

Joel Belz

CONSIDER THESE THINGS

observations on God's work in the world

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CONTENTS

Editor's Preface	ix
Balance on the High Wire	11
Biscuits and Knives	14
Camels' Noses and Pornography	17
Deferring Our Desires	20
More Ethical Than Abraham?	24
Americans Can't Stand Authority	29
Behaving Is Harder Than Believing	33
A Competent Turk	38
People of The(ir) Word	43
Checking the Owner's Manual	47
The Problem of Beginnings	52
Who Killed History?	57
Hugging the Center Line	62
Truth Should Be Expected	66

The Nature of Authority	71
Thanks-giving: an Antidote	75
A Perfect Marriage	79
More Than Democracy	82
Learning to Live With Freedom	85
Democracy Can Be an Empty Hoax	89
Atrium	92
About the Author	95

BALANCE ON THE HIGH WIRE

A man came to our town two weeks ago and advertised boldly in the local paper that he was going to defy the laws of God—in public.

Well, it wasn't exactly the way it sounds. The man was a tightrope walker with Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. What the newspaper ad really said was that for \$9 I could watch this fellow defy the laws of gravity. I'm not at all sure the acrobat knows that God controls gravity.

I didn't go to the circus, but the acrobat's claim set me thinking. What with all the lawbreaking going on in the world today, why would someone set out to break another one of God's laws so gratuitously?

The fact is, of course, that there are two distinct categories of God's laws. There are the ones like "don't lie," "don't steal" and "don't commit adultery"—laws that seem all too easy to break. Then there is that other set of laws like " $2+3=5$," "yellow+blue=green," and "two solid objects can't occupy the same space at the same time"—

laws that some of us work pretty hard to break, but which seem to get more and more certain as time goes on.

That's where appearances are deceiving, in several ways. We all know (even non-Christians know it) that when you try to break that second set of laws, you end up getting broken yourself; but we suppose that somehow with the right kind of cleverness we can sneak around the first set of laws and get off scot-free. It doesn't work that way at all. The evidence is that in the long run, on balance, we would be far better off ignoring the second set of rules and observing the first. The damage we would do would be severe, but not so long-lasting.

In fact, human misery is summarized in our rebellion against both sets of laws. Most of us would test even the first set of God's physical laws more regularly except that somehow we discover more quickly that life doesn't work as well when we do. Without that short tether, we'd be just as messed up there as we are with God's moral laws.

Part of our task as Christians is to discover, and then proclaim to others, how God's overall rules for life—both moral and physical—are designed to bring harmony and balance in all of life. This is true for us as individuals, as families, as communities, as nations, and in the world at large. Looking at the news makes it easy to see what we're doing wrong. Looking at God's Word is the best way to

Consider These Things

discover how we're supposed to do it right.

About that acrobat. He wasn't really breaking God's laws. Whether he knew it or not, he was observing them. That's why he kept his balance—something people paid to watch him do.

BISCUITS AND KNIVES

Our eight-year-old looked at me with astonishment. Sitting just to my left at the dinner table, she had been attacking a wonderfully tender biscuit with her dinner knife.

“Don’t cut it with your knife,” I told Elizabeth. “Use your fingers, and break it apart.”

Use my fingers?

Elizabeth, more than anyone at our table, had been reminded dozens of times in recent months not to use her fingers, but her silverware instead. How arbitrary can all these rules be? I could feel the same bewildered questions ringing the table.

Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt got a good going over for the next few minutes as we explored whether the “don’t-cut-your-biscuit-with-your-knife” rule was indeed arbitrary, or if it was rooted in some more basic principle.

“I think,” I proposed, not particularly fearing to wade in where I knew nothing at all, “that it probably has to do with showing what you think of the cook. Biscuits are

Consider These Things

supposed to be tender, not tough. If you use your knife on your biscuit, you're telling the cook that her biscuits are tough—that she was a failure in making them the way they were supposed to be.”

Soon, however, another dimension of the whole subject hit the dinner table. Whether or not the etiquette books ever laid arbitrary rules on us, what about God's intentions? Are His commandments, instructions, and rules just something He dreamed up to clutter our lives with things impossible or inconvenient to remember? Or are they rooted in deeper significance?

God's written Word, and even His creation, sometimes seem arbitrary. To some, the arbitrariness is there when they hear God say that sex is right only with the person you're married to. To others, that rule makes sense, but they struggle when God states that the tithe is His. You may be faithful to your spouse and a regular tither, but still wonder why God prohibited the Israelites in Deuteronomy 22:11 from wearing clothes made of both linen and wool. Admit it: Doesn't that rule prompt you to look up from the dinner table in amazement?

It should. When we quit being astonished at the complexity of what God has ordered in His creation, we've missed His purpose in putting us here. His rules for us as individuals, for society at large, and for His creation

are never willy-nilly. Every one of them means something. The sooner we find out what they mean, the more we can revel in His greatness and goodness.

The no-knife-to-the-biscuit rule turns the eater's thoughts to the biscuit's creator. A few days later, I asked Elizabeth if that still made sense. She said it did, but that night I had to remind her to use her fork with her casserole.

DEFERRING OUR DESIRES

“Economists Frank Levy and Richard Michel have calculated [that] in 1949 it took just 14% of an average 30-year-old man’s paycheck to make the payments on an average home. By 1985 the figure was 44%.”

That’s the kind of comparison that grabs your attention and in the process makes you feel a little sorry for yourself, or at least for your children if you were blessed to get your own mortgage before 1977 or so.

Instead of feeling a little sorry, maybe we should feel a little guilty.

Robert Kuttner proposed a point in the *New Republic* in quoting Levy and Michel by suggesting that a family home is fast becoming a luxury available only to the wealthy—or to those who inherited enough money from their parents to buy a house for themselves.

I believe Kuttner, while making an intriguing point, misses a more important one. The point he misses is that while the relative cost of housing may indeed have increased

dramatically since 1949, something else has increased even more dramatically: Our expectations of what life owes us.

Try to think of a single person in your whole acquaintance who lives in a home less comfortable than the one his or her parents had at the same stage in life. Most of us, clearly, arrived at young adulthood assuming some kind of inalienable right to three bedrooms, two baths, a garbage disposal, and at least one fireplace. No, that's not a caricature—it is literally what peer pressure has led us to expect of life.

My point here has little to do with the price of houses either now or 40 years ago. It has instead to do with society's inability to defer the gratification of its desires. The main reason average housing takes 44% out of a person's paycheck now as opposed to 14% a generation ago is that the average person's expectations for the housing he absolutely must have are so much greater than they used to be. The same thing is true for cars, clothes, leisure time, travel, and all the other things that drive our family budgets up, up, and up.

We Christians are, in this regard, virtually indistinguishable from the society we live in. And by blending in with our surroundings, we have missed a strategic opportunity for witness to a key element of the gospel.

Make no mistake here. This is not another call to simple living, at least not on a permanent basis. The guilt

I suggest we ought to feel has less to do with enjoying the good things God has made than it does with the timing in which we are privileged to enjoy them. Like the world around us, we Christians tend to assume early enjoyment is our prerogative.

But Christians of all people should understand that the MasterCard mentality is not the way to master life. The pattern Jesus established was one of deferring desires—not because the fulfillment of desire is wrong, but because “my time has not yet come.” Most of us think our time has come five minutes after the desire first pops into our minds.

Yet few concepts are more central to a Christian way of thinking than the ideal of deferring a present desire—in the confidence that something richer lies down the road. It is a constant and unrelenting theme of scripture.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Deferral now, rich reward later. He understood the concept perfectly, and His obedience to the death of the cross is, of course, the key to His and our future glory.

The theme permeates our lives. Train now, win the game later. Pull the weeds now, enjoy the sweet corn later. Skip the dessert now, enjoy a trim waistline later.

The principle is everywhere except in our consumer consciousness. There, the infection still rages. And for

such an infection to rage within the Christian community is costly in two ways.

First, it is costly in terms of wasted resources. In following the world's pattern of satisfying so many of our desires almost as soon as we feel them, we are spending far more than we should on interest and carrying charges. We would literally have 50% more to spend on what we want—maybe even 100% more—if we were patient to wait until the resources were in hand instead of buying right now. Think what impact that could have on the underfinanced ministries of God's kingdom.

Second, it is costly in terms of a wasted witness. If Christians were known around the world as people who through their patience, thrift, and keen sense of priorities lived prosperous lives, the gospel they preach and teach would have more credibility than it does now when so many of us spend most of our years playing catch up with the finance companies.

The problem isn't that too few of us have inherited money from our parents to buy the houses of the style in which we have become accustomed to live. The problem is our impatience with living in a slightly lesser style. It would be a great thing if Christians could teach such a lesson to the world. But before we can teach it persuasively, we'll probably have to learn it for ourselves.

PEOPLE OF THE(IR) WORD

In a year likely to be dominated by campaign promises, it is important to remember that Christians are people of the word.

It is not just incidental that when God comes to man, He comes as “the Word.” As He reaches out to us, He does not do so with ambiguity—but with words, the tools of communication best designed to avoid ambiguity and lack of clarity. For His fullest revelation, He did not come as “The Song” or as “The Rainbow,” even though He did not hesitate sometimes to enhance His revelation with such art forms. Instead, He spelled out with specificity who He is and what He is about by coming to us as “the Word.”

Looking at the way God uses words suggests at least these three principles:

1. God writes down His agreement. It makes Him—and us—accountable.

Here and there are people who conclude big deals with their word and a handshake. And certainly if there were

ever someone with the reservoir of credibility and integrity necessary for such agreements, God is that person.

Good managers appreciate people whose spoken word they can trust. But good managers also regularly insist on written records of important transactions and agreements just so that trust can be enhanced instead of jeopardized. When they make such requirements they are imitating God's way of doing things.

In our public lives some important things do get written down. But we only play at it. Both the Republicans and the Democrats every four years write down their platforms, spelling out what they agree to offer society. But who ever checks back to hold them accountable?

Accountability is the especially distinctive aspect of writing down our agreements with each other. It would be admittedly risky, but imagine a candidate who says throughout his or her race, "Here I am publishing the 10 most important things I stand for. Elect me, and then as my term progresses and comes to an end, hold me accountable for what I've promised you."

2. God is never tricky with His language. You don't have to worry about the fine print. It was Jesus who said, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'"

Most Americans think that if something is in the Congressional Record it has to be true. But it is not neces-

sarily the case that what is quoted in the high-sounding document is according to fact, since a member of Congress can place anything he or she jolly well pleases into the record. Much worse, the same Congress member can come back later and change the official record to suit his or her fancy. Not only can embarrassing gaffes be erased, but gratuitous insertions are allowed to make officials look better than reality would allow.

God made words to exalt the truth, not to play games with it. People who claim to follow Him should be diligent to do the same.

3. God is always as good as His word. Students of language will remember its “performative” function. Using it, a person makes something happen just by saying so. Kings and presidents do it when they decree something, but so do ministers when they say, “I now declare you to be man and wife.” Saying so makes it so.

God is the ultimate user of the “performative” function of the language. Since that incredible moment when He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, He has always brought to pass His holy will simply by saying so. It’s one thing to be powerful; it’s something a good bit more awesome to have a powerful word.

Now of course even those people who aspire to imitate God couldn’t begin to walk in His steps in this respect.

And yet there is an important lesson to be learned, and a warning which shapes our behavior. We will be more like our God if we are careful to ensure that our behavior matches our words. The one-for-one equivalence between speech and performance will not come, in our case, because we are so powerful. But we can at least provide a reflection of God's glory in this respect by refusing to give critics the opportunity to charge that our walk is totally different from our talk.

Glib words are everywhere. Words that aren't accountable. Words that are overly tricky. Words that aren't matched by performance.

Such words don't belong among Christians. Our witness in the world will be more potent when we learn to leave them behind us, using words instead in the same way God uses them.

ATRIUM

An atrium is one of my favorite architectural distinctives.

There's something about getting rid of the ceiling and lifting my eyes that prompts my heart to soar. Some people like wide open spaces. I like wide open entryways and tall hotel lobbies.

To some people, of course, an atrium is a waste. Just think of all the square feet of space that could be used or rented out if it hadn't been squandered on a high ceiling.

I am thankful—and I believe all Christians should be thankful—that the late Francis A. Schaeffer didn't think that way. Although I never talked to him about the subject, I have a hunch Francis Schaeffer probably liked atriums.

For, you see, Schaeffer spent a great deal of his life as a one-man wrecking crew, tearing out the ceiling that had existed over the room where most Christians lived when he was young. By tearing out that ceiling, Schaeffer enlarged the room in significant ways. He stretched the vision of thousands of Christians.

Schaeffer's ideas were by no means brand new. But he stated them at a time when a student generation was ready to hear them. And, especially when you consider how complex a man Schaeffer was, he stated the ideas with remarkable simplicity and clarity.

Schaeffer explained that for the Christian there is no "upstairs" and no "downstairs." We don't deal with God in a loft at the top of a ladder, and then come down to deal with the real world. For Schaeffer, it was all one room. And the God Schaeffer served and witnessed to filled that room.

That concept, of course, is central to the mission of *WORLD*. Some people wonder: Is this magazine secular or spiritual? Can't it decide which side it wants to come down on? The best answer is that I have decided—or perhaps that I've de-sided. There aren't two sides. Just as there aren't two floors. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

So what is this awkwardness our readers feel? Let me confess: I feel it too. It's one thing to say that it's all one room. But when we've been taught otherwise by centuries of tradition, habit, and practice, we don't immediately know how to treat world news as if it all belonged to the Lord. We can't, for example, afford to have the philosophers and the theologians upstairs while the scientists and math people gather in little groups below.

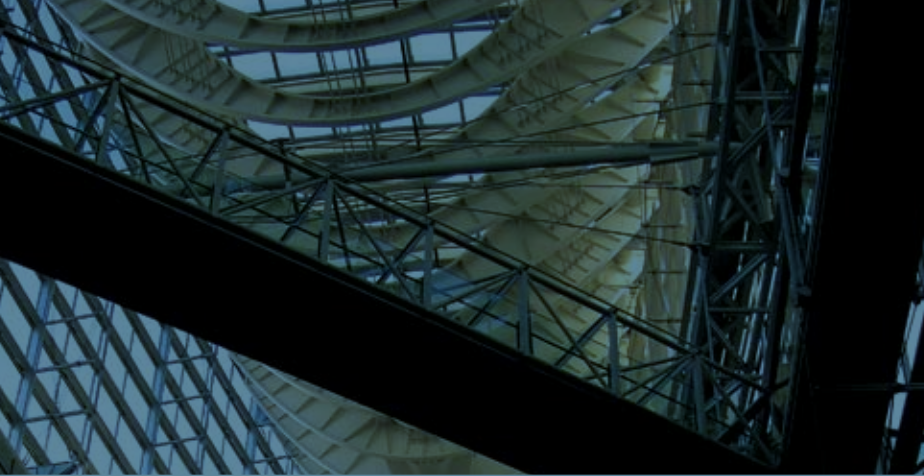
Developing a Christian worldview is hard work, and

Consider These Things

never an all-at-once achievement. We need each other to do it well—a getting-acquainted process that is made easier when we all are in one room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joel Belz founded *WORLD*, a Christian interest weekly, in 1986. Before that, Belz was managing editor of *The Presbyterian Journal*, a magazine of theological interest started in 1942. In 1997, Belz was elected president of the Evangelical Press Association. In 1994, he received the James DeForest Murch award from the National Association of Evangelicals. Belz also speaks across the country. He is an active churchman, having served in 2003 as moderator of the highest assembly of his denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America. He has been a member of the board of Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, for most of the last 25 years. He has a B.A. from Covenant College, an M.A. in mass communications from the University of Iowa, and a doctor of humane letters from Geneva College. In 1978, he was chosen alumnus of the year by Covenant College. Belz and his wife Carol Esther have five daughters, five sons-in-law, and 15 grandchildren.



from Consider These Things

“When we quit being astonished at the complexity of what God has ordered in His creation, we’ve missed His purpose in putting us here. His rules for us as individuals, for society at large, and for His creation are never willy-nilly. Every one of them means something.”

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