

Living Christianly

A SIXTH GRADE student in Albuquerque, New Mexico, came to class wearing a T-shirt picturing pigs in various positions of sexual embrace. The teacher, Donald Whately, told the student that the T-shirt was “offensive and unsuitable for school, maybe the entire universe.”

The boy told his teacher there was nothing wrong with the shirt and that his mother had bought it for him. The principal of the school, however, supported Whately’s directive, and the student was required to wear the shirt inside out for the rest of the day.

Donald Whately, who is president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation, is no narrow-minded reactionary. He told the *Los Angeles Times*: “For some reason I find that little incident to be a great moral victory. I wouldn’t want my daughter to have to sit in a classroom and look at a T-shirt with pigs fornicating on it.”

After explaining that there is a growing broad-based movement among America’s educators to teach the difference between right and wrong, he said: “I think what we need is a real radical and rapid shift to moral principles that can be taught—as opposed to this notion that values are largely in the eye of the beholder—because society can’t tolerate ambiguity.”¹

Researcher Michael Josephson says “a hole in the moral ozone has blinded the youth of America.” His research shows that in the past year 33% of high school students and 16% of college students have shoplifted. One third of high school and college students say they are willing to lie to get a job, and three fifths of high school students and one third of college students have cheated on an exam at least once.

His research also indicates that many of the students lied when answering the survey questions about whether they lie, cheat, and steal.²

This breakdown of ethics and morality is not limited to high school and college students. It is so widespread that we can truthfully say we are facing a values crisis in America.

William Bennett, former Secretary of Education and a fellow at the Heritage Foundation, established his Index of Leading Cultural Indicators in 1993:

Values govern our underlying thoughts, attitudes, and decisions which result in behavior.

It showed that since 1960, there has been a 560% increase in violent crime. There has also been more than a 400% increase in illegitimate births, a quadrupling of divorces, a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes, more than a 200% increase in the teenage suicide rate, and a drop of 75 points in the average SAT scores of high school students. Today 30% of all births and 68% of black births are illegitimate.

The U.S. ranks near the top in the industrialized world in its rates of abortion, divorce and unwed births. We lead the industrialized world in murder, rape and violent crime. And in elementary education, we are at or near the bottom in achievement scores.

But there are other signs of decay, ones that do not so easily lend themselves to quantitative analyses. There is a coarseness, a callousness, a cynicism, a banality and a vulgarity to our time. There are too many signs of a civilization gone rotten.³

The popular observation is that everyone lies, many commit adultery, stealing is common, and cheating is everywhere. But, beyond that, there is the growing perception that such attitudes and behavior are okay.

Many Americans are convinced that if you don’t cheat on your income tax, you will pay more than your fair share. If you are a virgin on your wedding night, there is something wrong

with you. If you do not victimize others, you will become a victim yourself.

Sadly, the Christian community looks much like the rest of our society. Surveys often indicate little difference between the attitudes and actions of those who call themselves Christians and those who do not. Jesus’ notion that His followers should be salt and light appears to be for another time and place. Our salt has lost its saltiness and our lights have grown dim or flickered out.

Perhaps we have bought into the prevailing notion that we have a right to happiness and that happiness will arrive when we get more of whatever we want. In other words, we place higher value on what we don’t have than on what we do have.

In 1993 the United Nations formulated a twelve-point list of prerequisites for being happy. The list for each family unit included one radio, one bicycle, and one set of kitchen utensils.⁴ For most Americans that sounds more like a prescription for unhappiness!

Australian social analyst Richard Eckersley maintains that the core of our problem is a fundamental breakdown in values:

The modern scourges of Western civilization, such as youth suicide, drug abuse, and crime, are usually explained in personal, social, and economic terms: unemployment, poverty, child abuse, family breakdown, and so on. And yet my own and other research suggests the trends appear to be, at least to some extent, independent of such factors. They seem to reflect something more fundamental in the nature of Western societies.

I believe this “something” is a profound and growing failure of Western culture—a failure to provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose in our lives, as well as a framework of values. People need to have something to believe in and live for, to feel they are part of a community and a valued member of society, and to have a sense of spiritual fulfillment—that is, a sense of relatedness and connectedness to the world and the universe in which they exist.⁵

These are not the kind of statements we would have encountered in secular periodicals as recently as ten years ago. Increasingly, however, social analysts are calling for cultural renewal, acknowledging that the values of the past three decades have caused havoc, and that a spiritual renewal is sorely needed. As Eckersley adds: “The United States, the pacesetter of the Western world, shows many signs of a society under immense strain, even falling apart. Recent reports and surveys reveal a nation that is confused, divided, and scared.... Most Americans, one survey found, no longer know right from wrong, and most believe there are no national heroes.”⁶

Values determine who we are and what we do. Examining our values confronts everything about who we are, what we believe, and what we do. Because they define us so clearly, therefore, Christian values distinguish the followers of Jesus Christ from everyone else.

Seeking Christian values may not be easy or comfortable, but it is essential. For just as America is doomed unless we have values as a nation, the

cause of Jesus Christ is doomed unless we have values as Christians.

Defining Values

Value refers to worth. When we value something, we rate or establish its usefulness, importance, its general worth. In monetary terms, value is the price we assign to something.

In the TV game show “The Price Is Right,” contestants bid to determine the value of merchandise on display. If you know what you are doing, you will say that a bottle of spaghetti sauce costs \$1.79 and the new car costs \$23,500. If you get them reversed, you not only lose the game but demonstrate your stupidity to millions of viewers. After all, what kind of idiot thinks spaghetti sauce costs over \$20,000 or that you can buy a fully loaded Dodge Intrepid for less than \$2.00?

Sometimes the contestants are asked to put four or five items in order from costliest to cheapest, such as a car, a can of peas, a microwave oven, and a trip to Tahiti. It is a game of values—deciding which is worth what.

Now, imagine playing the same game, but where the items to be valued are telling the truth, winning the lottery, loving God, and being promoted at work. Which has the highest value? Is it more valuable to tell the truth or win the lottery? Is it more valuable to love God or be promoted?

Most of the time we discuss values in terms of behavior, but we need to distinguish that behavior is *what* we do and the way we do it, while values explain *why* we do what we do. Values govern our underlying thoughts, attitudes, and decisions which result in behavior. Even though we can’t see values, they are real and powerful, determining human behavior.

There is a sense in which everyone has values. It’s just that we put different price tags on the same things. One person will lie to get a job, while another person tells the truth even when it means losing a job. One person would never have sex outside of marriage at any price, while a prostitute sells sex for \$50 a trick. Everyone has values, just different values.

Brandweek is a weekly publication of the advertising and marketing industry, which one would expect to have little or nothing to do with values. *Brandweek*, however, publishes information about values that “drive consumer behavior.” (After all,

American values determine American shopping habits.) Claiming that the consumer “seeks a synthesis of extremes,” the magazine charted a comparison between traditional values and new values in the American marketplace:⁷

<i>Traditional Values</i>	<i>New Values</i>
Others	Self
Discipline	Indulgence
Material possessions	Experiences
Work	Leisure
Commitment	Choice
Conservative	Liberal
Obligation	Entitlement
At home	Away from home
Mass market	Niche market
Save	Spend

Much has been said and written about the debate between traditional values and new values, and “family values” has become a code word for certain political agendas. The debate has been divisive—even among Christians.

Could it be that the divisiveness among Christians comes from failure to define what are truly Christian values? For example, which is more Christian, “commitment” or “choice”? If the commitment is to wrong values or the choice is to sin, both are anti-Christian. If the choice is to follow Jesus Christ and the commitment is to God’s reign in our lives, both are Christian.

The debate could be lessened and believers united by focusing on values that are clearly set forth in the Bible rather than on those primarily forged by changing politics and cultural expressions. Central Christian values from the Bible begin with God and truth, salvation, godliness, faith, good works, love, fellowship, forgiveness, evangelism, suffering, prayer, and integrity. When we agree and practice these values, we are far less prone to the divisiveness that arises over differences in denominations, political parties, and cultural lifestyles.

What we value is what we love. Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’.... Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said that when He returns, the issue will not be progress, but readiness and faithfulness.

In other words, Jesus said, “Value God. Value your neighbor.”

Compare this with 1 Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

Money isn’t the problem. It’s the value we attach to money. The apostle Paul was telling young Timothy about people who valued money more than they valued Christianity. They took the money and left the faith and wrecked their lives.

Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to see what we think is really important. Dr. Ronald Iwasko, a veteran Assemblies of God missionary to South America, is one such person. In his present teaching role in North America, he is able to observe the popular American value system as both an insider and an outsider. Here’s what Iwasko sees:

“Worth is based on achievement.” This produces the desire for recognition based on achievement and promotes competition among believers, which results in alienation from one another. There is a sense of frustration, failure, and worthlessness if recognition is not forthcoming.

By contrast, the Bible teaches that “worth is based on birth” (Isaiah 43:1-7; 49:15-16; Luke 15:11-32; Ephesians 2:4-5; Titus 3:4-7).

“Determination + persistence + knowledge + resources + time = success in just about anything.” This “can do” attitude produces a challenge to do the most difficult, whether or not it is the most effective or necessary.

The Bible teaches that “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

“To know and to do are really important things.” This produces the emphasis on many books and much hard work—a feeling that we must know everything. There is no time for meditation, prayer, quietness, and solitude. So we study like crazy and are constantly active. Books line our walls, especially the “how to do it” kind.

Compare the Bible’s emphasis on *being* (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 1:3—2:22; 4:24; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:2).

“Education is the key to success.” This produces the drive for more academic degrees. Teach-

ing is seen as the chief task of missionaries and ministers.

The Bible says: Faith plus obedience is the key to *godly* success, whether or not blessed in material possessions and position (Ephesians 6:7-8; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12, 25; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Revelation 2:10).

“Role = Status.” For example, the company president is much more important (valuable) than the janitor. This perspective ignores the fact that while the president’s *role* may have much greater impact, his *value as a person* is no different than the janitor’s. This view causes people to strive for position or for high visibility and recognition.

The Bible teaches that all have the same status in Christ, but different roles (1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Ephesians 4:11-16; James 2:1-10).

“Equality in everything is very important.” This produces the demand for equality rather than equity and the need for more and more rules to protect personal rights.

The Bible tells us that God deals with us as unique beings, each according to his own individuality (Matthew 25:15).

“Money can buy the things that will achieve the status that will bring us acceptance so that we can be happy.” This produces the desire for more and more “things,” especially those that give us status in the eyes of others.

According to the Bible, only God can bring true happiness as the fruit of a close relationship with Him. Our happiness in this life is *not* paramount (John 15:1-11).

“Time is linear, proceeding toward a goal. Therefore, progress is paramount.” This produces obsessive-compulsive people with workaholic personalities.

Jesus said that when He returns, the issue will not be progress, but readiness and faithfulness (Matthew 24:24).

“The individual is supreme.” This produces the demand to do one’s own thing and the subsequent fragmentation of the body of Christ. Life is seen as a pyramid, and many Christians strive for the top.

The Bible says that the individual is important—but not at the expense of the group. There is to be diversity within unity (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16).

Iwasko adds that “all of these are ‘rules’ by which we attempt to satisfy our basic needs, especially for significance, acceptance and trust. Though

of the world, they have been adopted by North American Christianity, by and large.... These values in the American way of life only produce alienation, aggression, competition, frustration and turmoil.”⁸

While some may debate Dr. Iwasko’s critique of North American values, we cannot deny that he raises provocative issues for self-evaluation. Too often, we give little thought to defining or evaluating the values that are so much a part of our culture and ourselves; instead, we assume them to be right.

Basis of Values

Many believe that all values are relative—that they change depending on time and circumstances. It’s sort of like buying a Christmas tree. On December 21 the value is \$6 per foot of height. On December 26 the exact same tree isn’t worth six cents per foot. It’s relative—it all depends on the date.

So, who decides? Obviously, people decide. Humans determine their own values. The human market for Christmas trees sets the value on Christmas trees—and on everything else. Except the most important values are not about the price of Christmas trees. The most important values are moral values.

Much of the moral crisis facing America today is rooted in moral relativism. It is this relativism that says ...

- Lying is okay sometimes but not at other times.
- Adultery may be wrong for some people and right for others.
- Someone who is young or beautiful is more valuable than someone who is old or unattractive.
- A picture that was obscene in 1934 is not obscene in 1994.

For example, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that pornography is determined by community standards. But different communities have different standards, and different people in the same community have different standards.

When relativism is the rule, everyone is free to determine morality according to individual preference or belief. Some say homosexual behavior is normal and some say it is sinful. To some abortion is acceptable; to others it is abominable. It becomes

impossible to hold a reasonable debate, much less come to any kind of moral consensus, when there is no agreement that moral absolutes exist. When the basis for values is relative and human, those values constantly vary and change.

Theoretically, then, we humans might one day decide that murder, rape, child abuse, and fraud are good, while truth, generosity, love, and fidelity are bad. In a world with relative values the price tags are constantly changing.

The opposite alternative is values that are absolute. This means that they are greater than our culture, our generation, our situation, or ourselves. Truth is always good. Murder is always bad. Faithfulness is a constant virtue and adultery is a sin—whether society agrees or not.

Some people who do not believe in God believe in absolute values. They think that truth is good because truth is good. Stealing is bad because stealing is bad. These are essential values that exist all by themselves.

Such persons may live wonderfully moral lives with very high values, but their logic really doesn't make much sense. Values are always tied to persons. Something has value or lacks value because it is or isn't worth something to somebody. It's like diamonds or gold. Somebody has to value diamonds to make them gems; someone has to say that gold is valuable for it to be a precious and expensive metal.

All of this brings us to God. Those who believe in God are driven to the conviction that God sets the values for our lives. What is good and bad, right and wrong, is determined by God.

Take a look at the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). They are considered the greatest moral code ever written. These are not just ten good suggestions. They are far more than ten arbitrary ideas. They are moral absolutes based on who God is.

The Ten Commandments begin by saying that "God spoke all these words: 'I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.'" "In other words, God sets the values. God says what is worth more and what is worthless. He declares what is good and what is bad.

Who sets the prices at a major department store? Who decides what is more valuable and what is less valuable? Who determines the price of each piece

of merchandise? We don't. Those who manage the store do. They decide and tag the merchandise accordingly. Our decision is to buy or leave.

The same goes with Christian values. They are set by God, not by us. He says that loving Him and loving our neighbors are worth an eternal fortune. He says that lying, stealing, cheating, and immorality are wrong. God sets the values. Our decision is to buy or leave.

Sports writer Curt Brown tells the story of a Chicago Bears football player who made the sports page because of his values. Since professional athletes are too often known for valuing money, sex, and power, it is interesting to find one who is different:

Chicago fullback Bob Christian is a member of an elite club. He's a virgin. "I'm not ashamed of it," Christian told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "It's out of choice and out of the grace of God that I'm a virgin. I'm very thankful I still am because when I get married I'll have something special to give my wife. I think that's God's plan, for you to be committed to one person all your life."⁹

He's an athlete who is a Christian not only in name but also in values.

Determining Christian Values

To be a Christian is to commit to Christian values. It means that we agree with God on what has worth. It means that we love what God loves and hate what God hates.

God has already told us His values. They are written in the Bible. God values justice. God values love. God values truth. God values forgiveness. God values the keeping of commitments.

In a sense, we can simply open up the Bible like a catalog and read the prices. Go for what God says is worth it. Avoid the cheap stuff!

But what about specific issues on which God seems to be silent? The Bible does not contain the words abortion, pornography, or gambling. It does not mention anything about wearing T-shirts with pigs on the front.

The answer is to discover the values of God by

Those who believe in God are driven to the conviction that God sets the values for our lives.

knowing Him and understanding the values He has clearly taught. Ask, “What is God’s likely purpose in this situation? What is most consistent with God’s value of justice and law of love? What would Jesus most likely do in this situation?”

There is a strange little story recorded in 1 Samuel. It occurred when Saul was king of Israel. He and his son Jonathan commanded the army that was nearing battle with the neighboring Philistines.

Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, “Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!” So all Israel went down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, mattocks, axes, and sickles sharpened. The price was two thirds of a shekel for sharpening plowshares and mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening forks and axes and for repointing goads. So on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them. (1 Samuel 13:19-22)

How did Israel get itself into this position? Well, probably during peacetime it didn’t matter. “So what if we don’t have our own blacksmiths?” they probably said. “It’s cheaper to let the Philistines do it anyway.” But when peace turned to war, the Israelite army could not fight because the enemy had all the blacksmiths.

This becomes a parable for our times. If Christians and the church ignore the culture around them and leave values for society to identify, we are stuck when conflict comes. It is good to get along with our neighbors, but we cannot allow them to control the values by which we live.

When I was a boy I often heard my father quote one of his favorite sayings: “Your life is like a coin. You can spend it any way you want, but you can only spend it once.”

Spend life well. Don’t throw it away on that which is worthless. Spend life on the values that God says have great worth.

As Jesus put it, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Living Christianly

Politics will not solve individual or societal

problems. Even though millions of Christians have diverted time and resources into massive political activity, the trend has not been reversed. Not even politician William Bennett thinks politics has the answer: “Our first task is to recognize that it is foolish, and futile, to rely *primarily* on politics to solve moral, cultural and spiritual afflictions.”¹⁰

Some Christians have become politically aggressive and treat fellow believers as if they endorse sin because they do not march, petition, or politicize. At the other extreme are those who refuse to be socially responsible and criticize any political involvement as if it were proof of failure to trust God. While political responsibility is good and each must decide how much to be involved, let us not believe or give the impression that any political solution will create Christian values in society.

The highest value for a Christian is to live Christianly. That is, to live by the values of Jesus Christ regardless of the circumstances. Living Christianly is exactly the opposite of living circumstantially. Putting his life on the line, Martin Luther said, “Here I stand—my conscience bound by the Word of God—I can do no other.”

Living circumstantially is an expression of relativism. Those who do so work hard at manipulating circumstances to their pleasure and satisfaction. They assign the highest values to health, wealth, success, and happiness. They do whatever the situation requires to get what they want at the moment.

Living Christianly is an exercise of faith. For those who do, the highest value is thinking and behaving like Jesus Christ. While circumstances are still important, they become the vehicles to live by faith. If we have wealth, we demonstrate the way Jesus handled wealth: “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9). If we suffer, we value a response like His: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). This is the only way we can escape the tyranny of changing circumstance and win the values war.

What happens to us is not the most important thing in our lives; what is most important is taking the opportunity to live Christianly in whatever happens. This is true Christianity. This is the power of righteous living that turned the Roman Empire from a heathen nation to a Christian nation. It is what is happening in our generation throughout the People’s Republic of China.

Politics can fail. Rebellions can be suppressed.

Money runs out. Elections are lost. But living Christianly cannot be stopped. It is revolutionary. Even death cannot stop it. The early church historian Tertullian argued that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The more Christians Rome martyred, the more people became Christians—because those who lived Christianly also died Christianly, turning the treachery of their enemies to triumph.

Eileen Cronin-Noe’s life beautifully illustrates this kind of triumph over circumstances. She says: “My story begins between the 26th and 60th day after I was conceived. On approximately the 28th day, we develop limb buds, and this was also true in my case. Usually, the entire limb is developed by the 56th day. In my case, the development was hindered, and the agent which caused this was most likely Thalidomide.”¹¹

Thalidomide is a sedative that was prescribed to pregnant women in the 1960s, resulting in over 8,000 cases of birth defects in Europe and about 20 in the United States. Eileen Cronin-Noe was one of those babies. She was born with only a portion of her upper right leg and her left leg has only a small underdeveloped calf below the knee.

The response of Eileen’s parents reflected their values and shaped their daughter’s life:

Needless to say, there were monumental lawsuits brought by parents whose children were among [Thalidomide’s] victims. A number of abortions were also performed on women who were informed of the possibilities.

For my parents, who did not have this knowledge, abortion was not an option and would not have been even if they had been aware of my condition. My parents believed that it was God’s decision, and they were content with that decision. For this same reason, they did not pursue any legal action. For them, a lawsuit never would have addressed the issue.

Their belief has led me to accept, even prefer, things for what they are. Many people may find this difficult to believe. They feel lucky that amniocentesis is available to screen out babies born with less severe deformities than mine.

This thought frightens me, because I know that amniocentesis can’t tell any parents what kind of child they will have. It can only tell what disability might exist in that child.

Amniocentesis could never have told my mother that I would have artistic talent, a high in-

tellectual capacity, a sharp wit and an outgoing personality. The last thing amniocentesis would tell her is that I would be physically attractive.¹²

Eileen’s parents’ values informed and controlled their response to circumstances they never would have chosen. Eileen tells of difficult experiences, especially the cruelty of other children as she grew up. But she walks tall with artificial legs. She grew up taking ballet lessons, playing softball, dating, and fully enjoying high school social life. As a young adult she graduated from college and moved on to receive a master’s degree and begin doctoral studies. She married and became a mother.

Circumstances never tell the whole story of our lives. Most of our biographies are written from the values we hold and contain our responses to those circumstances.

Imagine the impact on this nation and generation if Christians simply lived like Christ.

Questions

For Thought:

1. If you died today, how would others eulogize you? By what values would you most likely be remembered?
2. What happens to us is not the most important thing in our lives; what is most important is taking the opportunity to live Christianly in whatever happens. In adverse circumstances, how often do you respond the way Jesus would?
3. How might you “simply live like Christ” in your present circumstances?

For Discussion:

1. In what ways are you most swayed by advertisers? What are the most powerful appeals?
2. What are some of the “new values” being forced upon us by changing politics and cultural expression?
3. What are some of the “worldly” values adopted by North American Christians that only produce “alienation, aggression, competition, frustration and turmoil,” according to Dr.

Iwasko?

4. Why will politics alone not solve individual or societal problems?

¹Garry Abrams, "Movement Grows to Teach Moral Values," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (January 1, 1993).

²Michael Josephson, "Study: Many Youths Feel Honesty Isn't the Best Policy," from the *Los Angeles Times*, appearing in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (November 13, 1992), 1A.

³William J. Bennett, "Commuter Massacre, Our Warning," *The Wall Street Journal* (December 10, 1993).

⁴*Time* (September 13, 1993), 56.

⁵Richard Eckersley, "The West's Deepening Cultural Crisis," *The Futurist* (November/December 1993), 10.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷ "The Yankelovich Monitor," *Brandweek* (November 30, 1992), 18.

⁸Ronald A. Iwasko, "The American Value System Exposed," unpublished lecture notes, North Central Bible College, Minneapolis, Minnesota (1994).

⁹Curt Brown, "On the NFL," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (October 9, 1993), 7C.

¹⁰Bennett, *op. cit.*

¹¹Eileen Cronin-Noe, "Thalidomide Baby Counts Blessings," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 2, 1987), 1F.

¹²*Ibid.*, 6F.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
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