women who supported Jesus and his disciples; see Luke 8:1-3).

The consistent revelation throughout Scripture challenges us to surrender all that we have to God so that we serve God and God alone (see Proverbs 3:9). We can’t serve both God and money (see Ecclesiastes 5:10; Matthew 6:24), and, instead, should resolve ourselves to give as much as we can (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-15).

I can't say why Jesus challenged the rich young ruler to sell everything before following him, but I have to believe that Jesus was attacking something at the man's core. What would I say if Jesus issued this challenge to me? Maybe I'd bargain: "Just let me keep the laptop and high-speed Internet, and you can have the rest." I think I represent many Christians trapped in the prosperity gospel who simply don't know where to begin when juggling commitment between God and wealth. If writing a check to the church or another charity isn't enough, then Christian discipleship is far more difficult than we'd imagined.

While John Wesley provides some guidance for Christian consumers tempted to consume with abandon, the Latin American theologians quoted above provide a counter-narrative that flies in the face of the prevalent values in our country: God is on the side of the poor. We might put it this way: Many American Christians believe that wealth indicates blessing, while Latin American Christians believe that poverty indicates blessing. Which is correct?

Perhaps both are.

Maybe the wealthy find themselves in a position to use their possessions and power to bless the poor. This isn't a matter of simply writing a check or going on a short-term mission trip, although both remain desperately needed. Instead, the idea of using wealth to bless the poor requires a shift in mind-set and values: a new identity.

Wealthy Christians might be blessed with much, but our responsibility increases exponentially to use our wealth for good, whether working for development in third world countries (such as irrigation in Africa), lobbying our government for peace and justice (such as in the Darfur region in Sudan), or supporting legislation that will benefit other nations (such as free-trade agreements). By identifying with the poor of the world, American Christians can counter the prosperity narrative and combat their penchant for unbridled consumption. In the process, we'll learn from the wisdom of these people, correct our own errors, and gradually chip away at the injustice that God desires to wipe from the face of the earth.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Read through the news for a week and note the humanitarian crises taking place in the world. Do you feel burdened for one issue in particular?
- Discuss ways that you can break out of the cycle of consumerism. For example, which products do you typically purchase new that you might purchase used instead? What could you do with the money you save?
- Look up the words *poor* and *justice* in a concordance or online at www.biblegateway.com. I highly recommend reading Isaiah 58. Choose five verses and read through the whole chapter for each. What can be applied to the way we use our money?
- Read Matthew 19:16-30. How do you think Jesus' command to sell everything before following him applies to your life?
- Discuss ways that you can use what you have to bless those who have less.
- Are there any nonprofit organizations in your region addressing the issue of consumerism? Find out what you can about these organizations. If possible, learn about the shopping habits of the typical American. Think of ways that you can break out of that cycle.
- Latin American theologians advocate for Christians to identify with the poor. List three ways you can do that in your context.

Session 6

WAR AND PEACE

TERMINOLOGY

The practice of war, defined as any large-scale, violent conflict, is almost universal among human societies. From the most primitive tribes quarreling over a strip of hunting ground to the most developed empires clashing over ideologies, where human beings coexist, conflict can arise from an almost infinite variety of factors.¹

In the most general terms, peace is the opposite of war, with a wide range of states of being, from harmony, characterized by respect, justice, and goodwill between peoples, to the mere cessation of active hostility.²

PONDER THIS

Thomas Aquinas: from Summa Theologica

In order for a war to be just, three things are necessary. First, the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged. For it is not the business of a private individual to declare war, because he can seek for redress of his rights from the tribunal of his superior. Moreover it is not the business of a private individual to summon together the people, which has to be done in wartime. And as the care of the common weal is committed to those who are in authority, it is their business to watch over the common weal of the city, kingdom or province subject to them. And just as it is lawful for them to have recourse to the sword in defending that common weal against internal disturbances, when they punish evil-doers, according to the words of

the Apostle (Rom. 13:4): “He beareth not the sword in vain: for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil”; so too, it is their business to have recourse to the sword of war in defending the common weal against external enemies. . . .

Secondly, a just cause is required, namely that those who are attacked, should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault. Wherefore Augustine says (Questions. in Hept., qu. x, super Jos.): “A just war is wont to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what it has seized unjustly.”

Thirdly, it is necessary that the belligerents should have a rightful intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil. Hence Augustine says (De Verb. Dom. [*The words quoted are to be found not in St. Augustine’s works, but Can. Apud. Caus. xxiii, qu. 1]): “True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandizement, or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good.” For it may happen that the war is declared by the legitimate authority, and for a just cause, and yet be rendered unlawful through a wicked intention.³

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“It’s hard to convince people that we’re bombing them for their own good.”

BUMPER STICKER

“Can I love my enemies while in the process of murdering them?”

ADAM MALLIET, FRIEND OF THE AUTHOR

“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 peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.”⁴

HERMANN GOERING, HEAD OF THE GERMAN AIR FORCE IN WWII,
MARSHAL OF GERMANY

PONDER THIS

Jonathan Dymond: from "War: Its Causes, Consequences, Lawfulness, Etc."

Indeed, some of the definitions of defensive or a just war which are proposed by moralists, indicate how impossible it is to confine warfare within any assignable limits. "The objects of just war," says Paley, "are precaution, defense, or reparation." — "Every just war supposes an injury perpetrated, attempted, or feared."

I shall acknowledge, that if these be the justifying motives to war, I see very little purpose in talking of morality upon the subject.

It is in vain to expatiate on moral obligations, if we are at liberty to declare war whenever an "injury is feared":—an injury, without limit to its insignificance! a fear, without stipulation for its reasonableness! The judges, also, of the reasonableness of fear, are to be they who are under its influence; and who so likely to judge amiss as those who are afraid? Sounder philosophy than this has told us, that "he who has to reason upon his duty when the temptation to transgress it is before him, is almost sure to reason himself into an error."

Violence, and Rapine, and Ambition, are not to be restrained by morality like this. It may serve for the speculations of a study; but we will venture to affirm that mankind will never be controlled by it. Moral rules are useless, if, from their own nature they cannot be, or will not be applied. Who believes that if kings and conquerors may fight when they have fears, they will not fight when they have them not? The morality allows too much latitude to the passions, to retain any practical restraint upon them. And a morality that will not be practised, I had almost said, that cannot be practised, is an useless morality. It is a theory of morals. We want clearer and more exclusive rules; we want more obvious and immediate sanctions. It were in vain for a philosopher to say to a general who was burning for glory, "You are at liberty to engage in the war provided you have suffered, or fear you will suffer an injury—otherwise Christianity prohibits it." He will tell him of twenty injuries that have been suffered, of a hundred that have been attempted, and of a thousand that he fears.⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, two of the most prominent church fathers, clearly articulate a philosophy where war might be justified, provided it meets several parameters. The Just War Theory,⁶ as we know it today, is a bit more complex than what we have here from Aquinas, yet he provides a helpful framework to begin our discussion about the role of theology in our decisions about war, violence, peace, and defense.

On the other hand, Jonathan Dymond is one of many Quakers who speak out against the use of violent force. While Augustine and Aquinas will give a government the benefit of the doubt and seem to have Scripture to back up their views, Dymond refuses to trust governments in assessing the magnitude of a threat.

I believe that waging war is one of the most dehumanizing afflictions passed from one group of humans on to another. Lethal force assumes that negotiations will never bring about a desired result, so one nation imposes its will onto another.

In the midst of war, families are torn apart, soldiers and civilians die horrible deaths, women are raped, economies collapse, possessions are plundered, and homes are destroyed. Even some soldiers who fought in World War II—the “Good War”—returned home convinced that military combat is a tragedy that should never be revisited in the history of civilization.⁷ Nuclear weapons now raise the stakes of armed conflict, making possible the eradication of entire cities and even the entire planet. As we weigh the possible Christian perspectives on war, we must keep in mind that the realities of a post 9/11 world might require us to deviate from the arms race of the Cold War era.

When Augustine and Aquinas wrote, war was no doubt a horrible tragedy. But the prospect of bombing civilians or dropping nuclear warheads was also far removed from their times. Certainly the atrocities of war occurred and innocents suffered. But I have to wonder if the prospect of nuclear winter or the complete annihilation of our planet might have changed their tune.

Just a hunch.

In addition, I have to wonder if the law-enforcement mandate described

in Romans—a key for Aquinas—truly applies to individual countries declaring war on each other. Does the responsibility of one nation's government extend to situations where another government is antagonistic or in violation of a particular law? In addition, does the United Nations or other international bodies have a role in bringing about peaceful resolutions to potential military conflicts?

Views on war vary widely among Christians, from the nonviolence advocated by the Quakers to politically active Christians who generally support America's involvement in war. Further complicating matters is the wide variation in the perceived justice of specific wars. For example, many Christians might say that World War II and the First Gulf War in 1991 were justified military actions against cruel dictators who invaded other nations. Many believed no other way existed to restore freedom to conquered lands than declaring war on the aggressors. (Of course, matters become increasingly complex if we look at policies that could have been put into place to possibly prevent these wars from happening.⁸)

On the flip side, pacifists might just as easily argue that any violent attack on another nation involves one part of God's creation destroying another part of God's creation, and such circumstances aren't part of God's final plans. These Christians would describe war as immoral, noting that many civilians are killed, raped, or left destitute, and that soldiers are pitted in a life-and-death struggle.

And other Christians fall somewhere along the continuum between those who seek to justify some wars and those who oppose all wars. Some might decide that the atrocities of war are necessary to secure certain long-term goals. However, even if the cause of a war is considered just, Christians must carefully evaluate the *means* of bringing about such justice, especially if the means are ruled unjust.

No matter where we land in our theology regarding war, all of us face the difficult task of reconciling war with the teachings of Jesus. Just how far should we take his command to love our enemies?

Finally, as Christians, perhaps we need to deal with words like these written by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Come, O house of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD. (Isaiah 2:2-5)

Most theologians believe Isaiah is describing conditions of the future when God establishes his kingdom on earth. While we might be short on the exact details of how this will play out, I find this scenario intriguing. And I wonder, is this picture of the future under God's rule a far-off dream that we can never hope to realize in our dark and tarnished world, or is it a clue for where we need to concentrate our energy? If we're heading toward peace, why not start working on it today? The peacemakers are called sons of God, and I, for one, want to be in their company. Even if we never realize true peace and justice until Christ returns, we must ask ourselves: Is the future possibility of disarming and living in peace something worth, well, fighting for?

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Choose a war from the twentieth century. Based on the criteria of Aquinas, state why you think that war was just or unjust.
- What criteria would you list for declaring that a war is just?
- Some historians believe that World War II might have been prevented if Czechoslovakia, France, England, and Poland had struck Germany first. Do you think this kind of violence should have been used to prevent the tragedy of World War II?
- How does Jesus' command to "love your enemy" apply to war?
- Do you think Christians should serve in the military? Why or why not?
- Do you think the prophecy in Isaiah 2:2-5 applies to today? Why or why not?

Session 7

THE WAR ON TERROR

TERMINOLOGY

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S., the U.S. Congress authorized the War on Terror under the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists passed on September 18, 2001. Soon joined by other nations around the world, the U.S. has carried out the War on Terror through a wide variety of actions, including military, political, and legal.

PONDER THIS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: from Ethics

Torture is, in any case, generally an ineffectual means for discovering the truth; though, of course, this argument can have force only in cases where it is really the truth that is being sought for. But, quite apart from that, any physical torture inflicts the most extreme dishonour on the human being, and consequently engenders an intense hatred and the natural bodily impulse to restore this wounded honour by the application of bodily force. Bodily dishonour seeks to avenge itself on the body of the infamous tormentor. In this way the violation of man's bodily freedom once again destroys the foundations of society.¹

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“‘My country, right or wrong,’ is a thing that no patriot would think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying, ‘My mother, drunk or sober.’”

G. K. CHESTERTON

PONDER THIS

Jim Wallis: from God's Politics

Clearly, the existence of evil in the world is real in the biblical worldview. Indeed, anybody who could not see the real face of evil in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, is suffering from a bad case of postmodern relativism. To fail to speak of evil in the world today is to engage in bad theology. But to speak of “them” being evil and “us” being good, that evil is all out *there* and that in the warfare between good and evil others are either with us or against us, is also bad theology.²

MY THOUGHTS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer actively worked against Christian collaboration with the Nazi regime in pre–World War II Germany and even went so far as to collaborate with efforts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was himself tortured and eventually hanged by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945. The complexity of his situation makes his writings in *Ethics* all the more poignant, especially since the German state probably would have labeled Bonhoeffer and his associates as “terrorists.” Still, Bonhoeffer and those who led the plot to kill Hitler saw the removal of this dictator as the only way to end the terror of war. Bonhoeffer’s situation reminds us that our approaches to violence and terror are always complex and can never be limited to one catch-all response.

In the midst of today’s war on terror, America’s politicians assure us that they seek to make our nation more secure by obtaining vital information from enemy combatants. However, if former Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez went so far as redefining torture and leaving many other points of ambiguity

along the way, then I certainly wonder what our government is really up to.

As Christians, we must at least examine the basic human dignity for friend or foe, no matter what the foe intends to do. Bonhoeffer stated that torture doesn't guarantee the information we desire to get from our enemies, and it actually makes matters worse by inspiring enemies to seek revenge. But even if torture achieved 100 percent results every time, from a Christian perspective, the ends don't justify the means. We must wrestle with the words of Jesus: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27). Jesus went on to say, "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:35). Jesus spoke these words in the context of Rome's occupation of Israel. He was telling his Jewish listeners to pay back Roman oppression with obedience and kindness.

So how do Jesus' words apply today? Is it possible to find out what motivates terrorists and their supporters and then work to address those issues before using military force? Is it possible to love our enemies by addressing our trespasses against them, while never "surrendering" to them? Can we resolve to stop hitting back, while also working to remove the reasons why people want to hit us in the first place?

I appreciate Jim Wallis's wise distinction between labeling the acts of terrorists evil and framing the narrative in a "good versus evil" or "us versus them" struggle. We must ask whether our country's use of torture and declaration of war on terror simply leads to resentment and oppression that fuels terrorists and those who support them. In other words, do our actions simply deepen the divide and make more enemies? Does each bomb that kills innocent civilians—and many bombs have "collateral" damage—inspire more terrorists to take up the cause of the terrorists annihilated by the bomb?

Again, as Christians, we need to come face-to-face with the words of Jesus: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27). And we need to decide how we might obey his command.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Do you think the accumulation of wealth affects security and terrorism?
- Do an online search for “why terrorists attack” and read through the results that seem to have the most credibility (such as those from established media outlets). Summarize what you see as the top three reasons. Do you think that declaring a war on terror is the best way to address these issues?
- What role do Christians have in the War on Terror? How do verses such as Luke 6:27 apply to the way we might deal with terrorism?
- How can Christians support national defense and international justice while still preaching the gospel to the world?

Session 8

ENVIRONMENTALISM

TERMINOLOGY

Environmentalism is a movement that centers on the preservation and protection of the natural world in light of the threats presented by a booming human population that engages in unconstrained consumption of natural resources, focuses on economic growth regardless of the cost to the environment, and engages in widespread and unsustainable development. Environmentalists posit that the fate of human civilization on earth is intimately tied to the fate of the natural world and that it is inherently wrong for one species to destroy the environment on which all species depend for survival.¹

PONDER THIS

Esther Baird: from a Paper on Environmentalism and Creation

So what did God intend for this creation? Genesis 1:26-28 provides an answer. In this passage God creates man—the only part of his creation to be created in God’s image. God then gives his human creation instructions on how he wishes the rest of his creation to be cared for. It is important to note that he does not give them creation, rather he gives them the instructions on how to interact with creation, namely to fill it, subdue it, and to rule over it. He does not hand the earth over to them and leave the scene, he simply, like an owner might to a landlord, endows them with the care and upkeep of the planet. The earth, universe, and all of creation still belong to God and that

is of utmost importance when considering our responsibility and attitude toward it today. . . .

Romans 8:19-22 tells us that not just humanity waits to be restored but all of creation does. Paul says creation “groans” to be released from its bondage to decay.² This reinforces that God has a redemptive plan not just to pluck saved Christians out of a burnt up, decayed planet and whisk them off to some ethereal heaven, but that God will redeem and restore the earth. Revelation 21:1-3 paints a picture of a new earth, a restored earth, one where God will come down and dwell with us.

In C. S. Lewis’, *The Last Battle*, the children enter a door after believing Narnia was destroyed. But the new land turned out to be Narnia after all or as Digory said, “more like the real thing.” The Narnia they had known was just a “shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here.”³

The creation mandate does not then mean that we can wash our hands of this earth since God will eventually restore everything anyway. Rather, what the story of creation tells us is that God’s goal—a restored creation—ought to be our goal. The creation mandate means we must use the world God gave us with the same objective in mind that God has. Just as it is not acceptable to claim that we can abuse our bodies and minds since we are “saved anyway,” neither is it acceptable to treat the planet as if it doesn’t matter. It matters to God because it *is* God’s.⁴

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“I love the environment, but I’m cheap on the environment.”

NEWT GINGRICH

“God has given us a universe. It’s really an expensive toy with no instructions. We’re gonna break it sooner or later.”

KEVIN MAURER

“The way you can go to Paris or Beijing and everywhere there’s a McDonald’s hamburger, this is the ecological equivalent of franchised

life-forms. Every place is the same place. Kudzu. Zebra Mussels. Water
Hyacinths. Starlings. Burger Kings.

The local natives, anything unique gets squeezed out.
The only biodiversity we're going to have left is Coke versus Pepsi.
We're landscaping the whole world one stupid mistake at a time."

CHUCK PALAHNIUK

PONDER THIS

Carolyn Raffensperger: from "Women, Society, and Social Justice"

Word-oriented theologies which now exist in many of our churches are now being challenged by more Creation-oriented theologies. Is there hope for reconciliation of these theologies through Christ who was both called the Word of God and the Source of Creation, and who lived fully within our created world and shared our bread and wine?

There is much I do not understand. What I do know is how greatly our theology is enriched when we learn from the earth itself. This is because creation is the other Word of God, just as significant as the written Word. . . . I believe that what creation tells us about God and our own creatureliness is as important as Paul's letter to the Romans or the Sermon on the Mount.

But for now the creation groans in travail and pain because of our blatant disregard for its wellbeing and our attitude that we can use it up. Can we hear this cry of the earth?⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Christians have every reason to respect the earth as God's sacred creation that he declared "good." In fact, God liked it enough to take a day off just to enjoy it. Of course, the earth has gone through quite a bit since its creation. I wonder if God's report card on the current state of the planet would read something like this: "Progress unsatisfactory; see me after class."

I grew up with my mom in the home of my grandparents. While I wasn't a particularly messy child, my grandmother had a much higher standard when it came to clean. When Nana turned a room inside out for cleaning,

it looked like a brawl had broken out. She moved, turned over, shifted, and scattered everything as she vacuumed, dusted, wiped, sprayed, folded, and arranged. And then she put everything back. While no one said that I had to keep my room neat, I picked up on this household requirement by simple observation. Still, imagine if I decided that because Nana would eventually clean my room, I didn't need to take care of it in the meantime. So I chopped up my bureau for firewood, threw my TV out the window to watch it explode, tore up the carpet just for fun, and converted my closet into a secret hideout—something I would have needed if I had really done any of this!

You get the point. Anticipating future restoration doesn't give us a blank check to make a mess of things now. And perhaps our willingness to destroy something God created should also tell us something about the amount of respect we hold for him.

Esther Baird artfully communicates this same perspective on the care of creation—a biblical mandate for humanity to fulfill. She adopts a line of thinking that asks, if God's goal is moving the world toward healing and restoration, shouldn't that goal be ours as well? Certainly that's the first step that many Christians must take regarding the environment.

Carolyn Raffensperger then moves us toward the next steps. She teaches us that the environment has value on many levels and that our inability to care for creation reveals something dark and sinister about us. Not only do we abuse the creation of God, we also ignore the living book he has written all around us.

Raffensperger echoes the words of Psalm 19:1-3:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 night after night they display knowledge.
 There is no speech or language
 where their voice is not heard.

Creation speaks to us, revealing God. But often we're not listening. Far from being a repository of natural resources we use to make ourselves wealthy, our environment serves as yet another way that God says, "Hey, it's not all about you (or the hokey-pokey, for that matter)."

If we take the issue of caring for our environment seriously, we must challenge our own consumer-oriented, high-pollution lifestyle by asking questions such as: Can I buy something used instead of picking up the latest version from the store? Can I increase my energy efficiency or even explore viable energy alternatives? Can I support organic farms that will improve the soil and the quality of food I consume?⁶

Of course, as we reconsider our relationship to the environment, we need to keep our priorities in focus. I heard an interview with an inner-city advocate who said something along the lines of, "It's very hard to make people care about a drowning polar bear if they're afraid to walk out their front door." Saving our world from catastrophic climate shifts certainly needs to be a priority. But our contributions might be limited by socioeconomic factors. The redemption of our environment is one way wealthier segments of the world can actively work to bless those who possess far less.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- How has your church responded to environmental issues? In what ways is that response adequate and how could it improve?
- Read Psalm 19. If the heavens "pour forth speech," what are they telling us about God?
- How does Ruffensperger's characterization of the earth as a form of revelation change your views on the environment?
- The ways we can lighten our impact on the environment might surprise you. For example, plastics and many cleaning products are made from petroleum. So simply reusing canvas bags at the grocery store or buying an all-natural and non-toxic dish soap or bathroom

cleaner represent simple and low-cost ways to reduce pollution. Make a list of ways you can help protect the environment—do an online search if you want to make a big list—and choose three to put into practice.

- Read Romans 8. What exactly is creation here? What does it mean for creation to be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (verse 21)?
- Revelation 21:1 mentions a new heaven and a new earth arriving after the old heaven and old earth passed away. Explain whether or not this means we need not worry about the heavens and earth that we have today since they’ll just be replaced.
- Choose one of the Scripture verses mentioned above and dig deeper into the passage. Write a 200-word reflection on what you take away from it.

Session 9

PATRIOTISM

TERMINOLOGY

Simply stated, patriotism is love for one's country. This love can be manifested in myriad ways, from pride in the nation's culture to a desire to preserve the nation's character to a willingness to lay down one's life at the nation's call. The word *patriotism* itself stems from the Greek word *pater*, conveying the idea of a fatherland, a place from which one springs and to which one's loyalties are owed.¹

PONDER THIS

John Stackhouse: from "Of Course It Matters that Mitt Romney Is a Mormon"

Author's note: Two extremes are possible when we bring together Christianity and politics. Some Christians surrender themselves entirely to one political party or nationalist identity, while other believers believe that faith is a personal matter and has no place in public discourse. John Stackhouse outlines a potential way to balance faith and politics. In the following excerpt from Stackhouse's blog, he answers the question, Does 2008 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's Mormonism matter?

If someone ran for office and believed in Scientology, that would matter, because it would say something about that person's intelligence, outlook, values, and so on. If someone ran for office and was a faithful Islamist, that would matter for exactly the same reasons. If a candidate is a Richard

Dawkins–type atheist, or a James Dobson–type evangelical, or an Ayn Rand–type libertarian, of course it matters. Politics is all about understanding situations as clearly as possible, assessing plausible responses to those situations, selecting the best of those responses, and working well with others to actualize them. Beliefs, values, and practices all pertain to one’s meeting those challenges.

Therefore, of course it matters whether you believe in UFOs or a Supreme Being or a mindless universe. Of course it matters whether you believe that love for others is more important than love for self, or that God has given us guidelines for ethical behavior that must not be second-guessed, or that this holy text (the Bible, the Book of Mormon, *The Fountainhead*, *The Origin of Species*) is authoritative in a way no others are.

So let’s just agree that Romney’s world-and-lifeview does matter (it’s easier to drop the word “religion” here as distracting, as if other people’s views and values do or don’t matter because they are or aren’t “religious”), and move on to assessing two things: (1) what that world-and-lifeview actually is, and (2) what difference it would make in acting as President of the United States to make decisions in the light of it.²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“When I am abroad, I always make it a rule never to criticize or attack the government of my own country. I make up for lost time when I come home.”

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

“Patriotism is proud of a country’s virtues and eager to correct its deficiencies; it also acknowledges the legitimate patriotism of other countries, with their own specific virtues. The pride of nationalism, however, trumpets its country’s virtues and denies its deficiencies, while it is contemptuous toward the virtues of other countries. It wants to be, and proclaims itself to be, ‘the greatest,’ but greatness is not required of a country; only goodness is.”

SYDNEY J. HARRIS

PONDER THIS

Emmanuel Katongole: from an interview with Christianity Today

Author's note: Emmanuel Katongole, a Catholic priest born and raised in Uganda and son of Rwandan parents, tackles the idea of Christians in the world as travelers, not as settlers.

We have settled too easily. Instead of living out that story of journey toward a new creation, we tend to live out the stories of nationality. And then we forget what it means to journey. It's not difficult to see why we settle, because our nations or tribes or races try to convince us that life can't get any better than this. They ask us, "Where would you want to go? Why would you want to leave?" This is not just something that happens in a superpower like America. Even small nations like Rwanda, even small tribes, have an America-sized imagination of themselves!

The challenge that Christianity faces in our time is the challenge of tribalism. There's a church in Rwanda where the baptismal font still stands. But it bears the scars of being hacked by machetes, and the church was littered with thousands of bones of people who were killed. You couldn't find a more strange and ironic and tragic image than that: a common baptism surrounded by killing in the name of Hutu and Tutsi.

Many of us feel we are beyond that, but the dynamics of national identity remain—even of ecclesial identity. We can be settled in our Catholic power. We can be settled in our Baptist, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, or evangelical identity, and we feel a certain power from that. We think that our mission derives from that power.

The story of the tower of Babel begins with people settled in the land. The tower speaks of strength, power, and stability. It speaks of the ability to stand above the land and survey it. Pilgrims don't build a tower! In our day, I think what God is doing is exactly what he did for that tower—dispersing people, spreading them out, scattering them. Scattering, the way I read it in Genesis, is a good thing. It is part of God's purpose for God's people. It is meant to be good news for both Israel and the nations.³

MY THOUGHTS

I'd like to cover two veins of thought regarding the relationship between Christians and their countries. First, we need to acknowledge that our faith does influence our politics, votes, and whether or not we support or protest our government. Second, after we wrestle with the presence of faith in our politics, we must decide *how* our faith affects our patriotism and politics. If we are citizens of heaven who act as God's ambassadors on earth, what place do patriotism, allegiance to a political party, or the support of one candidate over another in an election hold in our lives?

John Stackhouse bluntly addresses the tension between the assertion that an individual's religion is a private and personal matter, and the reality that religion has a profound effect on our values and decisions. I personally find Stackhouse's argument very convincing: If our faith doesn't change how we live, then what's the value of those beliefs?⁴ However, one danger in bringing together our faith and politics is that we can easily marginalize people from other religious backgrounds. For example, even if a political candidate's own theology doesn't line up with orthodox Christianity, we shouldn't reject that person simply on the basis of his faith. Just as I hope that people will not dismiss my ideas because I'm a Christian, we shouldn't rule out any viable candidate simply because he subscribes to a different religion. In the end, we have to manage a careful balancing act that takes religious views into account, but doesn't marginalize anyone because of his views or our own.

As Christians, we have a number of factors to juggle if we want to take our faith into the public sphere: being good citizens, remaining loyal to the kingdom of God, and bringing God's kingdom to earth. Paul repeatedly refers to himself as an ambassador for Christ in this world (see 2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20), while also submitting to the governing authorities on earth (see Romans 13:1-7). As Jesus demonstrated, the presence of God's kingdom in our world changes what we believe and how we live. Although Jesus came to gather the lost, he also challenged allegiances and the norms of society.

The complexity of marrying faith and patriotism provides ample reason for Christians to be wary of both cultural estrangement and whole-hearted

allegiance to one particular party or cause. As ambassadors, we need both to withdraw and engage. Christians have reasons to vote for Democrats, Republicans, or any other party when that particular party best represents the values of God's kingdom. Christians can't afford to align themselves with any one political party in a complete sense, as any of these institutions will eventually fail to uphold the values of God's kingdom at some point. As ambassadors for the kingdom, we have a calling to rise above our political preferences and align ourselves solely with the kingdom of God, committing to let kingdom values direct our political/national allegiance.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- What political party do Christians in your context typically associate with? Why?
- In what way are religious beliefs both public and private?
- How do you balance the importance of a political candidate's religious beliefs with his or her policies?
- Read Luke 17:21. What's the significance of Jesus' statement, "The kingdom of God is within you"?
- How do you apply the concept of being an ambassador for Christ—a traveler in this world?

Session 10

SLAVERY

TERMINOLOGY

Slavery describes the socioeconomic condition of a person who is held against his will under the complete subjugation of another person or group of people, deprived of personal freedom and basic rights, and forced to perform labor without compensation. Though illegal in most countries, slavery still exists in staggering numbers, with as many as 27 million victims worldwide.¹

PONDER THIS

Martha Katz-Hyman: from an article on sugar and slavery, "Anti-Slavery Images"²

English abolitionists therefore urged consumers not to purchase sugar from the West Indies but rather from the East Indies where it was produced by free labor. This tactic was used in the 1790s during the campaign to abolish the English slave trade. . . . These campaigns were primarily supported by the female antislavery associations found all over England. Adherents distributed thousands of pamphlets and broadsides door-to-door in an effort to persuade British consumers not to buy West Indian sugar.³

QUOTE INTERLUDE

"Slavery is founded on the selfishness of man's nature—opposition to it on his love of justice. These principles are in eternal antagonism; and when

brought into collision so fiercely as slavery extension brings them, shocks and throes and convulsions must ceaselessly follow.”

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

“Trafficking in persons is a modern-day form of slavery, a new type of global slave trade. Perpetrators prey on the most weak among us, primarily women and children, for profit and gain. They lure victims into involuntary servitude and sexual slavery. Today we are again called by conscience to end the debasement of our fellow men and women. As in the 19th century, committed abolitionists around the world have come together in a global movement to confront this repulsive crime.”

U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE CONDOLEEZZA RICE

“If you want to be free, there is but one way; it is to guarantee an equally full measure of liberty to all your neighbors. There is no other.”

CARL SCHURZ

PONDER THIS

From the U.S. State Department's 2007 Report on Human Trafficking

Author's note: This report underscores the pervasiveness and scope of human trafficking in the world today.

The common denominator of trafficking scenarios is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit a person for profit. A victim can be subjected to labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, or both. Labor exploitation includes slavery, forced labor, and debt bondage. Sexual exploitation typically includes abuse within the commercial sex industry. In other cases, victims are exploited in private homes by individuals who often demand sex as well as work. The use of force or coercion can be direct and violent or psychological.

A wide range of estimates exists on the scope and magnitude of modern-day slavery. The International Labor Organization (ILO)—the United Nations agency charged with addressing labor standards, employment, and social protection issues—estimates there are 12.3 million people in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, and sexual servitude at any given

time; other estimates range from 4 million to 27 million.

Annually, according to U.S. Government–sponsored research completed in 2006, approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders, which does not include millions trafficked within their own countries. Approximately 80 percent of transnational victims are women and girls and up to 50 percent are minors. The majority of transnational victims are females trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation. These numbers do not include millions of female and male victims around the world who are trafficked within their own national borders—the majority for forced or bonded labor.

Human traffickers prey on the vulnerable. Their targets are often children and young women, and their ploys are creative and ruthless, designed to trick, coerce, and win the confidence of potential victims. Very often these ruses involve promises of a better life through marriage, employment, or educational opportunities.

The nationalities of trafficked people are as diverse as the world's cultures. Some leave developing countries, seeking to improve their lives through low-skilled jobs in more prosperous countries. Others fall victim to forced or bonded labor in their own countries. Women eager for a better future are susceptible to promises of jobs abroad as babysitters, housekeepers, waitresses, or models—jobs that traffickers turn into the nightmare of prostitution without exit. Some families give children to adults, often relatives, who promise education and opportunity, but sell the children into exploitative situations instead.⁴

PONDER THIS

Gary Haugen: from "On a Justice Mission"

Today, many American Christians who have entered the joy of God's passionate global mission embrace evangelism and compassion ministries that bring food, housing, microloans, and medicine to the poor. Yet many are also beginning to see the true basis of slavery, which is another source of suffering for the poor—aggressive violence. That is the core reality of forced labor: coercion and terror. Poverty, ignorance, and spiritual darkness are all part of a complex set of social factors that exacerbate slaves' original vulnerability,

but once enslaved, they need someone to rescue them from the brutal hand of their oppressor.

For Nagaraj and his family, who worked 16 hours a day, six days a week, making bricks, there was no mystery about what kept them and 80 other slaves inside the four walls of their compound. It was the vicious beatings unleashed upon those who tried to run away. For Elisabeth, a 16-year-old girl held inside a brothel in Thailand, it was money for Bible college that lured her into the hands of a sex trafficker who lied about a job across the border. Once inside the brothel, however, it was sheer violent terror that forced her to submit to multiple rapes by the brothel's paying customers.

To love these neighbors—and the millions of slaves they represent—the people of God must be biblically and spiritually prepared to confront this violence.⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Slavery didn't stop with the work of William Wilberforce in Great Britain or the end of the Civil War in the United States. Exploiting the weak and powerless represents far too lucrative a trade to ever die out completely.

In a 2007 interview on the radio show *Fresh Air*, Eugene Hutz, lead singer of the band Gogol Bordello, talked about returning to his childhood home in the Ukraine. He immediately noticed that many of the young women typically milling about town were missing. Where did they go? Many of them answered ads about modeling, working abroad, or chances to study in foreign lands but ended up in slavery, working under horrendous conditions as prostitutes. And this doesn't even touch the full extent of the modern slave trade. Children are sexually exploited from Asia to America, domestic workers are robbed of their passports and denied pay, and children are forced to join armies or work for no pay on cocoa plantations. Sadly, much of the chocolate we eat has been planted by exploited children (which has led to the recent popularity of fair trade chocolate).

Modern-day slavery traumatizes its victims because the traffickers—the real criminals—often force victims to perform illegal acts such as prostitution or culturally reprehensible acts such as killing innocent people. In these

situations, sex slaves and child soldiers respectively have no one to turn to, and they end up caught between the law and their tormenters.

We have much to learn from the abolitionists of America's colonial times, most notably the Quakers, who recognized the economic system at the root of slavery's horrors. These groups brought the message of emancipation into homes by pinpointing the way that many citizens benefited from the injustice of slavery: sugar.

The slave trade of today preys on the poor and uninformed. And while wealthier segments of our culture generally don't profit directly from the slave trade, we certainly do profit from countries that pay unfair wages and maintain unsafe working conditions.⁶ The injustices of modern slavery are so horrible and widespread that the church can't sit idly by. We must use our resources and influence to support anti-trafficking organizations, educate the targets of traffickers, begin the healing and restoration process of slavery victims, and pressure governments to step up law enforcement.

The Bible reveals a God who has his eyes upon the poor. He especially cares about those who hunger and thirst for justice. I can think of no greater injustice than for one group to use violence in order to subjugate and exploit another, and Gary Hauger's experience with these international crimes reveals that slavery is all about brutality and fear. God desires to bring healing to the nations, to send peace that flows like a river, and to wipe away every tear. As his ambassadors on earth, we can start doing that right now with the victims of modern-day slavery.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- For more information about ways you can become involved in the fight to end human trafficking, check out Stop the Traffik (www.stopthetraffik.org) and The Not for Sale campaign (www.notforsalecampaign.org). This organization is committed to ending modern-day slavery in all its forms. Additional organizations offering information include World Vision and the Salvation Army. Visit the website of one or more of these organizations and list three ways you could become involved in the fight against slavery.

- List the kind of people targeted by human traffickers. Do any people in your area fit this description? Who should you inform about this danger?
- One of the greatest obstacles to combating slavery today is not a lack of law but a lack of law enforcement. List some ways that modern abolitionists can change that.
- Look up information about the fair-trade movement, such as www.fairtradefederation.org and www.fairtrade.net. List some reasons why Christians should consider purchasing fair-trade products.
- The March 2007 issue of *Christianity Today* covers a wide variety of topics related to slavery. Why should Christians care about slavery today?
- Read Exodus 21. In what ways are these commands different from the kind of slavery described in Egypt in the earlier chapters of the book of Exodus?
- Read the book of Philemon. How does Paul relate physical freedom with spiritual freedom? In what ways could we say that Paul opposed slavery?

Session 11

EVIL

TERMINOLOGY

In a human sense, evil refers to pernicious, cruel, or selfish acts performed with calculated intent to harm another's person or interests. It is often defined in direct opposition to the moral and ethical values of a particular religion, and many cultures, especially those that are monotheistic, embrace the broader concept of evil as a force in opposition to good, often resulting in the personification of evil as an entity such as Satan.¹

PONDER THIS

Origen: from "The Suffering of God"

[The savior] descended to earth to grieve for the human race, and took our sufferings on himself before he endured the cross and deigned to assume our flesh. If he had not suffered, he would not have come to share in human life. What is this suffering which he suffered for us beforehand? It is the suffering of love. For the Father himself, the God of the universe, who is "long-suffering and full of mercy" (cf. Psalm 102:8) and merciful, does he not suffer in some way (*nonne quodammodo patitur*)? Or do you now know that, when he deals with humanity, he suffers human suffering (*passionem patitur humanam*)? "For the Lord your God has taken your ways upon him as a man bears his son" (cf. Deuteronomy 1:31). Therefore God has taken our ways upon himself, just as the Son of God bore our sufferings. The Father himself is not impassible (*Ipse Pater non est impassibilis*).²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger—according to the way you react to it.”

C. S. LEWIS

“No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks.”

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

BLAISE PASCAL

PONDER THIS

Augustine: from “Augustine on the Relation of God and Evil”

If there is a movement, that is a turning away (*aversio*) of the human will from the Lord God, which without doubt is sin, can we then say that God is the author of sin? God, then will not be the cause of that movement. But what will its cause be? If you ask this question, I will have to answer that I do not know. . . . The movement of turning away, which we admit is sin, is a defective movement; and all defect comes from nothing. Once you have understood where it belongs, you will have no doubt that it does not belong to God. Because that defective movement is voluntary, it is placed within your power. If you fear it, all you have to do is simply not to will it. If you do not will it, it will not exist. What can be safer than to live a life where nothing can happen to you which you do not will? But since we cannot rise by our own free will as we once fell by our own free will spontaneously, let us hold with steadfast faith the right hand of God stretched out to us from above.³

PONDER THIS

N. T. Wright: from Evil and the Justice of God

This project is a matter of setting the existing creation to rights rather than scrapping it and doing something else instead. God decides, for that reason, to work through human beings as they are. . . . Both in the grand narrative itself, and in many smaller moments within it, we observe a pattern of divine action, to judge and punish evil and to set bounds to it without destroying the responsibility and agency of human beings themselves; and also both to promise and to bring about new moments of grace, events which constitute new creation, however much they are themselves necessarily shot through with ambiguity.

This is not, I think, exactly the same as the “free-will defense,” beloved by some who try to explain or vindicate God (“God gave us free will so it’s all our fault”). It is more a “commitment to action” on God’s part, coupled with the settled affirmation of creation as still basically good. God cannot undo that good creation even though it has gone wrong. He will therefore act from *within* the world he has created, affirming that world in its created otherness even as he is putting it to rights.⁴

MY THOUGHTS

Behind many of the crises in our world today lurks a massive debate about the connection between an all-powerful and loving God and the presence of evil in the world. The brightest minds in the fields of atheism and religion have debated at length, with neither winning a decisive victory. *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* by Norman L. Geisler is countered by Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. The opposing sides seesaw on and on, with neither being able to convince the members of the other’s camp to cross over. Of course, the presence of evil in the world seems real enough, as all of us suffer enormous pain and loss at some point—trials that either drive us closer to or farther away from God.

I won’t pretend to have anything significant to add to this debate among intellectual heavyweights. I’d gladly let their statements stand alone without adding my own comments. Still, if the Christian thinkers quoted above

provide some level of explanation about the resolution of God and evil, I can at least contribute a personal element to this discussion.

Origen states that Jesus came and suffered with us on earth. This means that God hasn't removed himself from us and our suffering; in fact, he experiences it with us. Although I haven't suffered a great deal at this point in my life, during my darkest moments, God shows up in some powerful ways. I can't definitively say why life works this way or where evil and suffering even come from for sure. However, humans seem to bring a great deal of it down on one another. I also can't say why God doesn't directly intervene and stop disasters from happening. But I've met God, experienced God, felt his grief at the pain in our world, and received his comfort. Even if I can't comprehend the thought of God's permitting evil, I'm willing to put up with the parts I don't understand because I know God has experienced the same, he works to bring healing to this world, and he's present right now to bring comfort.

Of course, this doesn't help resolve the atheism debate or our conundrum with God and evil. But it does permit me to go on with life, to accept pain and suffering, and to have a relationship with the God who comforts and heals. In fact, if I'd never experienced God in this way, I'd likely be an atheist. But after seeing how God is the healer and comforter for me and for others, I can't imagine going on without him. If I need to choose between a world that has evil and either has God or doesn't have God, I'll take the world with God every time.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Read the book of Ecclesiastes, paying particular attention to the word *evil*. Verses 9:12 and 12:14 address the consequences of evil. What questions does the book of Ecclesiastes address concerning evil and what questions remain unanswered?
- In Romans 8:28, Paul says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." What is your response to that?

- In what ways have you experienced God in difficult times? How does that affect the way you look at suffering when it seems to be approaching again?
- How does the knowledge that Christ suffered affect the way you look at pain, suffering, and evil in the world and in your own life?
- Do an online search to find the arguments for atheism. What three points seem most valid? Imagine that a friend presents these points to you as reasons he or she doesn't believe in God. Write down how you'd reply to each.
- What differences do you see between the views Augustine and Wright state about God and evil?

Session 12

END TIMES

TERMINOLOGY

End times usually refers to the events that occur during the last days of human history. Most often the term indicates the eschatological writings of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, though nearly every religion has some form of eschatology (the philosophical and theological study of the last days and ultimate fate of humanity¹). Many of these systems parallel the Christian idea of a period of tribulation and deprivation followed by the coming (or return) of a messiah figure who will usher in a golden age.²

PONDER THIS

Paul Louis Metzger: from Consuming Jesus

Jonathan Blanchard, the founding president of Wheaton College, was an evangelical “social reformer”; he was also a postmillennialist. However, his son Charles was indelibly influenced by “the Moody forces,” and under their influence Charles led Wheaton into a new era of fundamentalism. Crucial to his redirection was Charles’s conversion to dispensational premillennialism, a perspective that often promotes a pessimistic view of engaging culture because it anticipates a rapture of the church prior to the Great Tribulation destined to fall upon the earth (Marsden, p. 31). . . .

The pre-Tribulation rapture theology can nurture the ethos of a community on the retreat. Although it is difficult to determine a historical or logical

connection, one can understand how such a link might develop. As Martin Luther might have put it, the elder Blanchard would have planted a tree today if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow. On the other hand, some dispensationalists have figured that they might as well let the world go to hell in a handbasket. Why? Because everything is going to burn in the end anyway. With that perspective, Christians should stick to saving souls for heaven rather than expending our efforts to mend a sinking ship.³

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“The lion and the calf shall lie down together but the calf won’t get much sleep.”

WOODY ALLEN

“Don’t wake me for the end of the world unless it has very good special effects.”

ROGER ZELAZNY

“It’s extremely important to prophecy believers to be able to read the signs of the times, that is, events that are signaling to us that the end time is near, and such events as wars, conflicts, increasing levels of evil and wickedness in the world, rising environmental hazards, the emergence of a global economy—all of these are seen as signs of the times that signal to us that the Rapture is near; the final sequence of events could unfold, at any moment.”

PAUL BOYER

John Cloud: from “Meet the Prophet” (on Tim LaHaye)

Why are so many people turning to someone like LaHaye—a guy more interested in reality than fiction—for novels? Because in this volatile moment, many people are starting to read the Left Behind books not as novels but as tomorrow’s newspapers. LaHaye believes that the Scriptures lay out a precise timetable for the end of the world, and the Left Behind books let us in on the chronology. . . .

As Evangelicals, they [authors LaHaye and Jenkins] take every word literally, even those mystical-sounding parts of the Book of Revelation that seem to defy interpretation.⁴

Tim LaHaye: from “Reasons for a Pretribulation Rapture”

The pretribulational view is the most logical view of Second Coming Scriptures when taken for their plain, literal meaning whenever possible. Many of the details of the Second Coming must be pieced together from various passages of Scripture, no matter what view you take. The pretribulational position finds a logical place for every Second Coming passage. Like a completed puzzle, all the pieces fit.⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Americans have been introduced to one Christian view of the end times through the wildly popular LEFT BEHIND series⁶ of books, which detail a cataclysmic end of the world where Christians are taken up to heaven, the world is chewed up in a violent tribulation, and then Christ returns to begin his 1,000-year reign. To their credit, the publishers of this series provide an overview of differing perspectives on the end times at their website.⁷ However, the publishers of this book also marketed the series as “what the Bible says” about the end of the world in our “uncertain times.” Playing off fear is effective marketing but bad biblical interpretation.

I’m not particularly interested in advocating one particular view over another, but I hope to point out a few problems overlooked in many discussions of the end times and in particular to challenge some of the implications of the LEFT BEHIND (also known as premillennial) interpretation that can be quite troubling for the church: It might very well miss the point of Revelation, it might weaken our ability to join the mission of God, and it might relieve Christians from the responsibility of caring for this world. I’m not saying these are necessarily the case for everyone who holds this view, but rather that they’re real dangers affecting how we live as followers of Jesus in our world. In fact, our views of the end times might influence how we preach the gospel and minister in this world. While Christians shouldn’t divide over

this issue, I urge you to ask some hard questions here with me, push back in the “Your Thoughts” section, and even drop me an e-mail if you think I’m out to lunch. So let’s take a look at some of the problems of the premillennial view of the end times, keeping in mind that faithful Christians can adopt this view but certainly must think through the following challenges.

The premillennial interpretation of the end times (involving a rapture, tribulation, and then return of Christ to reign for 1,000 years) advocated by the LEFT BEHIND series assumes that the book of Revelation should be read literally as a historical narrative, detailing events blow by blow. While I won’t rule out such a possibility, a study of Jewish apocalyptic literature from the same time as Revelation hints that John, the traditional author of Revelation, wrote up a Christian version of apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature⁸ was written by the underdog. It served as a kind of resistance literature for the religious Jews who wanted to keep the faith in the midst of religious persecution. This literature typically featured a dream sequence where the author is led about by an angel. The angel reveals a spiritual struggle between the forces of good and evil, with God eventually winning the day. After God’s victory, a judgment takes place, bringing God’s rule to earth and condemning all who are in opposition.

If you’re familiar with the book of Revelation, does any of this sound familiar? Granted, John’s writing isn’t classified as a pure apocalyptic account. But we should keep in mind that he undoubtedly was using a popular literary convention of his time under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to encourage the Christians to persevere in the midst of suffering.

Throwing this knowledge into the mix doesn’t mean we have to throw our Rapture theories or end of the world charts into the garbage. But it should warn us from accepting premillennialism without critical reflection on some of its possible implications. Perhaps we can find a historical narrative in Revelation—perhaps a story about a struggle between good and evil or just a story told in symbols. We’ll never know this side of heaven until something—we don’t know what—happens. And that’s where we need to find some balance. I actually have no problem with the existence of premillennialism as a view or with people who champion this view. But I think Christianity does have a problem when premillennialism *adversely affects the way we preach*

the gospel, the unity of the church, and how we treat God's creation.

Many Christians strongly focus on being saved or reserving a place in heaven by praying to receive Jesus, and premillennialism is the perfect companion—as escaping is a central concept in both ideas. And even if escaping isn't necessarily wrong, we're tempted to give little thought to what we're supposed to do between salvation and the escape besides warn our neighbors. So we settle into the default mode of attending church and sharing the gospel occasionally, but in the meantime, worrying about tomorrow takes over. In other words, a gaping void exists in the narrative Left Behind between salvation and escape. As a result, the American dream or any other value from our culture has a chance to fill this place—though I hasten to add that this isn't inevitable, only a very real possibility.

The incarnational approach of Jesus going out to the people is subverted by the escape narrative and the stories of our culture about securing a piece of the pie. If we believe that we'll fly away in a premillennial Rapture, we also can't forget that God placed us here to bring his kingdom to earth. And that means the Rapture doesn't pardon us from the physical and spiritual healing that we're supposed to experience and share when we give the Holy Spirit control of our lives. In other words, the premillennial understanding muddies the water for Christ's ambassadors in this world, and we need to ask ourselves: Are we manning the life boats or joining an invasion of God's Spirit?

And while we're talking about physical and spiritual healing, the premillennial LEFT BEHIND theology has also inadvertently subverted our charge to take care of the environment, God's creation. This doesn't mean Christians who hold to the premillennial view pollute more or have an agenda to destroy the world. Rather, I'm suggesting that a premillennial view might pull our attention away from caring for creation. A Christian who buys into premillennialism might care very deeply for God's creation, but think about it for a moment: If you believe this world will be destroyed one day, how motivated are you to care for it? In fact, Paul Metzger says that's exactly what has happened. Only recently have many Christians moved toward a consensus about the gravity of climate change, a consensus that might have been slowed down in part because of our eschatology.

By bringing the end times into the discussion of this guide I have run the risk of elevating the importance of this doctrine that really should not cause Christians to lose much sleep at night. Jesus is coming back for sure, but we don't know how or when. Christians have never agreed on the interpretation of the book of Revelation, and so we should be wary of how any particular view influences our theology or practice. However, our views of the end times do exert an influence on our theology, and from that perspective I want to make sure that these beliefs don't interfere with our need to join God's work here on earth. I've cautioned against relying too heavily on premillennialism mainly because an extreme escapist view can run counter to the calling of Christians, who really should be deeply involved in their world, joining in the work of God's kingdom. That doesn't mean that premillennialism doesn't work or that the events spelled out in the *LEFT BEHIND* series won't happen. In fact, the early church (AD 40–400) was noted for its care of the poor while for the most part also adhering to a premillennial interpretation. Even if we're not of this world in our allegiance, our work is in this world—continuing the commission of Christ to unveil the life of God.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Matthew 24 addresses the end of the age, but some parts seem to apply to the years immediately following the time of Christ. How does this passage apply to the end times?
- Read 2 Thessalonians 2. This is a very difficult passage to interpret and has been explained in a wide variety of ways. Look up a commentary on this passage and then share what you believe is the most plausible interpretation.
- After discussing a variety of issues we face in our world, I have chosen to end with some thoughts about our views of the end times as a way of challenging Christians to seriously consider what it means for God's kingdom. In what ways are my points valid or invalid?

- You will find a helpful list of articles outlining the variety of perspectives on the end times here: www.leftbehind.com/channelendtimes.asp?channelID=73. Choose one of these articles and write a 100–200 word reflection on its merits and weaknesses.
- How do you think a Christian's views on the end times can change who he is and how he lives?
- How do Metzger's thoughts on the end times apply to your context?
- How does the message of Revelation change for us today if we read it as a work of Christian apocalyptic literature?
- Do you think it's possible to hold a premillennial view that predicts an imminent end of the world, while remaining committed to social justice and protecting the environment? What would the rationale be for such beliefs?

NOTES

FIRST THOUGHTS

1. See my blog post: “How Technology Saved Our Lives,” October 9, 2006, <http://www.edcyz.com/how-technology-saved-our-lives/10/>.
2. I’ve tried to cover a wide range of issues in the “Social Justice” session, but recognize that an entire discussion guide could be devoted to the myriad issues that fall under this heading. In addition, some other topics worth exploring include immigration and the specific effects of globalization.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Social Justice,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice.
2. Lucille Sider Dayton, *Wisdom of the Daughters*, eds. Reta Halteman Finger and Kari Sandhaas (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, 2001), 253.
3. Leonardo Boff, “The Trinity as Good News to the Poor,” *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister McGrath (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), 122.
4. This doctrine, known as dispensationalism, began with the Plymouth Brethren in England in the 1820s.
5. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Julian the Apostate,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_the_Apostate.
6. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Julian the Apostate.”

7. Claiborne also blogs with Christian leader Jim Wallis. He has written a particularly powerful article about pursuing peace: “Mad Jesus Skilz: Applied Pacifism Isn’t Passive,” January 23, 2007, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/01/shane-claiborne-mad-jesus-skilz.html>.

RACISM

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Racism,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racism>.
2. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online*, third edition, s.v. “racism.”
3. Collin Hansen, “One Last Gotham Visit for Billy Graham,” *Christian History Newsletter, Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2005/jun17.html>.
4. Anthony Smith, “Practicing Pentecost: Discovering the Kingdom of God amid Racial Fragmentation,” *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 281–282.
5. Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 11.
6. See William Webb’s *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).
7. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1993), 881, s.v. “slavery.”
8. Stanley Grenz provides a comprehensive analysis of the divisions and denominations in American Christianity in his book *Renewing the Center* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006).
9. Edward Gilbreath and Mark Galli, “Harder than Anyone Can Imagine: Four Working Pastors—Latino, Asian, Black, and White—Respond to the Bracing Thesis of *United by Faith*,” *Christianity Today*, April 2005. <http://www.christianitytoday.com.au/ct/2005/april/12.37.html>.
10. See Mark Oestreicher, “A Public Apology to Our Asian American Brothers and Sisters,” <http://www.ysmarko.com/?p=1379>; Laurence Tom, “Youth Specialties/Zondervan Apology,” <http://abcpastor>

.com/2007/03/07/youth-specialtieszondervan-apology/; and Tommy Woodard and Eddie James, “Our Apologies,” <http://skitguys.com/skitguys/apology.php>.

GENDER

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Gender,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender>.
2. Makeesha Fisher, “Why I AM an Egalitarian,” *Swinging from the Vine*, August 8, 2007, <http://www.swingingfromthevine.com/2007/08/08/why-i-am-an-egalitarian/>. This article has been edited from its original version by Ms. Fisher.
3. For an example of this interpretive method, see William Webb’s *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

HOMOSEXUALITY

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Homosexuality,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality>.
2. Jamie Arpin-Ricci, “Homosexuality: A Personal Reflection,” *Emergent Voyageurs*, January 29, 2007, <http://emergentvoyageurs.blog.com/1485527/>. You can also join Jamie on his journey at his new blog: <http://missional.blog.com>.
3. The Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” *The Barna Update*, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=280>.
4. This begs the question, Why are Christians so concerned with homosexuality? Perhaps the most important reason is that Christians fear judgment from God because of the immorality in their land. In Genesis 18–19 God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because of the rampant wickedness in these cities, and at the center of the narrative is sexual immorality and homosexuality. Throughout the Bible these two cities become the standard for wickedness.

CONSUMERISM

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Consumerism," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>.
2. John Wesley, "Faith at Work," *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 248–249.
3. Ruth Padilla DeBorst, "Liberate My People," *Christianity Today*, August 2007, http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/08/liberate_my_people.html. © 2007 Christianity Today International. All rights reserved. Used by permission. From the Christian Vision Project (www.christianvisionproject.com).
4. William Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 97.

WAR AND PEACE

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "War," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War>.
2. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Peace," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace>.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1947), <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/SS/SS040.html#SSQ40A1THEP1>.
4. For the context of this quote, see <http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.asp>.
5. John Dymond, "War: Its Causes, Consequences, Lawfulness, Etc.," chapter 19 of essay 3 of *The Essays on Morality*, <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/moral03.htm>.
6. For more information about the Just War Theory, see "Just War, As It Was and Is" by James Turner Johnson, http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=142.
7. Dick Winters, a former commander in the 82nd Airborne in WWII (depicted in the miniseries *Band of Brothers*), shared that he made living in peace his goal after fighting in the war. See Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 88.
8. It is generally believed by historians that Germany planned the First

World War far in advance, but the diplomatic bumbling that preceded the “Great War” is the height of human tragedy. The inability of nations to resolve the First World War lent a kind of inevitability to the Second World War. In his book *Flyboys*, history writer James Bradley provides a detailed account of the colonialism and violence of western nations that influenced Japan and eventually paved the road toward the attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II. Even if Japan struck first, the policies of the United States and other western allies contributed to the motivation for the Japanese attack.

THE WAR ON TERROR

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 183.
2. Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 143.

ENVIRONMENTALISM

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, “Environmentalism,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmentalism>.
2. Romans 8:22.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), 210–211.
4. Esther Baird, “Christians and Creation: Why a Doctrine of Creation is Essential to American Evangelicals,” June 29, 2007.
5. Carolyn Raffensperger, “Women, Society, and Social Justice,” *The Wisdom of Daughters: Two Decades of the Voice of Christian Feminism*, eds. Reta Halteman Finger and Kari Sandhaas (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, 1990), 231.
6. I’ve jumped onto the “eat local” and organic bandwagon. By changing a few purchases, the average family can significantly reduce the pesticides they ingest. For example, apples, potatoes, berries, dairy products, and spinach are all high in pesticides and should generally be purchased as organic or low-spray. Ever since I’ve committed to eating organic, I now notice the taste of pesticides in many conventionally grown

fruits. The benefits of organic farming extend beyond our bodies to the earth. Organic farms generally work to improve soil quality and do not produce any toxic run off into streams, rivers, and oceans. See Barbara Kingsolver's excellent memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* for more about eating organic and local foods.

PATRIOTISM

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Patriotism," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriotism>.
2. John Stackhouse, "Of Course It Matters that Mitt Romney Is a Mormon," Prof. John Stackhouse's Weblog, May 14, 2007, <http://stackblog.wordpress.com/2007/05/14/of-course-it-matters-that-mitt-romney-is-a-mormon/>.
3. Emmanuel Katongole, "From Tower-Dwellers to Travelers," *Christianity Today*, July 2007, http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007_mission/. © 2007 Christianity Today International. All rights reserved. Used by permission. From the Christian Vision Project (www.christianvisionproject.com).
4. In his book *Everything Must Change*, Brian McLaren asks what the most pressing issues are today and then follows up by asking, "What does Christianity have to say about them?" Far from causing an ideological struggle, a charge leveled against religion in general by atheists, religion should say something about reconciliation and healing in our world.

SLAVERY

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Slavery," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery>.
2. For more information on the Christian fight against slavery, see "No Spoonful of Sugar" by Timothy Morgan, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/march/14.8.html>.
3. Martha Katz-Hyman, "Anti-Slavery Images," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume2/february04/iotm.cfm>.

4. U.S. Department of State, "Introduction," Trafficking in Persons Report, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2007/82799.htm>.
5. Gary Haugen, "On a Justice Mission," *Christianity Today*, February 26, 2007, http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/02/on_a_justice_mission.html.
6. The pesticides used on cotton crops in India have been linked with over 25,000 suicides by cotton farmers. Indians refer to cotton as the suicide crop. See "Seeds of Suicide: India's Desperate Farmers," July 26, 2005, http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/rough/2005/07/seeds_of_suicid.html.

EVIL

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Evil," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil>.
2. Origen, "The Suffering of God," *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 97.
3. Augustine, "Augustine on the Relation of God and Evil," *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 104.
4. N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 73–74.

END TIMES

1. *Wikipedia* contributors, "Eschatology," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eschatology>.
2. *Wikipedia* contributors, "End time," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_Times.
3. Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 24.
4. John Cloud, "Meet the Prophet," *Time*, July 1, 2002, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002762-1,00.html>.
5. Tim Lahaye, "Reasons for a Pretribulation Rapture," Good News for Israel, http://www.gnfi.org/external/TimLaHayeProphecy/reasons_for_pretribulation_rapture.htm.

6. While the LEFT BEHIND series provides a popular example of premillennialism, many Christians have viewed the 1972 movie *Thief in the Night* in Sunday school or at youth group events where a similar view of the end times was illustrated. It took me years to trust helicopters after seeing that movie. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070795/>.
7. See <http://www.leftbehind.com/channelendtimes.asp?pageid=510&channelID=71>.
8. For more on apocalyptic literature, see *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) by John Collins, and <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1643&letter=A>.

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