

September 29 2007: Living in the Christian Culture

I and some other Central/Element young(er) people went to Overflow earlier this month. This is a rally of the Christian campus ministries at University of Arizona that is held every semestre. Once a while back, the event centered on an extended season of prayer. Last time (Spring '07), it was "Stations of the Cross", evangelical-style. This time it was a guest speaker, [Neil McClendon](#), pastor of [Grand Parkway Baptist](#) in Sugarland TX. Always there is worship music led by a campus ministry band, usually associated with [Priority](#).



So we arrive and sit and listen to the canned music and watch the (mostly UA) students mill around. Finally we get started, singing praise choruses and getting emotional and raising our hands and clapping and all that - just like any Christian worship time (or, rather, any *young people's* worship time). Then Neil gets up and brings a very powerful message on Matthew 5:13-16, being **salt** and **light** in the world. He pointed out that we are too used to living isolated from the world in our little Christian culture. I was riveted.

I knew other people were listening, since laughter erupted when he made pithy remarks about homeschoolers to make a point. Then he finished, everyone applauded, and the band got up and led another half-hour of worship choruses, with everyone getting emotional and raising their hands and clapping and all that.

I didn't. I couldn't get past the irony of being more-or-less directly rebuked for being isolated in a Christian culture, and afterwards everyone continued to live in the Christian culture. I was part of it, too; when I was at UA, I would hang out (occasionally) at the Baptist Student Union and attend the college/career class at church, and maybe have gone to some Christian Ministry activities (i.e., "ministry to Christians") on campus, but I couldn't say I was "salt and light" to anybody in my classes. So here we are, holding a "ministry to Christians" activity in the UA Student Union building, singing our songs and getting emotional and "enjoying" a message from an excellent speaker, *and it's like we didn't even hear it.*

I guess it's a paradigm sort of thing, and unless you are sensitive to seeing something that way (like I seem to be becoming), it doesn't register. On the drive home, back to Central Place, the others were talking about the worship band, and how ours could do better. I offered the suggestion that *we* were living in our little Christian culture, focusing on church entertainment rather than being "salt and light", and it was like a light came on in the discussion... briefly.

That same weekend, we took a group to see [Todd Agnew](#) and the other groups at a local concert. It was the same thing; the music playing (I appreciated the efforts of [Rush of Fools](#) to *lead worship* rather than merely *entertain*). Todd was promoting [World Vision](#) (which is okay, but I'd rather support [Compassion International](#)) and pointing out how Christians in American spend their money on themselves, and can't even scrape up \$35 a month to help a child in poverty overseas. Of course, this got a lot of clapping and whistling, which he silenced with his observation that "the American church is better at *cheering* than *doing*". Again, more clapping and whistling! And then the band gets into it, and everyone is getting emotional and raising their hands and clapping and all that.



Twice in one weekend, the message that we believers are in a self-serving, isolated, ineffective Christian culture, rather than being "salt and light" to the world around us. Twice, the audience hearing but not registering.

September 25 2007: Drinking Alcohol: Is it a sin?

My parents were Southern Baptists, and they raised us kids in the traditions of that denomination. In many of the churches we attended, the Church Covenant was pasted inside

the cover of the hymnals, and we would recite it before or after the Lord's Supper. Here's a typical (standard) Southern Baptist Church Covenant:

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we do now in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and secret devotion; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; **to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drink as a beverage**, and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our Saviour, to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that, when we remove from this place, we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

This is not *Scripture*, even if it has Scriptural elements in it. It is also not *LAW*. It is a *covenant*, an agreement that the members willingly enter into. It is a **Good Thing**, and I am pleased to bind myself under it as well. However, note the highlight.

I don't want anyone to get me wrong: I am a Southern Baptist Christian (that is, a Christian, who is also a Southern Baptist), and proud of it. As much as I appreciate my denominational upbringing and the context of my parents' church, however, I don't think Southern Baptists are without error. I have come to the point where I believe the prominence of evangelism - that is, regarding it as an **obligation**, and the failure to perform as a **sin** - is an error. I agree with the Covenant that says we ought to support it, and I do. I just think the Southern Baptists go beyond the covenant - and beyond Scripture - in making it an **obligation** binding on all believers.

We do the same thing with alcohol. Pastors regularly take passages out of the Bible that speak against drunkenness, and apply them to drinking alcohol at all. Church people are scandalized if others (particularly young people) admit to or are caught drinking, and sometimes at the mere mention of "b-b-beer"! But worst, it becomes a point of judgment against even unbelievers (who don't acknowledge Christ, let alone the Baptist Church Covenant); a big turn-off to unbelievers in general, and an impediment to the *other* great principle of evangelism!

About a month back, I was in Huntsville with some other guys, and we were done with the job early morning, so we decided to do some sight-seeing. One of the good old boys suggested a tour of the famous Jack Daniels whiskey distillery in Tennessee, which is a little over an hour's drive from Huntsville. So we went. Here's the tour photo (I'm second from the right):



I'll bet there are good Southern Baptists who would be scandalized that I did this, and more so that I would cheerfully admit it. But I don't want to promote an unbiblical, false, and harmful *religious* notion, like "drinking is a sin" (and "evangelism is an obligation"). So I will say - I enjoyed the tour, and I don't mind posting my picture at the distillery!

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That said, I still voluntarily bind myself to the Church Covenant regarding alcohol. I won't be rigid about it, particularly when travelling in Italy where wine is as much a part of the local culture as Coca Cola is to ours. I would counsel anybody, especially young people, to voluntarily become teetotalers out of love for Christ. But don't judge anybody else for their drinking! **It isn't a sin!**

(Actually, I wish we would promote *and honestly observe* the Church Covenant in more of our Southern Baptist churches. We are supposed to be *salt and light* in our world - that is, **different**, and supporting each other in a commitment to love and holiness would be a refreshing mark of realness to our world. Or so I maintain.)

September 20 2007: Evangelism: Is it a *duty*?

Eric Jones of [Transformed Daily](#) has a mini-series on evangelism ([here especially](#), also [here](#) and [here](#)). These, and a recent conversation/debate with a friend from my old church has reminded me of why I left my old church, and my current analysis of the "Evangelism" Question in the evangelical church.

The pastor of my previous church is an **evangelist**. As such, and as a pastor of a medium-size church, he isn't content to be an evangelist by himself, or even with a subset of

members also interested in evangelism - no, *everyone* in the church is expected to be an evangelist. The church moves from one evangelism event to the next, from one evangelism program to the next, and a major recurring topic of Sunday Morning sermons is how every Christian is required by God to be an evangelist. Well, things kept mounting until the straw that broke the camel's back arrived one Sunday in a sermon with the line: "If you're not out there winning souls, I have doubts about your salvation." It was this, along with my newfound appreciation for the [Purpose-Driven model](#) and the realization that this church was dreadfully and unfixably unbalanced, that induced us to find another place of service.

But this point was not arrived at lightly. He *was* my pastor, after all, and I needed to carefully consider whether what he was teaching (which is also the party line in the Southern Baptist convention, and most other evangelical denominations) was true. I struggled with this for months, read books, searched Scripture, and this is where I arrived:

The obligation for evangelism, as taught by evangelical churches, rests on three primary passages: The Great Commission, Paul's Example, and the Pastoral Letters. It also frequently invokes guilt-tripping, including "If you don't tell them, they will go to Hell; you don't want *that*, do you?", which is the logical fallacy of Appeal to Emotion. In contrast, I find two scriptural principles opposed to the universal mandate of evangelism: the Gifts and Offices, and the Lists of Christian Obligations.

The Great Commission

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

The teaching of the church is that this command applies to each Christian individually. However,

- In context, the command is given to the Apostles. There isn't anything in the context to indicate that this applies to each Christian individually. There are other commands Jesus gives the Apostles, such as going through Israel two-by-two, but the church doesn't teach that *those* commands are universally binding.
- If we assume that the Great Commission is binding on each believer, then this implies that each believer should be baptizing and teaching as well. However, the church reserves the ordinance of Baptism to be performed by the pastor (who officiates even if a lay person actually does the baptizing, as some churches allow), and the church readily admits that some but not all believers have the Gift and Office of teaching (see below). So why is Evangelism singled out for universal application?

I fully agree that the Great Commission does not apply to the Apostles alone, but rather to the Church that they would start, and which includes them. However, applying the Great Commission to the Church as a whole does not imply that the Great Commission applies (even in part) to each member individually. This would be the logical fallacy of saying "what is true of the whole is true of each part."

Paul's Example

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

II Corinthians 5:20

There are many passages, of which this is one of the most popular, in which Paul declares that "we" (which is taken to be "all Christians") are evangelists just like Paul was an evangelist. Which he was, no question, but is "we" really "all Christians"? In the context of II Corinthians, and indeed *all* of Paul's epistles, "you" (the ones to whom the letter is addressed) *are themselves Christians!* Not unbelievers being evangelized by Paul and the rest of "we"! So who is "we"? Paul and the other Apostles, clearly, the ones who are in the practise of writing epistles to churches to correct doctrinal or behavioural problems. Therefore, applying what Paul says about himself as an Apostle (which he does frequently) cannot be applied to every believer in an "evangelism" sense.

The Pastoral Letters

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God, and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

II Timothy 4:1-2

Often, passages in I and II Timothy and Titus are used to justify the doctrine of the universality of evangelism. Clearly, these books were written to *pastors* (bishops) *specifically*, along with other instructions such as how to appoint deacons, things which obviously do not apply to all (lay) believers.

So, if the common prooftexts used to support the doctrine that all believers individually are required to be evangelists actually fail upon closer inspection, are there other passages that counter this doctrine?

The Gifts and Offices

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has apointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

I Corinthians 12:27-28

The entire chapter of I Corinthians 12 is dedicated to the teaching that *not all Christians have the same gifts and roles in the church*. This seems so simple and obvious that even those who advocate the universal obligation of evangelism recognize the tension; the usual tactic is to acknowledge the teaching of gifts, then "poo-poo" and refer back to the above prooftexts. Yet "evangelist" is clearly a separate, non-universal role in Ephesians 4:11, another place where the teaching of Gifts and Offices is given.

The evangelical church readily accepts the teaching of Gifts and Offices, and there are no end of "tests" conducted by churches for members to discover their spiritual gifts and where they fit in the church. Curiously, the "evangelism" gift is not treated the same way as the others.

Lists of Christian Obligations

At the end of nearly every epistle is a list of Christian obligations:

- Wives, honour your husbands
- Husbands, love your wives
- Children, obey your parents

- Slaves, honour your masters
- Pray without ceasing
- Rejoice evermore
- and others

Guess what's missing? An obligation for each believer to "share his faith". Seems to me that if the case for a universal obligation for evangelism were really there as clear as the evangelical church would have it, it would be clearly set forth in the lists of other clearly-set-forth obligations. Yet it isn't.

Summary

Now, if you are a pro-evangelism Christian, up to this point you have been developing the opinion, "You're just trying to justify not sharing your faith." Not so! I am trying to discredit the notion of an **obligation or duty or "law" for evangelism!**

- One of the prime features of the Modern Church is an incipient legalism: Don't drink, Don't smoke, Don't cuss, Put on your nice clothes for Sunday Morning. And so forth. But *Christ condemned the legalism of the Pharisees!* Christ freed us from rules and laws! Applying an **obligation** for evangelism is the RELIGION that Jesus hates!
- **It Doesn't Work.** The church has been doing this evangelism thing for more than a hundred years. Yet Christianity in the West is dying. Christianity in China is increasing exponentially; do we seriously think this is because Chinese (underground) Christians are out "soul-winning"? Beating up the people for lack of progress is what Egyptian taskmasters and bad American managers do.
- We recognize that rank-and-file evangelicals are unwilling or afraid to "share their faith". The response of the church is to condemn them, or offer "share your faith" classes, or construct "witnessing" programs. The fact that we have to keep changing programs (because they become stale and ineffective) so quickly demonstrates that programs **don't work**.

There's a better way. The *one* passage that comes to mind involving evangelism and all believers is:

But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.

I Peter 3:15

I maintain that when Christians get excited about Jesus (not about flashy church services and great worship music) and *experience Him personally* (which really is the story of the New Testament, isn't it?), and develop the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) including JOY and LOVE (things everybody wants, including unbelievers, even unbelieving Chinese), and it shines out of us, the telling will be as natural and as unstoppable as those Apostles who were *jazzed* about seeing the risen Jesus! And we won't even *have* to say anything! They will ask us!

When the church focuses on plugging believers in to Jesus, we will see souls won. The longer the church keeps hammering on the evangelism **obligation**, the less evangelism there's going to be!

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Update: I had previously seen [Mark D. Roberts'](#) series on [missions](#). I especially appreciated Part 6, where Dr. Roberts emphasizes that we cannot go out on mission except through the power of the Holy Spirit, and also Part 8, where the key to personal mission is given: *just be*

honest (or *Just be yourself*). I suspect that persons chosen by God to be pastors of churches are already given an urge to evangelism, which they then tend to project on all other believers (improperly, as I argue above), and this comes through in places in his series, but overall, I think Dr. Roberts is on track for this subject, and more balanced than the usual evangelical position.

September 14 2007: *The Real Power Behind A Church*"

A few weeks ago, I was in Huntsville supporting a TOW-RF test flight. Toward the end of the week, we discovered there was a sell-off firing ("Fly-To-Buy") on Monday, and someone needed to stay over the weekend. I volunteered.

Well, not only was I the most logical candidate, but I also had ulterior motives! So when Sunday Morning arrived, I visited my friends at [West Huntsville Baptist](#). I renewed acquaintance with some people I had met before, and met a new friend, Jasper, and his family, who invited me to sit with them during the service. During and after the service, it was clear to me that this was a *real* church who loved Jesus, rather than a typical, merely traditional church, and part of this opinion is influenced by something new I learned about WHBC.

I already knew...

- The church has established small-group meetings during the week in their ministry region across Limestone and Madison counties. So Fellowship and Discipleship are more than theory spouted in a Sunday Morning-Only church.
- The church has partnered with a failing elementary school in their neighborhood; supporting administrators, helping teachers, and mentoring students. Their efforts have brought the school up to just below the "failing" line. So "God's Love" is more than just a Sunday School story to these people.

The new thing I learned is...

- In the past, as the church has grown, occasionally the church splits (amicably, presumably), and half the church goes off somewhere else in the area and starts a new church. I've visited a couple of those spin-off churches! This is *better* than planting a "mission" church - this is actually putting part of *themselves* into a new church!

The church (right now) is not particularly large. The bulletin listed (in typical Baptist fashion) last week's Sunday School attendance as 160, and Worship attendance as 242. This is a "medium small" church in Baptist circles, perhaps 3 or 4 times the size of Central Baptist Tucson. Yet, they have been doing a lot of the things Central and The Element would like to do. Is it the location (Bible Belt)? Is it the quality of people?

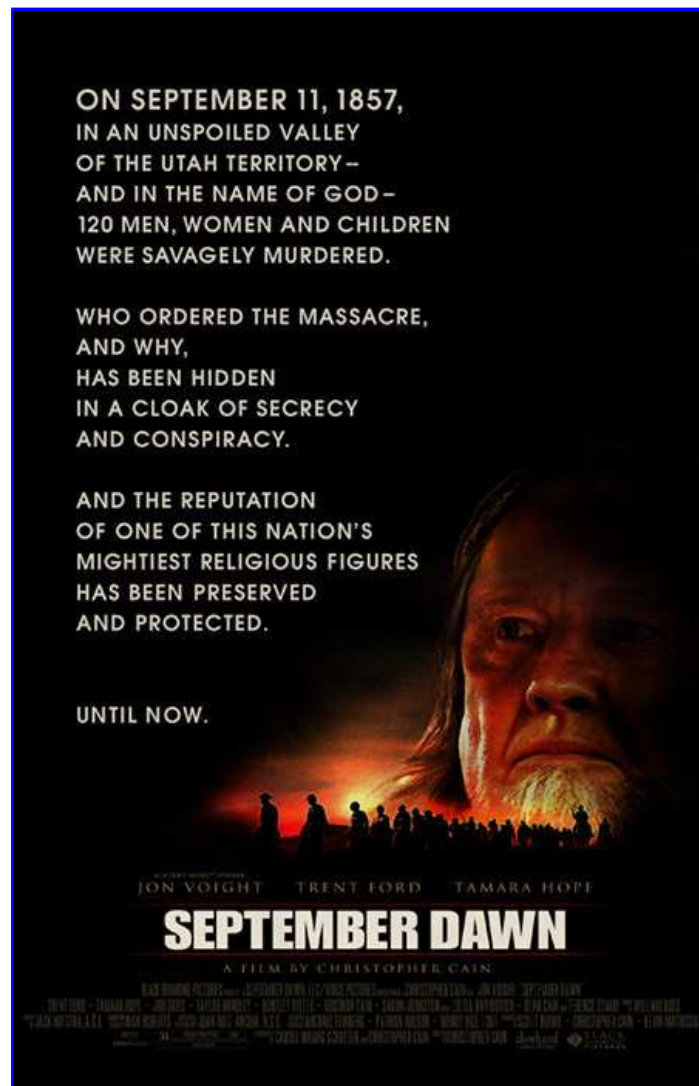
I believe part of the answer was also on the back of the bulletin. They have **FOUR** designated prayer seasons during the week: One for men, one for ladies, one for everyone on Sunday afternoon, and one for everyone on Wednesday afternoon. In the bulletin, official ministry activities of the church.

In Matthew 21:13, when Jesus throws the merchants out of the Temple, He affirms what the Old Testament had said in Isaiah 56:7 -

My House shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

Not a house of music (although God did ordain music), and not a house of preaching or teaching (although that certainly did happen, and Jesus did it Himself). No, the primary function of the Israelite Temple was a place to meet God. Surely that is the primary function of the church today. So a church that does not emphasize prayer - *corporate, purposeful, and led by the leaders* - cannot expect success at its other endeavors, while a church that *does* - like West Huntsville Baptist Church (and [Brooklyn Tabernacle](#)) - will experience God's blessings.

August 31 2007: Relativism on "Proselytizing"



On August 22, 2007, Hugh Hewitt interviewed Chris Cain, who produced "September Dawn", and Jon Voight, who starred in it. At one point in the interview (transcript [here](#)), Jon makes the following statement:

Well, I think that what we're facing in Iraq and around the world right now is a totalitarian movement. And you can ask about how totalitarian movements evolve. I look at this time in our history as a time not dissimilar to 1938, when everybody was saying well, Hitler is this, Hitler is that, just talk to him, and all of that. And then we realized that we're in grave, grave danger. And finally, after you know, the population gets enough and then we have Pearl Harbor, we realize what's at stake, and we realize we're in the gun sight, right? And then we had communism, which is another totalitarian movement. And it comes from many different things, but it comes from a person saying everybody's got to think our way, or they're out. And that's why I don't... I feel religions are very, very important. I think morality comes from religions, and our country is based on religious principles. And yet, you know, they can be distorted and used toward a totalitarian aspect.

Which is fine, as far as it goes. But he goes on to say:

And that's why I don't like proselytizing. I think that the danger is, finally,

proselytizing has got to go. We can't insist that everybody see the world through our glasses. We have to look at everybody as individuals, and we have to be able to have dialogue with all religions, and we have to respect each other. Once that respect happens, then religions can come together and we have some fun.

Why do so many people equate "proselytizing" with "coersion"? This is the relativists' worldview in action - if all [religious] truths are equivalent, then you pick whatever you want, or stay wherever you were born, and leave everyone else strictly alone. But the non-relativist sees that it is important for others to be **right**. Some religions, like statist (totalitarian) Islam, *do* take the position "convert or die". But this *is* **COERSION**. It is *not* **PROSELYTIZING**. There may have been flavours of this in statist (totalitarian) Christianity in Europe or the American Colonies a long time ago, but the model held by the Bible, and evangelical Christians, is not "coersion", but merely *informing*, offering people our perspective on Reality and giving them an opportunity to take it for themselves. This seems so innocuous and inoffensive... except for people who (stridently) insist that Christians (or indeed, anything but their own relativist worldview) have no claim to *actually being* (exclusively) **True!**

August 25 2007: A Death in the Family

We've had two deaths in the family lately.

A few years ago, our daughters got it in their heads that they wanted birds as pets. Mommy (who had prior experience with keeping birds) and Daddy tried to dissuade them with arguments of the unpleasantness of cleaning cages, or the responsibility for feeding and caring for them, and the incompatibility with the *cat* pets we already had, but to no avail. We got two parakeets - Prince and Heather.



We had the understanding that birds tend to live a long time. Turns out that this isn't true for many bird species bred particularly to be pets (like parakeets). We were wondering why Prince took to sleeping all the time and ceased singing and dancing and admiring himself in the mirror like he used to, but nothing serious appeared to be wrong, so we figured he would either get better or get worse. Then a few weeks ago, the girls were cleaning the cage and realized that Prince was really quite ill. So while I was (conveniently) absent on business travel, Jerri took the bird to a bird vet and discovered that Prince (and Heather) were close to the end of the expected 5-8 years of pet-bred parakeet lifespan, and Prince was not expected to live much longer.

The vet offered to take Prince (in lieu of expensive vet bills) for what amounts to "hospice" care, and since we didn't want Heather to be lonely (or Prince either, in his last days), we let the vet take Heather, too. We walked out of the vet with an empty cage and sad hearts. Even though we did not actually experience Prince's death, the awareness of it, and the end of our bird-keeping days, was painfully real.

We've had another death in the family, much more significant than a bird. This family is the Evangelical Christian Community in Tucson, and the death is of Palo Verde Christian School.

[PVCS](#) is the oldest continuously-operating private Christian schools in Tucson. It was started years ago by Palo Verde Baptist Church at their facility in the Pima/Grant/Alvernon/Country Club neighborhood. At one point it was K-12, and it spun off the high school grades as a separate entity, [Pusch Ridge Christian Academy](#). At another point, a decision was made to become independent of Palo Verde Baptist, to continue using their facility, but to no longer be dependent on their support and therefore subject to their control.

To some extent, this is good, that a church should not dictate terms to a school. We know other Christian church schools in the area in which the administrators, and sometimes the

teachers, are required to be *members* of the church. Unfortunately, this requires the school must be totally dependent on tuition for income. Since PVCS was an urban school, and attracted lower to middle class families, they were constrained in the level of tuition they could charge. As a result, they could not pay the teachers living wages, and it was difficult to retain good teachers. Some excellent teachers continued, regarding their service to the school as a ministry, but this could only persist so long. So this year, the School Board voted to close the school.

So PVCS was caught in a dilemma - they could not survive on their own, and they didn't want to be under the thumb of *a* church (pride?). But was PVCS a *business* or a *ministry*? If just a business, then we aren't out much. Private Christian schools can survive as independent businesses in the suburbs, with upper-middle class clients, rather like [Desert Christian](#). We decided to send our children to PVCS, and later Desert, for the purpose (on my part, at least) of supporting a Christian alternative to public schooling. But this means very little if such an alternative can only exist in the suburbs (as *PRIVATE* Christian schools), and not in the urban area (as private *CHRISTIAN* schools), where the need is. No, we need such schools as *ministries*.

The problem really comes in because churches insist on doing their ministries themselves. All the Christian schools (in the urban area) connected with a church are the ministry of *that* church, subject to the whims of *that* church, including termination when the church members tire of the burden of a school. The only way such a ministry can really operate on such a long-term basis as PVCS did is if *several* churches cooperate *together* at the ministry, with a School Board (there's always one, anyways) to be the joint oversight by the involved churches.

But Evangelical churches don't seem to cooperate much, don't want to share ministries much, certainly not ones like schools, which do not much further the short-range goal of "evangelism", or stand to add members to the rolls.

And *that* is the real cause of this death in the family, one I deeply mourn.

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Update: According to their website, PVCS is closing *for this year only*, and intends to reopen next year. God bless His work. I am still fearful, however, that unless they address the fundamental problem, they cannot escape the result.

August 05 2007: An Inescapable Worldview

Our concept of reality colors everything we do or think about. This is what "**Worldview**" is all about. Being aware of your own Worldview helps you analyze your reactions, and with this awareness you can choose your actions to be consistent with your Worldview. It can also help you analyze the thoughts of others, if you understand their Worldview, even partially.

This is apparently the case with Richard Dawkins, who is currently America's Foremost Atheist. Dawkins has written a book, [The God Delusion](#), to promote his Worldview, which unfortunately includes a hatred of all things religious, or at least Christian. I have no intention of reading it, since it would do me little good (other than understanding better how to argue with atheists, which I have already done, with little effect) and would serve as a distraction (I have too many books I need to read already!), but [Tim Challies](#) has read it, and written an analysis. Five paragraphs into his book review, Challies observes that Dawkins apparently believes that God must have come from somewhere, too.

If you are a (consistent) atheist, you must be a materialist, and an evolutionist. Inanimate matter and energy and physical laws are Ultimate Reality. All life and intelligence has evolved. Therefore, if there is any "god" out there, who is alive and intelligent enough to design and create other life forms, must have evolved also. If Challies' analysis of Dawkins' thought is correct, what Dawkins is saying is that, if the origin of life, with the appearance of supernatural design, is improbably, then the origin of the Designer is even *more* improbable.

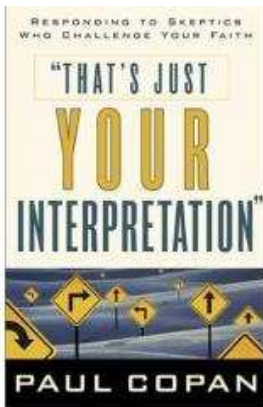
See what is going on? Dawkins interprets "god" in the context of his own Worldview! If matter and energy are the only Ultimate Reality there is, then "god" must have arisen somehow, too, in time and space, just as we have. Of course, the Theistic Worldview doesn't hold anything like this; rather, God *Himself* is the Ultimate Reality, existing without beginning or cause, every bit as much as the atheists' Universe (in their Worldview) is the Ultimate Reality, existing without beginning or cause.

Now, Dawkins may have set up a "strawman", a "god" concept that *doesn't* represent what Christians believe, and then mocks it. But if this is what he *really* believes, then he has committed the error of assessing someone else's Worldview inside the context of his own. Without realizing it.

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It's possible that Challies has misunderstood Dawkins, and it's further possible that I have misunderstood Challies, and in fact, Dawkins does *not* hold this view of "god". However, what I am saying above holds true regardless: Being aware of the concept of "Worldview" enables you to assess other people's Worldviews, as well as your own. Ignorance of this concept exposes you to the danger of misunderstanding other people's fundamental beliefs, and making misdirected and irrelevant arguments about them.

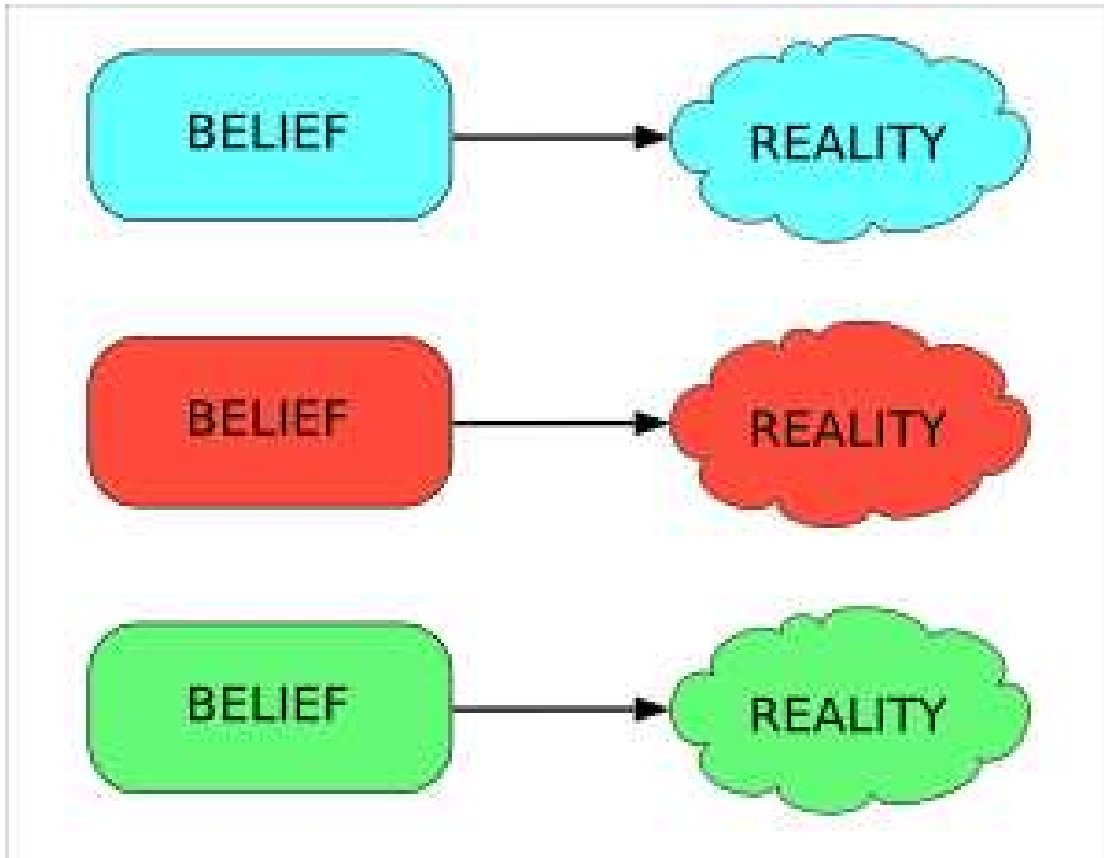
July 17 2007: Relativism (1)



I've started reading this book by [Paul Copan](#), who is a Christian philosopher/apologist who specializes in post-modernity and relativism. So far, it's a pretty good book, and i'll probably have more to say about it later, but it got me thinking about this whole "This is *my* truth, and that is *your* truth" idea.

Perhaps "orthodox" post-modernity teaches that that cultures, not individuals, create a "narrative" to explain the world and provide a framework upon which society is built. But it appears that post-modern individuals depart from the "orthodox" text-book line, and many seem to ascribe to the idea that "**We create our own realities**". I'm not sure how else you can take the statement "That may be true for you, but it isn't true for me".

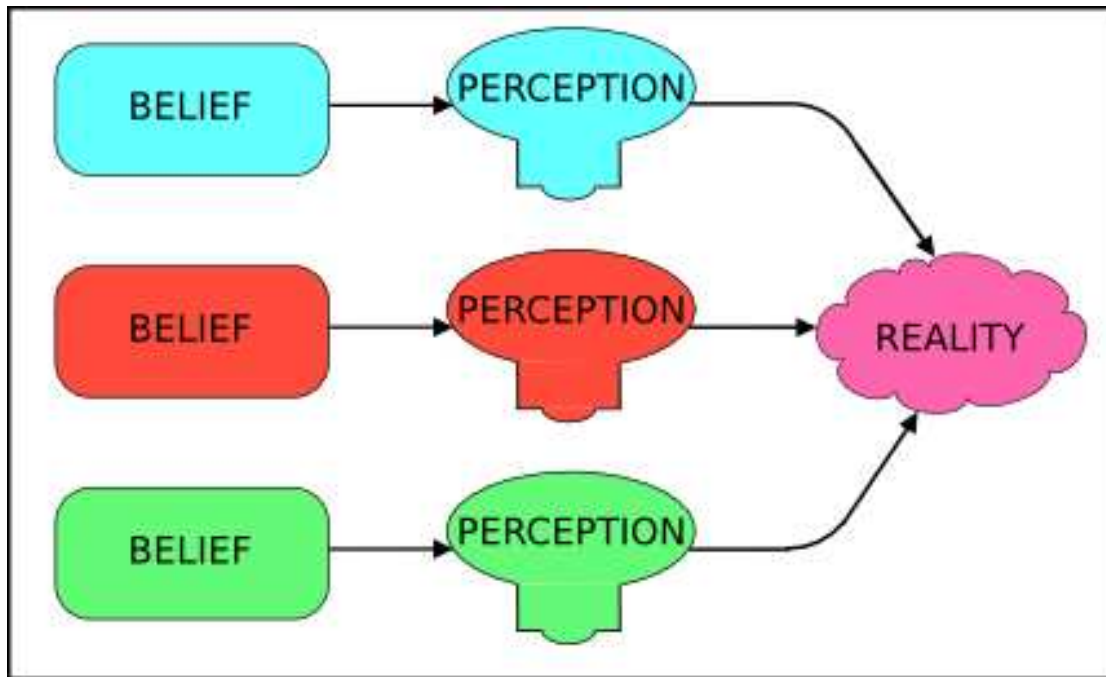
But what does this statement mean, really? Is it like this?



Where, say, a Buddhist believes in reincarnation, and when that Buddhist dies, she actually gets reincarnated, because that is the reality she has created for herself. Meanwhile, a Christian believes in heaven, and when she dies, she actually goes to heaven, because that is the reality she created for herself. At the same time, an atheist believes there is nothing but this world, and when he dies, he ceases to exist, because that is the reality he created for himself. A multitude of beliefs, a multitude of realities, and a multitude of actual yet incompatible outcomes.

This seems impossible, but it *does* appear that's what people have in mind when they say "that is *your* truth, and this is *my* truth". Or is it, really? The Buddhist isn't really thinking, "I will get reincarnated, but you might not be"; she is really thinking, "*everybody* gets reincarnated, whether they believe it or not". Similarly, Christians believe that *everybody* is going to face a judgment by a holy God, whether they believe it or not, and that belief or lack of it will determine their eternal destiny. And atheists certainly don't believe that a spiritual reality might exist for others but not for them personally; they fight for the proposition that there is no spiritual reality *at all* for *anybody*. This multi-reality construct may be the meta-truth that individual post-moderns profess, but there is a disconnect between this and the personal reality they actually hold, and it seems to me that this disconnect is a result of not thinking through the implications of their beliefs.

I think that *this* is what is actually going on:



Everyone has their own beliefs, but those beliefs are the expressions of their perceptions of a single, common, universal Reality. These perceptions combine analysis of observations (by the individual himself or by trusted authorities), cultural conditioning, and personal desires and expectations. So everybody has their own *perception* of reality, and certainly "what you perceive to be true is not what I perceive to be true". However, there is still only one Reality, and some beliefs and perceptions will align more completely with that Reality than others. The extent to which a person's belief system corresponds to Reality will directly affect that person's life and eternal destiny. Being wrong about some details about Reality is much better than being wrong about the essential nature of Reality!

I think that everybody tacitly understands this, and obviously believes that their own beliefs and perceptions match Reality better than others (or they would change their beliefs *). If this is the case, then the statement "that may be true for you, but not for me" isn't made to express actual belief, but as a defense against religious discussion that might prove uncomfortable because the person's cherished beliefs are questioned.

And this is where something interesting appears: Someone who has a belief about reality probably understands that people who don't share that belief in a substantial way are in danger of the consequences of not conforming to Reality. Yet in the post-modern view, the danger of having one's *feelings* or *self-esteem* damaged by having their beliefs challenged is **more serious than** the danger of being wrong about essential Reality. Now, some belief systems, the consequences of being wrong are not so great; if there is reincarnation (Buddhism, New Age) or no hell (liberal Christianity, Mormonism, etc.), then being wrong doesn't matter to terribly much, and it's easy to see why those belief systems don't attempt to challenge the beliefs of others. However, for some belief systems like Christianity and Islam, being wrong *is* a serious problem! Hence those system's emphasis on conversion, and those systems' incompatibility with post-modernism.

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* There may be an exception for those who believe that it doesn't matter what you believe, and that religious belief about a supernatural reality is merely a game, something to be chosen at whim to suit personal preferences or feelings at the moment. Observe, of course, that this position of religious irrelevance is *itself* a religious belief, and subject to defense by the "true for you but not for me" line!

July 04 2007: American Civil Religion

We visited [Cornerstone](#) last Saturday eve, partly because I hadn't dropped by in quite a while, but mostly because Aunt Kris told us that their children were "leading worship". When we got there, of course, the *real* attention-getter was the broken air conditioning. July in the Old Pueblo is hot (duh), but I couldn't help thinking, with all the complaining going on, our Tucson ancestors didn't have air conditioning, or even swamp coolers till later. I would have figured homeschoolers would have delighted to experience history like our ancestors!

The purpose of the service that evening, as it turned out, was an Independence Day focus. "Leading the worship" was singing patriotic songs, and (in typical homeschooler style, which seems to turn every public gathering into a school recital) kids quoting the Declaration of Independence and The Gettysburg Address.

Now, I have been through that sort of thing before. With the high concentration of military families at Central, Memorial Day and Independence Day focus services tend to have the same patriotic focus. It was the same at [FSBC](#). I'll bet it is very similar in evangelical churches across the Nation.

In fact, I could defend this from Scripture. Christians are supposed to be good citizens, honor and obey those in authority over us, pray for the civil powers, etc. Nobody should be more of a conscientious patriot than a Christian.

Then today, I heard a segment of the [Dennis Prager Show](#), in which he pointed out that the Jews have maintained an ethnic cohesion through three millenia, mostly due to their common **rituals**, particularly Passover. America, on the other hand, has abandoned our civic rituals and observations - all our holidays are merely time off work and school. Dennis suggests that someone ought to reinstate a ceremonial event for July Fourth.

Let's contrast these two ideas:

1. Real Christian belief will reinforce patriotism
2. National ceremonial observances will reinforce patriotism

Which is more powerful? Which lack is our *real* problem? I think Dennis' column gives away part of the clue when he describes how "Merry Christmas" has changed into "Happy Holidays". It has also changed from a spiritually meaningful time to a commercial event. Similarly, prayer in school: It changed from an expression of Christian belief (surely, some time in the past) to a civic religious formality, and then dropped entirely. Even the efforts of some well-meaning believers to reinstate prayer in school cannot achieve what is really needed, to recover the original Christian significance of that school prayer. The problem is, our culture has become **less Christian**. Shocker, I know. Duh. But Dennis' loss of national ritual is a **symptom** of the decay of Christian commitment, not an isolated *cause* of the decay of patriotism. In fact, Mr. Prager's religious heritage should teach him the same thing: It wasn't the lack of religious ceremonies that brought about the destruction of the Israelite kingdoms; rather, it was the Israelites' *rejection* of God's Truth that resulted in both.

TRUTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN CEREMONY. This was true for Israel, several times in the past. It is true for America now. And it is true for many individual Christians that attend their churches looking for a particular form of ceremony, rather than a living connection with the Almighty God.