



The Forgiveness of Sins

What does Victory Outreach believe about the forgiveness of sins? What are the limits of God's grace when it comes to forgiveness?

The Bible affirms that God is gracious and merciful; He is willing to forgive all those who confess and turn away from their sins (Exod. 34:6-7; Psa. 32:1; 130). In the Old Testament God normally forgave sin on the basis of sacrifice and transference. Sin was removed from the nation of Israel, for example, by means of conferring the sins of the community onto another scapegoat (Num. 16:20-26). As Christians, we at Victory Outreach affirm that our sins are forgiven by grace through faith in Jesus Christ who as the sacrificial Lamb of God bore our sins on the cross. When we place our trust in Christ and repent, our sins are forgiven and we are declared not guilty before God (Isa. 53:12; Matt. 26:28; John 1:29; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 10:12-18; 1 Pet. 2:21-24). Jesus himself had the power to declare a person's sins were forgiven (Mark 2:1-12; Luke 7:36-48; John 8:2-11). In the New Testament "to forgive" means to release or pardon (*aphiemi*; *aphesis*) and show oneself as gracious (*charizomai*). Forgiveness not only involves God's pardoning of our sins, but our ability to forgive others who have wronged us (Matt. 6:14-15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; 2 Cor. 2:6-10; cf. 1 John 4:20-21).

Victory Outreach believes that because Christ died for our sins, there is no sin too great for God to forgive. Here are some prime examples of how faithful God is to forgive sin and to what extent He will pardon the wrongdoer: The Corinthians were involved in swindling, thievery, idolatry, drunkenness, sexual immorality (including prostitution and homosexuality), and yet by the grace of God their sins were washed away and they were set apart as saints for God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Saul participated in the persecution, imprisonment, and execution of Christians (Acts 22:4; 26:10; Gal. 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 1:15), yet he was converted to become one the greatest saints of all time – the Apostle Paul. Jesus claimed that the one who is forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:36-48). No one is too great a sinner that God cannot reach.

Not only does God forgive our sins when we repent, but we also believe that He does not hold our former sins against us. Micah illustrates it this way: God throws away our sins "into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:18-19; cf. Ps. 25:7; 130:3-4; Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34; Heb. 10:17-18). In other words true forgiveness involves the removal of offenses committed against God or the person offended. This results in reconciliation between the two parties so that a harmonious relationship is once again restored.

What then do we make of the unpardonable sin or blasphemy of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 3:28-29)? The fact that a person desires to repent before God and turn away from his/her sins authenticates that he/she has *not* committed the unpardonable sin. If a person committed this sin today, his/her heart would be so hardened that he/she would not repent or ask for forgiveness in the first place (see Question #4).

Sin, however, does have its consequences. A person who has committed murder and then becomes a Christian is still liable for his actions under government law. A person who commits sexual promiscuity all week and then confesses her sin every Sunday opens herself up to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, guilt, emotional trauma, abuse, and so on. A presumptuous attitude in which we declare that we can go ahead and deliberately indulge in sin because "God will forgive me anyway" invites dire consequences. People who have such an attitude are either not truly converted or they will likely find themselves so hardened and enslaved by their sin that they end up losing their close connection with God. Repentance must be true repentance involving godly sorrow and a determined effort not to commit the sin again (2 Cor. 7:9-11). Paul writes that we are not to be presumptuous when it comes to God's grace (Rom. 6:1 cf. Deut. 29:19-21).

What should a Christian do if he/she commits sin? The Bible declares that if we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins (1 John 1:9). Jesus understood our weaknesses and how we sin on a daily basis; hence, he established the way we should pray in the Lord's Prayer – we are to ask our heavenly Father to forgive us our sins as we also forgive others who sin against us (Luke 11:4; Matt. 6:12).



Sanctification and Holiness

What is Victory Outreach's view on sanctification? How does a person become holy? Can a person become absolutely sinless?

The Bible affirms that because God is holy, Christians should be holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; cf. Matt. 6:9). The word “holy” (*qadosh* in Hebrew) refers to something that is set apart or separate. It is the opposite of what is impure and profane. To sanctify means “to make holy.” Sanctification therefore involves the condition in which a person or object is transformed into the likeness of God. Some people use the word “anointing” to define sanctification, but often what they intend to say is that an “anointed” person is specially-endowed or gifted by the Holy Spirit to perform a certain calling or ministry. Sanctification, on the other hand, is bestowed upon every believer and includes an ethical dimension – the believer is being freed from a sinful lifestyle and conformed to God’s standards for righteousness and godliness.

We believe that sanctification is both an event and a process. By way of illustration, two thousand years ago Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God here on earth, but the completion and full realization of that kingdom will not occur until Jesus returns. Hence, God’s kingdom is both a present and future reality – it is both “now” and “not yet.” In a similar way, when a person becomes a Christian they are sanctified, but the completion of that sanctification is still futuristic.

At the time of conversion, believers are cleansed from their sins and experience regeneration by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Thes. 2:13; Tit. 3:5). In this sense, sanctification is an *event* related to the conversion experience and justification by faith. From that moment onward, believers are considered “saints” or “holy ones” (Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 2:8-9). They are set apart as holy even if they have not reached the ultimate standards God has for them. We note that Paul calls the Corinthian Christians “sanctified,” “holy,” and “saints” even though he corrects and warns them about their immature and sinful behavior throughout most of his correspondence with them (1 Cor. 1:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:1).

Sanctification is also *progressive*. After conversion, the life-long process of sanctification takes place. We continue to be made holy by refraining from sin, exercising different virtues and fruits of the Spirit, and drawing closer to God (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18; 6:14-7:1; Gal. 5:16-26; Col. 3:9-10; 1 Thes. 4:3-7; 2 Pet. 1:5-10; 3:14). The Book of Romans discusses the sinful state of humankind (Rom. 1:18-3:20) before stressing the remedy: justification by faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:21-5:21). After this, the book outlines how a Christian can live a godly life (sanctification) with final glorification as the ultimate goal (Rom. 6:1-8:39). Our journey is complete when we receive our glorified bodies after the Lord returns (Rom. 8:18-23, 29-30; 1 Cor. 15:20-58; Phil. 3:20-21).

Do Christians ever reach perfection in this present life? Victory Outreach believes that while some Christians achieve a level of maturity that God intends for them, they will never be absolutely flawless or sinless until Christ returns. While Christian maturity and moral purity should be our goals (Eph. 4:13), the Bible states that if we say we are sinless we are deceiving ourselves and not abiding in the truth (1 John 1:8-10). The New Testament writers understood that while Christians are to strive to be holy, they nevertheless sin and fall short of God’s standards (Rom. 7:14-25; Phil. 3:12-13; 1 John 1:8-2:2). Yet this is no excuse for Christians to indulge freely in sinful behavior. The correct application of 1 John 3:4-6 is not that we are to become absolutely sinless in this present life or else we are not truly saved. Rather, we are to refrain from the type of continual sin that exemplifies the lifestyle of those who do not know Christ. In other words, sin should not be the hallmark identification of those who live in Christ. If a person’s conversion makes no difference related to the way he/she lives and how he/she strives against sin, then there is reason to question whether that person really knows the Lord and is truly a Christian.

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus sets up the goal for his followers to be “perfect.” But this does not necessarily mean that the Lord expected all his followers to be perfectly sinless in the present age; rather, they must strive to become *perfect in love*. In the immediate context, Jesus is claiming that the disciples are to exemplify God’s perfect love and compassion, which means that not only should they love their neighbors, but also their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; cf. Luke 6:26-36; Col. 3:12-14; 1 John 4:16-21). They are to keep their heavenly Father’s righteous standards by loving God, their neighbors, and doing to others what they would want to be done to themselves (Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40; cf. Rom. 13:8-10). Our Lord understood that we would continually fall short of his glory until he returns. This is why, in the Lord’s Prayer, he encouraged us that until his “kingdom come” to always pray, “forgive us our sins...and lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4).



Backsliding and the Security of the Believer

What does Victory Outreach believe about a Christian who backslides and no longer desires to follow the Lord? Is the security of the believer such that once a person is saved, he/she is always saved?

For centuries ministers and theologians have held to different views about backsliding and the security of the believer. Two prominent positions are related to Calvinism and Arminianism. We will discuss these options before indicating Victory Outreach's position.

The first position holds to the perseverance of the saints. This view is often identified as Calvinism, after the French reformer and theologian John Calvin (1509-64). Some evangelicals use the term "Eternal Security," but genuine Calvinists use the term "perseverance of the saints." This position believes that God has elected certain individuals to salvation (unconditional election) and draws them to serve Him by means of His irresistible grace. Because the Christian has been predestined to final salvation, the Christian will persevere and eventually make it to heaven. Some Christians might experience doubts and temporarily backslidings, but since God has unconditionally elected them, they will ultimately return to the Lord and make it to heaven. If a person falls away and never returns to the Lord, that person was never a genuine Christian in the first place. In some cases, this position holds that Christians who backslide and die lose their heavenly reward, but they will still be saved.

The second position is often identified as Arminianism, after the Reformed Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Many evangelicals who hold to this position define a backslider as a person who has lost his/her salvation. More precisely, Arminians believe that it is possible for a genuine Christian to fall away from grace or commit apostasy. If a person who was once a Christian rebels against God and remains in a backslidden state of rebellion until he/she dies, he/she may suffer the same eternal consequences as unbelievers. This position is based on the idea that God gives sufficient grace for people to get saved, but humans always have the freedom to choose to serve Him or not. They are able to resist God's grace.

Both positions have their strengths and weaknesses, and no Christians should think that someone who believes in Calvinism or Arminianism is cultic, heretical, or not really a Christian. We recognize that Christians can hold to either position and remain within sound biblical and theological precepts. However, Victory Outreach holds to the belief that a person who was once a Christian can indeed fall away from the faith.

The Bible affirms a number of passages related to the possibility of falling away. Paul warns the Galatian Christians that if they seek to be justified by the law and circumcision, they are fallen from grace and cut off from Christ (Gal. 5:1-4). A careful reading of this book allows us to observe that falling away would be considered the reversing of salvation by grace and justification (e.g., Gal. 2:16-21). In 1 Corinthians Paul warns the believers that if they participate in idolatry, fornication, and other sins, their fate will be similar to that of the Israelites of old (1 Cor. 10:1-11). Namely, even though Israel was delivered (i.e., saved) from Egypt (i.e., the fallen world), "baptized" through the Red Sea (i.e., converted), and experienced miraculous spiritual provision (i.e., Spirit baptism and gifts), many of them were destroyed in the wilderness before making it to the promised land because of their rebellion (i.e., God's people did not make it to God's eternal rest due to falling away/backsliding). He concludes this section by warning the Corinthians, "let him who thinks he stands beware, lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

One of the central themes related to the Book of Hebrews is to warn the Christians against falling away from their salvation (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29). They are to look diligently or else they might commit apostasy through unbelief (Heb. 3:12; 4:11; 12:14). The results of falling away involve dire consequences (Heb. 2:2-3; 6:6-8; 10:26-31; 12:25). In 2 Peter we read that the false teachers at that time were once saved ("redeemed" – 2 Pet. 2:1), but fell away through false doctrines and covetousness (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 15-16, 19-22; 3:2-4; cf. Jude 17-18). Through Christ, they had once escaped the pollution in the world, but then became entangled in it again so that their present state of unrighteousness was worse than their former state (2 Pet. 2:20-22). Revelation warns that God will remove from His heavenly kingdom (New Jerusalem) those who tamper with His prophetic words (Rev. 22:18-19; cf. 3:5).

While it is true that predestination and election are biblical, the passages that relate these concepts to final perseverance (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1) stress election in the corporate body of Christ. In other words, it is the *church* that is elected and predestined to be with the Lord. An individual Christian can claim such promises *as long as* he/she chooses to remain "in Christ" (i.e., remain a member of the

invisible body of Christ [the church]). But if Gentile Christians show themselves to be unworthy of God's kingdom, they too, like Jewish unbelievers, could be cut off from God's community (Rom. 11:11-24).

Passages related to the security of salvation in John's Gospel (John 6:37; 10:28-30) need to be tempered with the warning in John that those who fail to remain/abide in Christ are cast away from him as a useless branch cut off from the vine (John 15:1-6). And while it is true that John focuses on false believers who departed from his church in 1 John 2:18-19, this does not necessitate that *everyone* who backslides and departs from any church was never a true believer. In John's letters, these false believers were spreading a doctrine of the Anti-Christ (1 John 2:18; 4:1-6; 2 John 7). Not every backslider teaches such doctrines; albeit, some do serve the Lord insincerely, never showing any real change, and then leave the church. Other backsliders, however, do believe at one time or another and then fall away (cf. Luke 8:4-15; esp. 8:13).

We have the assurance of present salvation (1 John 5:13; 1 Cor. 10:13), and yet we are encouraged to persevere so that we do not fall away (Heb. 3:14; Matt. 24:13). These biblical ideas help us to avoid two extremes: cheap grace and fearful anxiety. On the one hand, we resist the error that a Christian could go ahead and indulge in sin by abusing the notion of "once saved, always saved." Such an attitude is denounced in the Bible as presumption and insincere repentance (Deut. 29:19-21; Rom. 6:1; 11:20-22; 1 Cor. 10:12; 2 Cor. 7:9-12; Heb. 10:26). On the other hand, we do not live in fearful anxiety, thinking that every time we fall short of God's glory, we lose our salvation. God is not standing in heaven with a lightening bolt ready to kill us off as soon as we sin, so that he can sentence us to hell. Such an attitude does not represent our loving and merciful Father.

We do recognize, along with both Calvinists and Arminians, that for all practical purposes, a person can be considered "Christian" at point A in their life, and then due to unbelief and sinful living, be considered an "unbeliever" at point B. We conclude, then, that some individuals who were once considered Christian can fall away to the extent that they disqualify themselves from God's kingdom, unless they repent. Every person is different, and as long as there is hope for the backsliders, we will continue to pray that they return to the Lord.



Unpardonable Sin or Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

What does Victory Outreach believe concerning the unpardonable sin? How is it committed?

The unpardonable sin is known in Scripture as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-29; Matt. 12:31-32; Luke 12:10). Matthew writes the occasion that prompts Jesus to mention this sin occurred after he healed a demon-possessed man (Matt. 12:22-24). In this encounter certain religious leaders (scribes and Pharisees) explained the miracle by claiming that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebub (a Jewish designation for Satan in this context). Jesus responds that Satan cannot cast out Satan and a house divided against itself cannot stand. Jesus casts out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit, and this demonstrates that the inception of God's kingdom has arrived. Then he declares that all manner of sin can be forgiven except the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

The unpardonable sin was thus committed by the religious leaders who were attributing the work of God's Spirit to the work of the devil. Can a person commit this sin today? There is no indication that blaspheming the Spirit was committed only during the time of Christ's ministry on earth. Succeeding generations of Christians mention the unpardonable sin also (e.g., Didache 11:7; Gospel of Thomas 44), but it is not an act that can be easily committed.

In the Greek of Mark 3:22, 30, the imperfect tense reads that the religious leaders "were [continually] saying" or "kept saying" that Jesus was demon possessed and performed exorcisms through the help of demonic powers. The implication is that this was not a one-time event or conclusion but a repetitive attitude that the scribes and Pharisees embraced against Christ. They opposed Jesus time after time throughout his public ministry. The unpardonable sin does not reflect something that is committed by a single irresponsible act but a constant resisting of the power and message of Christ. The context of Luke 12:10 suggests that this sin may be related to the concept of apostasy or a final denial of Christ (cf. Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 1 John 5:16).

Moreover, the religious leaders did not commit this sin in ignorance but deliberately. They should have understood that the coming Messiah would be able to perform miracles (Luke 4:14-21; 7:18-23). This may be one reason why those who witnessed Christ's miracle asked whether he was the "son of David" (Matt. 12:22-23). In Jewish tradition, both David and his son Solomon had authority over demons (1 Sam. 16:23; Testament of Solomon). The Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the "son of David," who would have power over demons. Despite this anticipation, the religious leaders rejected Jesus as their Messiah even though his lineage came from David and he had authority to exorcise demons. It is possible that, according to Jewish tradition, they believed the only unpardonable sin was to be uncircumcised (Jubilee 15:33-34). Jesus asserts instead that rejection of the Holy Spirit is the only real unpardonable sin.

In light of these considerations, Victory Outreach concludes that the unpardonable sin is *not* committed in ignorance, foolishness, by doubtful thoughts, in a fit of rage, or even in a single act. Nor does someone commit it when he/she yells at or curses out God, Jesus, or the Spirit. We also do *not* believe that a person who is disturbed or tormented by the possibility that he/she has committed the unpardonable actually *has* committed it. The very fact that a person is worried about committing this sin *proves* that he/she has *not* committed it. The gospels portray those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit as maintaining a persistent and willful rejection of the message of Christ despite his miraculous demonstration of God's love and power through the Spirit. Such a person is opposed to Jesus Christ and attributes the good work of God to something evil. He does not repent, feels no conviction or remorse, and has no desire to turn from sin and unbelief to follow the Lord.

Victory Outreach encourages people who are haunted by the false idea that they have committed the unpardonable sin to take comfort in knowing that Jesus has not rejected them (John 6:37). If they have committed sins, they can confess them, repent, and be forgiven (1 John 1:9; Rom. 10:9-10).



Laying on of Hands and Divine Healing

Why does Victory Outreach follow the practice of laying on of hands? What does Victory Outreach believe regarding Divine healing?

The members of Victory Outreach normally pray over those who wish to receive prayer by placing hands on them. Our reason for doing this is because we find that the Israelites and early church practiced the laying on of hands. In the Old Testament Jacob (Israel) laid hands on his grandsons to confer a blessing on them (Gen. 48:13-20). Moses commissioned Joshua his successor by laying his hands on him (Num. 27:22-23), and the high priest laid hands on animal sacrifices as a symbol of identification and transference of sin (e.g., Lev. 16:20-22). Jesus and the early Christians also laid hands on people when healing the sick (Mark 6:5; Luke 13:13; Acts 28:8 cf. longer ending of Mark 16:18), conferring a blessing (Mark 10:16), commissioning leaders (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 5:22), and requesting for or imparting spiritual power and gifts (Acts 8:17; 19:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). While we recognize that the laying on of hands is a visible point of contact for such types of transferences, we understand that this activity is neither mandated nor necessary to receive such transferences. We lay hands on people because it is a pattern found in Scripture, but we think no less of anybody who does not choose to lay hands on others.

Victory Outreach believes that God is sovereign; if He chooses to do so He can heal afflicted individuals of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual problems. Hence, we believe that divine healing is for today. However, we do not believe that it is necessarily "God's will" to physically heal everybody at this time, and we resist the idea that a person who is not healed must either be in sin or lacks faith. This approach to divine healing leads to abuse, presumption, or unnecessary sorrow if a person is not healed. We must always remember that God is sovereign, not our faith (1 John 5:14-15; James 4:13-17; Matt. 26:39, 42; Rom. 15:31-32). Moreover, we believe that God allows for healing and alleviation of sickness to take place through surgeons, doctors, medicine, and other means.

Our perspective is that, while Jesus provides healing through his death (Isa. 53:5; Matt. 8:16-17), there is no guarantee that he *must* heal us in this present age. We live in a paradoxical age of "now" and "not yet." We are able to experience glimpses and tastes of the future glory of the heavenly kingdom when we experience God's visitation and miracles. Healings in our present age are thus examples of the future glory, but the full realization of that glory is still in our future. The complete redemption of our physical bodies does not take place until Christ returns (Rom. 8:19-23). We are encouraged pray for the sick by noticing the examples of divine healing in the Bible (e.g., Mark 1:29-34; 5:21-43; John 9:1-11; Acts 3:1-10; 8:6-7; 28:8; James 5:14-15), and yet we also recognize that Trophimus was left sick in Miletus without being healed (2 Tim. 4:20), Timothy suffered from persistent stomach problems (1 Tim. 5:23), and Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). These examples show us that not only is God able to use miraculous healing for his honor and glory, but also our weaknesses and infirmities.



Heaven and Hell

What does Victory Outreach believe about heaven, hell, and final judgment?

The Bible refers to several aspects of final judgment, including a judgment in which believers will receive their recompense (2 Cor. 5:10). Although true believers will make it to heaven, they will receive reward or loss of reward based on what they do here on earth (1 Cor. 3:11-15; cf. Luke 19:11-27). There seems to be different levels of rewards and punishments related to heaven and hell (cf. Luke 12:35-48; Matt. 10:15; Matt. 25:14-46), and angels will also be judged (1 Cor. 6:3).

The Book of Revelation depicts a great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15) that seems to occur a “thousand years” after Satan was first bound (Rev. 20:1-10). This judgment takes place after the present world order has been destroyed (Rev. 20:11; 21:1; cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-13). The dead stand before God and are judged according to what is written in the “books” and in the “book of life.” The other books might signify a record of the deeds of the righteous and the wicked (Psa. 56:8; Mal. 3:16-17; Dan. 7:10; cf. 2 Esdr. 6:18-20 [Jewish tradition]). The book of life stands out as the most important book because the eternal destination of a person depends on whether or not his/her name appears in it (Rev. 20:12; 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; cf. Phil. 4:3; Dan. 12:1). Those whose names do not appear in this book are cast into the “lake of fire,” the place where God punishes Satan and his followers (Rev. 20:10, 15; cf. Matt. 25:41). Revelation identifies this punishment as the “second death” because it goes beyond physical death; it involves a separation from God in the afterlife (Rev. 20:14; cf. John 5:28-29).

The Gospels portray hell as a place of fiery judgment (Matt. 5:22; 13:40-42), outer darkness (Matt. 8:12), and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:49-50; Luke 13:28). The Greek word often used for “hell” is *gehenna*, which ultimately derived its meaning from the Hebrew word *ge hinnom* or Valley of Hinnom, a location on the south slope of Jerusalem. King Ahaz and Manasseh made this area infamous with their burnt sacrifices offered to the false god Molech (2 Chron. 28:1-3; 33:1-6; Jer. 7:29-32; 32:34-35). Eventually *gehenna* was associated with judgment after death. It came to be known as a fiery place where the wicked are punished and excluded from the holy city of Jerusalem (Matt. 5:29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 25:41; Luke 12:5).

We identify hell as a condition of punishment in which a person is eternally separated from the presence of God in the afterlife. Is hell a fair punishment for the wicked? We believe that people choose their own destinies through their beliefs and actions. Those who become eternally separated from God choose not to serve Him, and reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. God respects human freedom and dignity by permitting humans to say no to His love and forgiveness. He will not force them to love Him. The only alternative, then, is to allow humans who resist Him to experience the folly of their own choice – an existence that is void of God. Moreover, if God is just and holy, we should expect the afterlife to have rewards for the righteous and punishments for the wicked. Otherwise, there would seem to be no ultimate justice – an Adolf Hitler has no punishment after death and a Mother Teresa has no reward.

Alternative views about death and judgment do not seem to fit the biblical evidence. Annihilationism, the view that God punishes the wicked by having them cease to exist (extinction), is hard to reconcile with biblical passages that refer to hell as a conscious place of punishment where the wicked continue to exist (Matt. 25:41, 46; Mark 9:47-48; Rev. 14:11; 19:20 with 20:7,10,15; Dan. 12:2). Eternal punishment is the counterpart to eternal life (Matt. 25:46). And contrary to reincarnation (the belief that the spirit/soul of a dead person returns to inhabit another human body), Hebrews 9:27 affirms that it is appointed for humans “once to die,” and after this comes the judgment. Revelation 20 speaks of the “second death” as the final separation from God. These passages suggest that humans die only once; there are no second or subsequent chances to make amends after death.

What happens to those who die before the future judgment in Revelation 20? Luke 16:27-31 suggests a conscious existence immediately after physical death. Lazarus is comforted in “Abraham’s bosom” after death while the rich man is tormented in *hades*, a word used as the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word *sheol* (another name for the grave, or realm of the dead). This parable might give us some insight into the *intermediate* state of the dead before the final judgment in Revelation 20. Several biblical passages support the immediate consciousness after death (e.g., Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23; Rev. 6:9-11; cf. 1 Sam. 28:1-20).

What does Victory Outreach believe about heaven? We do not hold to a primitive idea that heaven is a place in the sky where saints sit on clouds and strum harps all the time. The Bible describes “heaven” (Hebrew *shamayim*/ Greek *ouranos*) in at least three ways or levels of perception: 1) the sky or atmosphere (Gen. 1:8; Matt. 6:26); 2) the outer place of lights or outer space (Gen. 1:14; Job 38:31-33); and 3) the dwelling place of God (1 Kings 8:27-30; Isa. 63:15-16; Matt. 5:16; 6:10). Paul refers to an incident in which he experienced the “third heaven” or paradise (2 Cor. 12:1-9). Heaven is a place where the righteous ones receive rewards (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4), continue to serve the Lord (Luke 19:12-27), have continual growth (Eph. 2:7; 2 Cor. 3:18), and rest from the conflict of evil (Heb. 4:3; Rom. 8:18). In Revelation 21-22 we find that the New Jerusalem is the ultimate abiding place for

the believers. They have immediate communion with God (Rev. 21:3; 22:4) and rest from the burden of sickness, sorrow, pain, and death (Rev. 21:4; 7:15-17; cf. John 11:25-26; 1 Pet. 1:4). The believers will experience the heavenly Jerusalem in glorified, resurrected bodies (Rev. 20; 1 Cor. 15:20-58; Rom 8:19-24), and so shall we ever be with the Lord. I Thess. 4:17



Creationism

What does Victory Outreach believe about creation and evolution?

Victory Outreach does not believe in naturalistic evolution. This theory claims that life on earth emerged through random, naturalistic processes. The universe and the solar system emerged by chance; life evolved from non-life. The theory normally suggests that over millions of years mutation and natural selection have brought about the emergence of the present complex creatures from a simple primordial organism. Consequently, humans and apes evolved from a common ancestor. This position upholds macroevolution, which claims that one species can evolve into an entirely different species. (Thus it claims more than microevolution: the view affirming that change and mutation can occur *within* a certain species.)

The crucial problem with naturalistic evolution is that it dispenses with God as the creator of the universe and life on earth. Hence, atheists and agnostics champion this view. The Bible affirms that God is the creator of all things including heaven, earth, and humans (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 146:5-6; Isa. 40:26-28; John 1:1-3; Acts 17:26; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3). But our perspective in no way indicates that we do not respect science or scientific endeavors. A number of scientists, both Christian and non-Christian, criticize naturalistic evolution because it seems to lack evidence or conflicts with other disciplines. In recent years, for example, biologists have observed that organs or chemical processes require many complex parts to fit just right, or else they will not function at all. The proper construction of DNA, protein molecules, and organs seems difficult to explain if they were constructed slowly and randomly over a long period of time.

We firmly hold to the view that God created the heavens and earth, but we admit less certain about the *way* He went about creating the world. Was the universe and earth created in six literal 24-hour days (Young Earth Creationism)? Did it take billions of years to create (Progressive Creationism)? Did God use evolution as the means to bring about His creation of life forms (Theistic Evolution)? Did He destroy the first world and then recreate it a second time (Gap Theory)?

Young Earth Creation reads the earth's origin in Genesis 1-2 literally. The text is said to be an accurate description of creation both historically and scientifically. Hence, creation took place in six literal 24-hour days. The main problem with this view is that it flies in the face of most scientific evidence, which affirms that through physics, astronomy, geology, and other disciplines the earth is at least several billion years old. If God is the creator of nature, we should expect that nature would tell us something about its creator. But this approach sets the Bible at odds with the established views of nature and science.

Progressive Creationism suggests that the six days of creation in Genesis 1-2 are not meant to be interpreted as 24-hour days; they represent six eras that may have each lasted millions of years. Since the sun was not created until "day four" (Gen. 1:14-19), it seems difficult to imagine why the first three "days" or "evenings and mornings" of creation would need to be determined by 24-hour revolutions around a sun that did not yet exist. As well, the events in Genesis 2:4-25 all occurred on the sixth "day" (cf. Gen. 1:26-27): God created the Garden of Eden with its plants, trees, and rivers; God created Adam; God had Adam work in the garden; Adam named all the animals; God affirmed that it was not good for Adam to be alone; God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep; God created Eve from Adam's rib; God presented Eve to Adam who says, "At last, this is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). It is hard to imagine all these events taking place within one 24-hour period. Thus, progressive creationists argue that the word for "day" in Hebrew (*yom*) sometimes refers to a period of time much longer than 24 hours. In Psalm 90:4 (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8), for instance, the writer asserts that a day to Yahweh (God) is as a thousand years. The advantage of this view is that it can remain true to the Scriptures while not contradicting the old age of the earth that the scientific community affirms.

Theistic Evolution agrees with Progressive Creationism that the earth can be billions of years old. This view (along with some advocates of Progressive Creationism) affirms that Genesis 1-2 was never intended to portray a chronological history or science, as we understand these terms today. Genesis 1-2 is religious literature and should be read as such – it is not a scientific textbook. The Genesis creation functions as a polemic against pagan creation myths that held to polytheism (the belief in multiple gods) and equated various natural forces with gods. Contrary to other Ancient Near Eastern perspectives, the Hebrew Scriptures argue for one true God who possesses all power, creates all things, and controls all nature. Genesis 1-2 should be read more in terms of poetic literature, with figurative/symbolic language, than matter-of-fact history. With this approach in mind, Adam's creation "from the dust" means that he was created out of same stuff from which the earth was created, and Eve's creation from Adam is meant to suggest that she was the

same kind of creature as Adam. Nothing in the text contradicts the possibility that God used evolution as His means to create Adam and Eve.

While Theistic Evolution compliments the views of the secular scientific community, we are left wondering to what extent this approach allows for any real history in Genesis 1-2. Various nuances of the Gap Theory attempt to solve this conflict by affirming both the old age of the earth with a six 24-hour day reading of Genesis 1-2. This view argues that the earth was originally millions of years old, but it was destroyed and then recreated by God in six literal 24-hour days. Between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 there is supposedly a gap of millions of years. All the evidence for an old earth appeared during this time: ancient strata, early organisms, dinosaurs, and so forth. Satan fell from heaven and contaminated the original creation at that time, so God had to destroy and then recreate the world. The problem with this view is that it lacks biblical support. There is no break in the Hebrew language which suggests a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. We likewise do not know *when* Satan fell, and prophetic passages often cited to construe Satan's fall in the distant past are tentative at best. Originally certain texts were intended to portray the future fall of pagan kings (Isa. 14:3-23; Ezek. 28), and the fall of Satan in Revelation 12 occurs primarily as a result of Christ's redemption (Rev. 12:9-12). Nevertheless, even if we did assume that these passages "hint" at the original fall of Satan, they still would not imply that God's original creation had to be destroyed and recreated because of the fall.

Victory Outreach encourages open dialogue on issues related to the nature science and creationism. Right now we do not take a strong position on any one scientific viewpoint related to creation, but we do resist the theory of naturalistic evolution because it posits a world without a divine creator. We are generally supportive of scientific endeavors and see no conflict with the idea that faithful Christians can also become good scientists.



Death and Burial

What is Victory Outreach's view of death? Does the church take a position on burial methods?

It is inevitable for human beings to die. Human death is attributed to the sin of the first couple (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:20-23). Although Christ came as a second Adam to undo the curse of death and provide eternal life, physical death will continue to pervade humanity until our Lord returns. Victory Outreach believes that God can heal people, but we also accept that people will not live on forever in this present age no matter how faithful or holy they might be. Since physical death is a part of what it is to be human, we think it wise to plan for our departure from this present life.

We are given little biblical instruction on the proper interment or burial method. We suspect the reason for this is that the issue may not be a big concern for God. What is important for Christians to remember is that their faith and commitment is far more important to God than their manner of burial.

In both the Hebrew and Christian traditions, burial of the body seems to be the normal method of interment (Gen. 3:19; 49:29-31; Josh. 24:30; Judges 16:31; 2 Chron. 24:15-16). Both cave and bench tombs seem to be utilized by the Israelites with mourning and sacrifices in honor of the dead person (Gen. 49:53-50:11; 1 Kings 13:30; 2 Chron. 16:14; cf. Jer. 22:18-19). The early followers of Jesus seemed to adopt the Jewish tradition of lamenting (Acts 9:36-39). The early Christians sometimes considered death of the physical body as "sleep" because of the hope of a future resurrection (John 11:11; Acts 7:59-60; 1 Cor. 15:6, 20 cf. 1 Cor. 15:50-55; 1 Thes. 4:13-16). Exposure without a proper burial was considered a disgrace (1 Kings 14:11; Ezek. 29:5; Rev. 11:7-9).

What about cremation? Although burial seems to be the normative pattern in Scripture, we do find an exception with King Saul, who along with his sons, is burned after death (1 Sam. 31:11-13). Scholars debate the reason for Saul's burning. Some have suggested that it might be related to advanced decay or perhaps as a ritual in honor of a hero. In any case, this example is not entirely the same as modern cremation because after Saul's body was burned, his bones were buried. The enemies of the early Christians sometimes burned martyrs with the intention of ruining Christian confidence in a bodily resurrection. But the early Christians seemed to be undaunted by this; they were confident that an all-powerful God could raise them from the dead anyway.

These examples give us an idea that burning or cremating a body did not affect a person's status with God. There is no biblical precedence for claiming that cremation prevents a Christian from entering heaven or failing to be raised from the dead when Christ returns. If God is able to create life from the very dust of the earth, we believe that He is powerful enough to reconstruct a body that has been disintegrated or turned to ashes.

Although bodily burial seems to be the normative interment pattern for the Israelites and early church, we recognize that sometimes Christians might prefer cremation over body burial due to the high cost of funerals and burial plots, or due to a country's regulations that do not permit bodily transportation in or out of a country's borders without cremation, or for some other reason. Families who lose their loved ones do not need to feel distressed about a proper method of burial. We affirm that salvation is based on grace through faith, not interment methods. A person's manner of burial does not affect his/her eternal reward.



The Confession of Sins

What does Victory Outreach believe about confessing sins to God and to one another?

As a church that believes in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), Victory Outreach encourages those who wish to follow Jesus Christ to confess and turn away from their sins. Hence, an appropriate commitment to Christ includes repentance.

An exemplary biblical model for confession is the parable of the prodigal son. In the parable, after the son had greatly sinned, he returned to his father and confessed his wrongdoing before him (Luke 15:11-32). In a similar way, we should confess our sins before our heavenly Father. The prayer of the tax collector is another example of confession (Luke 18:9-14). He felt honest remorse for his sins and directed his prayer to God: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). After David had committed adultery, he confessed his sin to God (Psa. 51). In the Lord's Prayer, we are to ask the Father to forgive us our sins as we also forgive others who sin against us (Luke 11:4; Matt. 6:12). We read in 1 John 1:9 that if we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. These passages suggest that a normative biblical pattern of confession involves admitting our sins and requesting God's forgiveness in prayer.

Some confessions need to be made to people we have wronged (Matt. 5:23-24). If we have sinned against other individuals, we should confess our sin to them and ask their forgiveness (Matt. 5:23-24; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). If a fellow believer sins against us but refuses to confess his/her wrongdoing, the biblical model is to approach that individual (if it is safe to do so) and show him/her where he/she is at fault. If the person refuses to listen, then we can bring with us a few other mature Christians to talk with the person. We are to bring the matter before the entire church (by taking it to the leadership) only if that individual has refused our previous attempts at reconciliation. Jesus granted authority to his apostles to discipline or ostracize such a person from the church if he/she refuses to be reconciled after numerous attempts (Matt. 18:15-19; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 2 Thes. 3:14-15; Tit. 3:10).

James challenges us to confess our sins to one another and pray for each other (James 5:16). It is spiritually healthy for Christians to confide in ministers and mature believers where they are able to confess their sins, trials, temptations, and ask for prayer in times of testing.

Ultimately, we should always remember that Christ is our only true mediator, and we can go to him any time we need to confess our sins. No minister, priest, saint, or fellow Christian can ever replace the work of our Lord when it comes to confession and forgiveness.



God's Sovereignty and Foreknowledge, Human Free Will, and the Problem of Evil

What does Victory Outreach believe concerning the free will of humans in relation to God's Sovereignty? If God works out all things to conform to His will, does this mean that he is responsible for evil? If God foreknows the choices we make, why doesn't He always intervene to prevent potential evil and suffering caused by the wrong decisions humans make?

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign; He does what He pleases and works all things in conformity to the purpose of His will (Eph. 1:11; Psa. 135:6; Isa. 46:10; Job 42:2; Dan. 4:35). God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that His miraculous power could be demonstrated to Israel and Egypt (Rom. 9:17-18). At the same time, the Bible affirms that humans are free and responsible to make their own choices. They will be blessed if they follow the Lord, and punished if they do not (Deut. 30:17-20; Josh. 24:15; Rom. 6:23). The Lord does not want anyone to perish, but come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Is God in control of our decisions? If God does control our decisions, wouldn't this make him responsible for the evil and suffering in the world? Shouldn't He be blamed for murder and human suffering rather than people like Hitler, Stalin, and Bin-Laden?

We affirm that God has given humans the ability and freedom to choose to do either good or bad things. Hence, Adam was able to choose between obeying or disobeying God (Gen. 2-3). Unfortunately, Adam chose to disobey God by eating of the tree that God had forbidden him to eat. Why, then, didn't God create humans *without* freedom of choice? We believe this freedom to choose between good and evil is *itself a good thing*. God could have made us into human "robots" who were pre-programmed to serve Him, but a race of robots could not freely choose to love and serve Him. Forced love cheapens the value of genuine love; it is really no love at all. Apparently, God thought it a better thing to create creatures with the ability to freely love Him even if it meant that some of those creatures would choose not to love Him. Since we believe that freedom of choice is itself a good thing, then we do not believe that God should be held responsible for the wicked actions that some humans choose to make.

Humanity has experienced atrocities such as the Holocaust, two World Wars, and terrorist attacks. Why doesn't God always intervene to stop evil and suffering? Again, God has given humans the choice to follow or disobey Him. Suffering and evil would be greatly alleviated if people would simply follow the teachings of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself" and "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40). Perhaps God does intervene to stop evil more than we realize, but we are not always aware of this because we cannot see all cause and effects relationships from beginning to the end. We do not know the full picture of His plan until all is fulfilled; we grow in our comprehension of God's providential care. That is why having faith is so important (Heb. 11:6). Some philosophers believe that God allows present evil and suffering in order to bring about a greater good or to prevent a greater evil. Others affirm that God allows evil and suffering in order to build our character (soul building) and faith. Without conflict, resolution, and taking responsibility for our actions, there would be no real moral growth. As flowers need both rain and sunshine to grow, so people need both times of blessing and trials in order to properly grow in their faith. Our love and faith can grow much deeper when we are tried.

If suffering and evil overwhelm us at times, we must always remember that this present life is not all there is. Christ has promised his followers eternal life. We can be assured that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed (cf. Rom. 8:18). Most of us would say "yes" to getting pricked in the finger by a needle if we were given one billion dollars for doing it. We would realize that the investment is worth far more than the cost – the pain we feel is only momentary, but the money we will receive could last a lifetime. In a similar way, our momentary pain on earth works out for us an eternal reward that will be far greater than the temporary sufferings we experience in the present (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Matt. 5:11, 12).

If God knew beforehand that Adam would disobey him, and death and suffering would result through Adam's disobedience, why did He create Adam in the first place? If God is all-knowing (omniscient), He no doubt has *foreknowledge* of future events. So why did He go ahead and create Adam when He knew ahead of time that Adam would sin? Perhaps God values love to be greater than suffering, and freedom of choice as a better option than no freedom. When couples get married, they realize that one day their spouse may die before them, and this would cause great suffering. But couples chose to marry despite all potential suffering because they believe the love they will experience together has a greater value than any future suffering. Apparently, God determined that the love He would share with those who would choose to love Him would be worth any future suffering. Although He allowed humankind to fall, He also provided them a way to be restored to a love relationship with Him through Christ.

There are various approaches to the paradox of God's foreknowledge and human freewill. Among the most popular options are these:

- 1) God predestines (predetermines) everything, even the saint to go to heaven and the sinner to go hell. The problem with this view is that if God predestines the wicked to do evil, how can we say that they are entirely free to make their own choices? Wouldn't this make God responsible for the evil actions of the wicked, and hence, make Him responsible for the evil and suffering in the world?
- 2) God does not know the future because the future has not happened yet. If He says something will come to pass, that is because He is powerful enough to bring it to pass without violating human free will. The problem with this approach is that the Bible does seem to affirm divine future knowledge. Christ predicted that Peter would deny him three times (Matt. 26:33-35). Either God forced Peter to sin (which is not a good option) or else God knew the future decisions of Peter.
- 3) God has simple foreknowledge of future events. Since God created time and is able to stand "outside" of time, He has the ability to know all things past, present, and future. Yet His ability to know our future choices before we make them does not coerce us to make those choices. By way of illustration, a person in a helicopter may be able to simultaneously see an entire parade from beginning to end. But this does not *force* the participants to do what they do simply because the person in the helicopter knows what they will do before the ground-level spectators know. In a similar way, God's foreknowledge of future events does not necessarily force or coerce us to make the decisions we make.
- 4) In the beginning God knew all possibilities of all possible worlds according to His nature (necessary knowledge), and He knew all the choices people would make in the world He would decide to create (middle knowledge). Then God created this world according to His will and decrees without violating the free will of humans. This would be similar to a theatre owner who knows the dress rehearsals of various theatre plays and decides upon the best play to show at his theatre. He chooses the play, sets the time and limitations of the play according to his own purposes, and is able to know all the lines of the actors and the entire plot before the opening performance.

Attempting to reconcile divine sovereignty and free will, some philosophers prefer the illustration of God as the wise and all-knowing cosmic chess player. No matter which moves his opponents freely make, God will bring about His planned purposes and win "the game" because He is the superior player.

Ultimately, however, we concede that a mystery exists regarding God's sovereignty and human free will. Perhaps absolute sovereignty and free will are both equally true yet inexplicable from a human standpoint. What is important to remember is that God does not coerce humans to do anything contrary to their will. Put differently, God does not force people to do things contrary to their own decisions.

Many humans are bent on defying God, and God is patient with them for a period of time; but if they persist in doing evil, He gives them over to their own rebellious way, which leads to ruin (Rom. 1:21-26; cf. 9:22-23). A similar explanation seems fitting for Pharaoh (Exod. 1-15). Pharaoh rejected the one true God of Israel, and so God brought about a plan in which He would use Pharaoh's own hardened heart to bring about a miraculous deliverance for Israel. God gave Pharaoh over to his rebellious ways. No coercion was necessary: Pharaoh never once made a decision that he himself did not want to make.

Christians who faithfully serve God should pray that God give them wisdom and grace to make right decisions. We have assurance, though, that even when we make wrong decisions, God is able to work all things out for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).



Racism

What is Victory Outreach's position on Racism? Does Victory Outreach approve of interracial marriages?

Genesis 1:26-27 teaches that humankind was created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). This shows us that all humans should be respected and treated impartially because they bear the image of God. Apartheid and segregation of races are contrary to New Testament teaching. It was the pattern of the early churches to have a variety of people from different nationalities and ethnicities under one roof (Acts 13:1-3). We are all descendants of one man (Acts 17:26), which means that no race or culture should be condemned as non-human or bearing the "mark of Cain." No race is to be favored over another, for Divine election is by grace, not race. In Christ, there is no racial, sexual, class distinction (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Our faith should bear the fruit of love whereby we ought to do good to all people (Gal. 6:10). Since all Christians (Jew or Gentile) are God's people (Rom. 9-11; 1 Pet. 2:9-10), racial distinction no longer matters (John 1:12-13; Acts 10:34; 17:26).

Regarding interracial marriages we believe that a single Christian is at liberty to marry a person from any race, as long as that person is a Christian (1 Cor. 7:39). While it is true that the Israelites were not to take wives from the neighboring nations, the reason for this was because those nations did not worship God (Ex. 34:14-16). Such marital prohibitions have nothing to do with one's skin color, but whether one's prospective marital partner followed the one true God. Ruth, for example, was a Moabite who married an Israelite – she was accepted by the Israelites because she served the God of Israel (Ruth 1-4). Hence, we believe that it is wrong to forbid interracial marriages between two Christians.

People that claim their ethnic group is the true Israelites are also mistaken. Their arguments normally trace a supposed lineage to one of the so-called "lost tribes of Israel," which did not return with the tribe of Judah (the Jews) when they came back to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon (5th-6th centuries, B.C.E.) A crucial problem with this view is that it is unbiblical. Both Jews and all the other Israelite tribes came back to Jerusalem after the captivity and participated in the rebuilding of the temple under the auspices of Zerubbabel, the descendent of David (Zech. 8:9, 13; 10:6; Hag. 2:1-5; Ezra 5:1-2; 6:17; 8:35; Hag. 2:23; Ezek. 37:15-28; Jer. 3:18; Luke 22:30; James 1:1).

Victory Outreach condemns any form of prejudice toward an individual, people, or race. It holds that no ethnicity or race is superior to another. We also affirm that no race should be privileged over another but that all people are created equal and deserve the same basic human rights as everyone else. Moreover, we believe a toleration of other races is not enough – we are to accept all peoples with open arms. Jesus has called us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). We understand that certain races have suffered injustices and oppression at the hand of other races, but we condemn counter-racism as a solution to the problem. Fighting injustice with injustice is not the answer, for only by love and forgiveness can Christians conquer hate.



Government and Political Parties

Does Victory Outreach endorse a particular political party or government?

Victory Outreach looks forward to the future realization of God's kingdom. We recognize, however, that in the current age God has permitted the establishment of various political governments to run societies. We believe that civil government is ordained by God and is better than anarchy. Yet at the same time we endorse the efforts of political leaders of the past, such as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, who had the courage to stand up against civil injustice by peacefully protesting. A Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms: the church and the state. We therefore encourage believers to influence political systems with a Christian worldview whenever possible. In a free party system, we encourage Christians to vote. Some Christians may feel led by God to seek political office. These are productive ways to influence society (Matt. 5:13-14).

As a Roman citizen, the Apostle Paul had certain rights and stood on them to protect himself from injustice and persecution (Acts 16:37-39; 22:23-29; 25:8-12). He instructed the Christians in Rome to respect the governing authorities, knowing that God establishes such authorities to protect those who do right in a society and punish those who do wrong. Consequently, he encouraged the Christians to pay taxes (Rom. 13:1-7; cf. 1 Peter 2:13-17; Mark 12:17). He also exhorted Timothy to pray for rulers and those in governmental authority so that the community would be able to live a quiet and peaceful life (1 Tim. 2:1-2). We agree with these biblical instructions.

We do not endorse one particular political party in the free world. In the United States, for example, a Christian is free to be a Democrat, Republican, or something else. Individual Christians can use godly wisdom and go with their own political preferences. A church could become divisive if it affirms only one party.

The political kingdoms, religious wars, and imperialism of past centuries have demonstrated that when the boundaries between Church and State get blurred, disastrous consequences can follow. Ultimately, Christians must recognize that their final kingdom is eternal rather than temporal, and their central focus is to influence others with the good news of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19; John 18:36).



Dating and Marrying Unbelievers

What is Victory Outreach's position on dating and marrying non-Christians?

The Bible warns against entering into a marital or sexual relationship with a non-believer (Deut. 7:1-5; Exod. 34:10-16; Num. 25:1-2; Josh. 23:6-13; Ezra 9-10; Neh. 10:28-30; 13:23-29; Psa. 106:34-39; 1 Cor. 7:39; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). The primary reason for the prohibition was that the believers would be led astray to serve the idols and false gods of the people whom they married. The fall of King Solomon is classic example of this (1 Kings 11:1-8). Solomon married a number of foreign women who eventually led him astray to worship their gods. If the "wisest man in the world" at that time could be led astray, believers should take heed not to make the same mistake as Solomon.

In the 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, Paul claims that sexual relationships with non-believers (temple prostitutes in this case) is offensive to the body of Christ because it makes a member of Christ's body united with a member of the "outside" or fallen world controlled by Satan (1 Cor. 6:9-20; cf. 5:5, 13; 2 Cor. 4:4). Paul writes that a single Christian (or widow in this case) should only marry a person who is "in the Lord," or in other words, a fellow Christian (1 Cor. 7:39). He also forbids a believer to be "unequally yoked" together with a non-believer (2 Cor. 6:14). The Greek cognates used for "yoke" (*zeugnumi*; *sunzeugnumi*) often refer to marriage unions in Scripture. Mark 10:10, for example, uses *sunzeugnumi* for "joined together" when Jesus speaks of a marriage union: "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Although the context of 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 primarily involves idolatry, a comparison with 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 supports the idea that Paul is also discouraging sexual union with non-believers.

We thank God for married couples who originally were non-believers but then become Christians. Sometimes, however, this creates a dilemma if one spouse decides to be a Christian and the other one does not. Paul writes that such couples should attempt to stay together, but if the unbeliever leaves, the believer is not bound to stay with the unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:12-16). Peter writes to Christian wives who have unbelieving husbands and suggests that the husband might be won over to the gospel by virtue of the wife's godly conduct (1 Pet. 3:1-6).

It is also wise to suggest that a believer should not marry another person who claims to be a believer if that person's lifestyle contradicts his/her faith (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-12). There are times when some partners pretend to be Christian to avoid breaking up with their boyfriend or girlfriend. A relationship like this will not work out in the long run if there is insincerity and hypocrisy. It is not enough to verbally profess to be a Christian if one's lifestyle is bound by immoral habits. It would be within a Christian's best interest not to marry someone who claims to be Christian and yet is abusive, or an alcoholic, or a drug abuser, or is sexually immoral, or dishonest, or a law-breaker (e.g. a thief), or is controlled by some other destructive vice. Our ministry specializes in reaching people with such problems, and we would encourage such to seek counseling or enter into one of our rehabilitation homes to break free of destructive habits.

Another concern is that some Christians wrongfully get involved in "missionary dating," hoping to win a non-believer over to the Lord as they become boyfriend and girlfriend. This method of evangelism is hopelessly flawed and risky. And success stories of this kind do not nullify all the failures. Many times the non-Christian partner influences the believer instead of vice versa; the believer begins to compromise his/her faith by doing things he/she would not normally do, such as having some form of premarital sex. Sometimes the believer completely backslides because of their non-believing boy/girlfriend. In other cases, the believer falls in love with the non-believer, and then the believer realizes that their partner flatly refuses to become a Christian. They then breaks up with her and is left emotionally devastated. Still other cases involve Christians who end up violating biblical scripture by marrying the unbeliever, hoping they will win over the unbeliever after they get married. It is presumptuous for a believer to think that they can win over a nonbeliever to God's word when the believer is violating God's word by marrying the nonbeliever in the first place. And even though Peter and Paul hope that a non-believing spouse would be won over to the Lord, there is no guarantee of this (1 Cor. 7:16).

Victory Outreach therefore discourages believers dating unbelievers. We teach that a believer should marry only another believer of the opposite sex.



Intimacy in Dating

What does Victory Outreach believe regarding appropriate and inappropriate intimacy for Christians who are dating or engaged?

There is a radical difference between our culture (Western society) and that of the biblical era. During the time of the early Christians, most marriages were arranged, and courtship/ romance was not as normative as it is today. The father of a household often arranged the marriage of his daughter in relation to family ties and dowries (often with the bride's consent). Love was not normally a factor in marriage; it was considered an added bonus. To insure virginity, girls were sometimes betrothed to men before they reached puberty; more typically, they were married shortly after the onset of puberty. The normal age for a Greco-Roman or Jewish bride was about 15 years old, and a small percentage were as young as 12. The period of betrothal lasted about one year. The Jews permitted polygamy and concubines, but the great majority of marriages were monogamous.

It was in this historical context that the New Testament was written. Unfortunately, the early Christians say little about the proper limits of intimacy in dating or courtship because their world did not know much about the freedom we have today to "go out on dates" and selectively choose our own mate whom we genuinely love. Nevertheless, the Bible provides us with proper boundaries and wisdom in relation to this issue. One thing that is definitely off-limits for any Christian is sexual immorality, including premarital sex (1 Cor. 7:1-9; 1 Thes. 4:3-7; Mark 7:20-23; Deut. 23:13-29). Clearly there is no biblical basis for claiming that premarital sex (fornication) is acceptable for Christian singles.

Some unmarried Christian couples think they should have sex before marriage in order to know whether or not they are sexually compatible, but this view is flawed. Mature, honest, and candid conversation between the dating couple and a good Christian counselor would reveal whether or not the couple is sexually compatible. In any case, most alleged incompatibilities could be worked out in marriage through love, prayer, patience, proper counseling, and a willingness to meet the other person's needs before their own (cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-5).

Victory Outreach values sexual purity. We hope that unmarried couples would wisely, prayerfully, and respectfully define their own proper boundaries on these issues or seek the advice of mature believers whom they know and trust. We oppose any intimate activity that tempts single Christians to commit sexual sin. Certain forms of kissing, for instance, might be too intimate for some Christians. And something as innocent as a foot massage might arouse another Christian to sexual enticement. If couples that date have little self-control, what starts out as a fairly innocent form of affection might lead to uncontrolled passion and sex. Again, prayer, communication, and setting proper boundaries are essential for respectful dating. To avoid improper intimacy, a wise choice is for dating couples to meet in public places or go out with other couples and friends.

A number of single Christians realize that sex before marriage is wrong, but they redefine sex to mean "sexual intercourse only." Hence, they abstain from intercourse but indulge in other sexual activities that are virtually just as intimate. We urge all single people in our churches to refrain from behavior that is too sexual in nature; namely, actions such as sexually explicit communication, petting, pornography, etc. or any other activity that involves contact with a boyfriend or girlfriend's private areas.

We recognize that physical beauty, attraction, romantic love, and sex are good things if done within the proper boundaries that God has established. Our sexually promiscuous societies have perverted those boundaries because they do not respect biblical principles. The Christian must stand firm against these external influences and be faithful to the God of the Bible. We are encouraged by the fact that our God is the God of second chances. If a single Christian has failed in this area in the past, there is forgiveness, restoration, and strength to resist sexual temptation through Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9; Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 6:10-18).



Abuse

What is Victory Outreach's position on abuse? What advice does Victory Outreach offer to those who are in abusive situations?

Abuse is defined as “physical maltreatment” or “language that condemns or vilifies, usually unjustly, intemperately, and angrily.” A longer definition may be understood as “the imposition of one person’s destructive will or actions upon another person which inflicts harm to the victim on a physical, emotional, or spiritual level.” The abuser misuses his/her physical or psychological strength, position, or authority to afflict the victim, whose will is not considered. The victim is almost always unable to prevent the abuse or overpower the abuser.

Victory Outreach takes a strong stand against abusive situations and is actively involved in healing the dysfunctional home. We grieve with the heart of God over those who find themselves in abusive and harassment situations. Clearly God never intended helpless victims to succumb to such mistreatment, but sadly too many people who know about abusive situations do nothing about them. This only perpetuates the problem and gives the abuser more confidence to continue victimizing others.

Biblical Scripture presents us with the proper paradigm for non-abusive conduct. We are to exemplify the fruits of the Spirit, which include: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). In Ephesians, we read: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:29-32). In relation to family conduct, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, and wives should respect their husbands. Parents are not to provoke their children to anger, bitterness, or discouragement, but train them up in the ways of the Lord (Eph. 5:23, 33; 6:4; Col. 3:21).

The question may arise whether it is realistic to expect fallen humans to communicate no negative emotions. Emotional outbursts are often rooted in feelings of anger, resentment, stress, irritation, unhappiness, and so on. While these feelings are understandable, there is no reason to take out one’s own frustrations on another person. It is necessary sometimes to discipline one’s children, express one’s disappointments, and communicate one’s disagreements, but these things should never be done in a way that vents out personal anger on an innocent victim. Scripture suggests this: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph. 4:26-27).

Sometimes a Christian wife might have a distorted view of Christian submission – she accepts abusive behavior because she believes that a wife is supposed to “submit” to the husband, according to the Bible. But biblical submission does not mean succumbing to the abuse of one’s husband! Christian marital relationships involve *mutual* submission, respect, and love for one another (Eph.5:22, 33; Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7; Tit. 2:4). Abuse is selfish behavior that lashes out in violence, hurt, and great disrespect. A Christian husband who is abusive is sinning against his wife and violating Scripture. He is thus sinning against God.

Here are some suggestions regarding confronting, reporting, correcting abuse.

First, it is helpful to discern whether a situation is in fact abusive. Outbursts of anger occur in most families, but this itself is not necessarily abuse. Verbal rage that is intended to hurt a person, or ruin the self-esteem of that person, is abusive. Every state and country interprets abuse differently, but sexual abuse, molestation, and beatings are all criminal acts requiring legal penalties. Hence, battery, rape, incest, sexual exploitation, child pornography, are some of the ways abuse manifests itself.

Second, once abuse has been determined, it is necessary to report it to someone of authority who has the ability to stop it. This becomes a difficult step for many victims because often they are emotionally attached to the abuser. The abuser might be their lover, spouse, parent, employer, or a well-respected person of authority. In many cases fear grips the victims. They are afraid of the abuser’s retribution, or fear embarrassment, or don’t want to face losing a person they love. In other cases, the victims feel false guilt, thinking themselves to be somehow responsible for the actions of the abuser. But silence is not golden in any of these cases – it only permits the abuser to continue his/her destructive behavior.

Third, the abuser himself/herself must be confronted. It is probably best to have officials confront an abuser who might get violent. In many cases, the abuser might deny there is a problem. He/she must first take responsibility for his/her actions. If possible the abuser ought to be referred to a professional counselor, preferably a Christian. In a home situation, it may be necessary for a separation to take place in order to ensure security, safety, and healing. In some cases legal action might be the only preventative. The most important objective is the immediate protection of the innocent.

Finally, due the trauma caused by abusive situations, a time of healing needs to take place. It is important for the innocent victims to seek counseling, prayer, and request the help, company, and support from mature believers, friends, and relatives.

For those who are remorseful abusers, we are able affirm that there is forgiveness, the ability to change, and the possibility to live a normal life. God is able to heal both the oppressed and oppressor. Restoration is possible through forgiveness and true change. The Apostle Paul's conversion is an example of a violent individual who was permanently changed by the power of God (Acts 9). He writes: "here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15).



Engagement and Marriage

What is the Biblical View of Marriage according to Victory Outreach?

In our current age when the secular world promotes lust, sexual promiscuity, same sex relationships, and living together in an uncommitted relationship, the concept of marriage and family values seems to be under duress. Victory Outreach believes that society needs to return to a strong biblical foundation for marriage and family.

Jesus affirmed marriage by claiming that in the beginning God created humans as male and female; the two are to leave their parents and become one flesh. "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). Marriage is portrayed as a binding relationship between two people of the opposite sex. It is an institute that God has sanctioned. Although some people practiced polygamy in the Old Testament, the words of Jesus indicate that the appropriate pattern in marriage relationships is monogamy. Examples of the polygamous marriages of Jacob (Genesis 29-50), David (2 Samuel 11-1 Kings 1), and Solomon (1 Kings 1-11) result in a checkered history of sibling rivalry, jealousy, murder, and (in Solomon's case) idolatry.

The religious ceremony of the wedding stresses marriage as a covenant between the couple and God. The wedding participants represent the church and community who stand as witnesses of this union. The church community should be supportive of the married couple by nurturing them in the ways of marriage, family, and serving the Lord. In Ephesians 5:22-33, we read that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and wives are to respect their husbands. Mutual submission, love, and respect between husband and wife need to reflect the Christian home (1 Pet. 3:7; Tit. 2:4; Eph. 5:22). In addition, the couple should not to deprive one another sexually (1 Cor. 7:1-5).

Marriage is intended to be a lifelong commitment. Tragically, we live in an age where divorce has broken up marriages and shattered many families in both non-Christian and Christian homes. The Bible rightly declares that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). Not only must the sanctity of marriage and permanence of the home be stressed in our churches, but we also need to teach realistic expectations in marriage and give wise counsel to those who date or are in the process of selecting a lifetime partner.

Our advice begins by asking single persons to honestly ask themselves why they desire marriage. Paul affirms it is better to be single than married, but he recognizes that not everyone is able to remain a lifelong celibate (1 Cor. 7:7-9, 25-40). If a single person wishes to be married, does he/she have an unrealistic expectation that marriage will solve all his/her problems? Are friends, relatives, or figures of authority pressuring the single person to get married? Is the single person settling for someone he/she is not really interested in because of desperation to get married? Does the single Christian wish to get married simply to find sexual fulfillment? (Granted, Paul claims that it is better to marry than to burn with lust [1 Cor. 7:9], but this reason *alone* is not enough.) Hence, singles need to examine their motives for marriage. In western society, marriage should not be for any reason that does not include as its primary motive a genuine love, connection, and attraction for the person one wishes to marry. It is our conviction that God does not call us to marry other Christians with whom we are incompatible, or no have attraction for, or are not genuinely interested in. Without proper motives, sincerity, and self-honesty, a potential marriage is heading for disaster. It is also our position that God does not call us to marry unbelievers in order to evangelize them.

Couples who are dating should not rush into engagement and marriage, but allow for enough time to elapse getting to know one another in various settings and circumstances. They should not let their sexual urges cause them to make premature decisions. Marriage is more than just physical intimacy; it involves spiritual, intellectual, and emotional oneness also. If all a dating or engaged couple focuses on is physical intimacy, there is something wrong. True compatibility involves much more than this.

We advise that every couple who is contemplating marriage seek Christian counseling from a qualified person. Honest discussion about expectations on key issues need to be thoroughly addressed: financial management, career endeavors, short and long-term goals, family planning and birth control, sexual expectations, communication skills, relationships with friends and future in-laws, church involvement, roles, and so on. It is also important that the couple's personal background and histories be completely disclosed. Deception will never make a marriage work. Every important issue should be exposed and resolved long before there is a wedding ceremony. This way healing, forgiveness, correction, and the release of emotional pain may truly take place.

Our church encourages couples to pray, seek wise counsel when contemplating engagement, and follow God's standards for marriage.



Family

What does Victory Outreach believe about the family? What is a biblical model for the family?

Victory Outreach places a high value on the family. The family has been God's agency for populating the earth and raising children. Jesus placed a high regard for marriage and affirmed, along with the Old Testament Law, that children must honor their parents (Matt. 19:1-9; Mark 7:9-13; 10:2-12). The early Christian leaders often instructed their congregation members to follow household codes, which outlined the proper roles for husbands, wives, children, as well as domestic and government relationships (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7; Tit. 2:1-3:8).

The role of the husband is to love his wife as himself, care for her, be considerate to her, respect her, and be self-controlled (Eph. 5:25, 28-29, 33; Tit. 2:2, 6). It may be quite a challenging order for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, but this view certainly rules out any form of abuse and would considerate it to be absolutely contrary to the biblical role for husbands. Peter infers that a husband who is not considerate to his wife will have his prayers hindered (1 Pet. 3:7). Moreover, as a father, the husband is to provide for his own children, train them up in the ways of the Lord, and not overwhelm or embitter them (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; cf. Deut. 11:18-21; Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:6; 29:15).

The role of the wife is to love and respect her husband, submit to him, be self-controlled, busy with domestic affairs, pure, and focus on her inner beauty (Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Pet. 3:1-6; Tit. 2:4-5). She is to love her children and manage her household well (Tit. 2:4; 1 Tim. 5:14; cf. Prov. 31). As a spiritual daughter of Sarah, she is to do what is right and not be intimidated by an unbelieving husband or society (1 Pet. 3:5-6).

Both husband and wife share a mutual submission to one another, and they are not to deprive each other of sexual pleasure (Eph. 5:22; 1 Cor. 7:1-5).

Children are to obey their parents who are in the Lord because this pleases God. As the Old Testament Law states, children are to honor their father and mother "that it may go well" with them and that they "may enjoy long life on the earth" (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; cf. Exod. 20:12).

Sometimes Christians speak of the family in terms of the traditional family, which includes both parents and all their natural children. In reality, divorce, remarriage, adoption, blended families, and extended families have altered the definition of the traditional family and create new needs for the church to meet. The church must be sensitive to the challenges of single parenting and step parenting. Is the church prepared to give wise counsel to Christian stepparents and children? The church must instruct and reach out in love not only to traditional households, but non-traditional also.



Balancing Relationships and Responsibilities

What does Victory Outreach believe regarding prioritizing relationships and responsibilities?

The Christian is faced with the complexities and responsibilities of everyday living: maintaining a job, spending time with friends and family, finding time to rest, time to exercise, attending church, getting involved in church functions, getting involved in other activities, and so on. How does one prioritize his or her time?

An excellent biblical model for the proper balancing of relationships and responsibilities is found in Matthew 6:24-34. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts his followers not to be worried about how they should live. He claims their heavenly Father knows what needs they have before they ask Him. Christians can trust in God's providential care; they do not need to be anxious about how they will eat, drink, or be clothed. Jesus declares, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).

Our first priority, then, is to God. We should seek to develop a strong, personal relationship with God and His kingdom. Fellowship with God includes prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), being led by His Spirit (Gal. 5:16; Rom. 8:12-14), and attempting to do what pleases Him. We discover how we should serve Him by following the guidelines set for us in the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16-17; John 8:31-32). God's Word permeates in our hearts when we read Scripture, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, and listen to biblically based messages at church and on radio or television. We can also be encouraged in the ways of the Lord through godly Christian fellowship.

Our second priority is to our spouse and children if we are married, or to our family if we are not (1 Tim. 5:8; 1 Pet. 3:7). The Christian must recognize, however, that his/her own personal relationship with God should never be compromised.

Work, of course, is important in order to provide for one's family. However, work for work's sake is not a priority; in fact, too much work has a tendency to eat into our family and devotional times. We refer again to Jesus' words in Matthew 6:24-34. He informs us not to worry about material needs. God will provide for us if we seek Him first. Family relationships and one's personal relationship with God are far more important than financial success or the acquiring of extra material goods. This does not mean that we should never work overtime or seek to advance in our careers, but our motives must be pure and our priorities in proper order. In God's eyes, a successful family is more of a priority than a successful career.

Depending on our schedule and preferences, other priorities might include getting involved in various church activities, maintaining quality friendships, exercising, and finding time for relaxation and entertainment.



Divorce and Remarriage

What is Victory Outreach's position on divorce and remarriage?

Victory Outreach strongly values the need for society to have strong marriages and family . Because we believe that marriage is a sacred lifelong covenant joining two people in a monogamous relationship, we abhor divorce as a tragic event that breaks up families and leaves them with emotional scars. We value the biblical concept in which God affirms marriage (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6); divorce is a contradiction of God's intention for the family (Mal. 2:16). We encourage couples to stay together and lament with those who have faced the tragedy of divorce.

The Bible upholds the necessity for married couples to stay together. This also includes mixed marriages in which one partner is a Christian and the other is not. Under normal circumstances, the Christian is not to initiate divorcing the unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:10-11). Jesus warned that if a person divorces his/her spouse and marries another he/she commits adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12). It is clear through these verses that the biblical record denounces divorcing one's spouse to marry or have an affair with another person. This is tantamount to adultery.

The Old Testament set regulations regarding divorce and remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4). A person who was divorced and remarried, for example, could not return back to the original spouse. The New Testament has stricter standards and records only two cases in which divorce may be legitimate. In the first case, the exception is when one spouse is sexually unfaithful to his/her partner (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The second case involves a mixed marriage in which the unbelieving spouse departs from the believing spouse (1 Cor. 7:15). Abandonment or desertion is a long-term physical withdraw from a partner that neglects support and responsibilities. In such a case, divorce may be an option. We must stress that in both circumstances, divorce is an option rather than a mandate. Whenever possible, we would encourage that such couples receive counseling, prayer, forgiveness, and healing rather than end their marriages, especially when children are involved.

Although the Bible does not affirm any other grounds for divorce, we are sensitive to the fact that the biblical writers are responding to real-life situations arising in the first century. Their objective was to meet the needs of a particular church or community. Paul writes about divorce and remarriage in response to marital and sexual questions posed by the Corinthian congregations (1 Cor. 7). Perhaps Jesus' strong words against divorce were at least partially motivated by the scandal in Palestine created by Herod Antipas, who divorced his first wife (the daughter of King Aretas IV) in order to marry Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod had John the Baptist imprisoned because John kept on declaring that it was not lawful for Herod to take his brother's wife (Matt. 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9; cf. Lev. 18:16; 20:21). John was eventually beheaded on Herod's birthday. After being questioned by the Pharisees about divorce, Jesus' answer might be supporting John's position against Herod by affirming that it is adulterous to divorce one's spouse in order to marry another (Matt. 19:1-9).

These situations address the needs of that time and cause us to question whether other cases of divorce may be legitimate but simply not mentioned in Scripture. In church history, for instance, exceptional cases of marital dissolution were identified by the term "annulment." In our age, physical and/or verbal abuse may be an exception case because it poses a major threat to family and/or life and limb. For protection's sake, sometimes it is better to separate than to stay together. If abuse continues after numerous attempts to be reconciled, divorce may be a possible option. Other cases might involve marrying a person under false pretenses; another case might involve a spouse who belongs to the military and is missing in action; still another case might involve a spouse who is sentenced to life imprisonment for a crime he/she committed. Even though such cases are not addressed in the Bible, they do require us to use discernment in order to arrive at a good solution to the problem. In exceptional cases, then, the church and its ministers must use godly wisdom to prayerfully suggest what might be the best course of action for a congregation member to take. In no case do we believe that Christians ought to create their own "exceptions to the rule"— we would strongly recommend that divorce never be made independent of the Christian community or professional Christian counsel.

The question of legitimate remarriage goes hand in hand with the question of the legitimacy of the divorce. In cases where the divorce is legitimate, remarriage may be an option, but we would recommend that a divorced person not get married right away. Healing and stability takes time, especially when children are involved. It is also important to evaluate the reasons why the first marriage failed and how a future marriage would avoid the same pitfalls. In other cases, the partner might realize that he/she has sinned by divorcing

his/her spouse, repent, and yet for one reason or another, reconciliation is not possible. Again, in such circumstances, the church must determine on a case-by-case basis whether it would sanction a second marriage for such individuals.

The point that must be stressed is that couples should not attempt to look for any “loopholes” that would legitimize their divorce; rather, they should strive to do all they can to make their marriages work. One marriage that lasts a lifetime is the biblical objective, not divorce and remarriage.



Celibacy and Singles

How does Victory Outreach Respond to Singles?

Some Christian traditions place a high value on the single life. Throughout Christian history, priests, monks, many saints, and single missionaries have been examples of how single Christians could live a life of celibacy dedicated to God. While we admire such dedication, we find no biblical basis for establishing celibacy as a mandate or prerequisite for ministry. Peter was married and was accepted by God to do ministry; Paul was single and was also accepted by God for ministry. The Lord calls each of us to abide in the special calling in which He has called us (1 Cor. 7:17-24).

Victory Outreach encourages every Christian to discover his/her spiritual gifts and calling. Some single believers might feel challenged to remain celibate, as did the Apostle Paul, who recommended remaining single (1 Cor. 7:7-8). The advantage of being single is that a Christian has more time and freedom to dedicate oneself to the work of the Lord. A married person's allegiance is divided between ministry and the needs of his/her family (1 Cor. 7:32-35). In any case, singles are to remain sexually pure (1 Thes. 4:3-7; 1 Cor. 6:18-20; see Statement #24).

Paul informs us that there is nothing wrong with desiring marriage, but if a Christian could remain single, he/she can use this gift for God's honor and glory (1 Cor. 7:25-38). Singles have great potential to be involved in ministries and missionary projects, which married couples might find difficult to do because of work schedule, children, or other obligations.

Single Christians should not consider themselves more spiritual than married couples, and married couples should not consider themselves better than singles. We believe it is beneficial, for the completeness and unity of fellowship in a church, that singles create friendships with married couples, and married couples do the same with singles.

Sadly, sometimes churches overlook the special needs of singles, divorced people, widows and widowers. We urge more Christian fellowships to address the needs of the singles in their churches. There is a growing need to establish more singles groups that cater to the needs of Generation X (born 1960's or later) and the Baby Boom generation (born before 1960), senior citizens, campus ministries, divorce recovery classes, single parents ministries, and so on.



Homosexuality

What is Victory Outreach's position on homosexuality?

Victory Outreach does not endorse homosexuality or lesbianism; we consider both to be immoral and contrary to biblical teaching. We do not believe that homosexuals should be ordained as clergy in any church that professes to be historically orthodox with reference to Christianity. Regrettably, many people today portray anyone who criticizes or speaks out against the homosexual lifestyle as prejudiced, hate-mongers, or homophobic. While there are some individuals who are indeed homophobic, we encourage our church to reach out in love to the homosexual with the Gospel message of hope and forgiveness. We believe it is possible to love a person without approving of his/her lifestyle. We fully recognize that the gay person is a human being who is created in God's image, and we condemn the activities of those who are violent towards gays.

Some have argued that homosexuality is a natural sexual preference made by perfectly normal and healthy people. Yet important studies have shown that those who practice homosexuality are more unhappy and prone to commit suicide than heterosexuals. Studies have also demonstrated that homosexuals or bisexuals are more susceptible to getting sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDs than heterosexuals. On the average, the life-span of homosexuals is much less than heterosexuals.

What does the Bible say about homosexuality? Certain gay advocates claim that David and Jonathan were lovers (1 Samuel). They confuse a careful distinction between a special friendship and a sexual relationship (2 Sam. 1:26). David and Jonathan had a relationship that was clearly a special relationship. Both would have been condemned under Levitical law had they been homosexuals (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). The Old Testament also describes the sin of Sodom and Gomorra, which involved homosexuality (Gen. 19).

Homosexuality is viewed as "unnatural," contradicting God's intended purpose and order for creation – men and women are to have heterosexual relationships (Rom. 1:26-27; Matt. 19:4-6 cf. Gen. 2:21-24). Homosexuality and lesbianism are considered sexual vices akin with fornication and adultery. The Bible warns that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rom. 1:24-32; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; cf. Jude 7).

Some gay advocates have argued that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality; rather, it denounces male prostitution, pedophilia, male rape, Canaanite practices, or excessive sexual promiscuity. The biblical contexts, however, do not warrant such explanations as the complete reason behind its condemnation of homosexuality. Granted, when Paul lists a number of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9, he uses the Greek term *malakos*, which could mean "effeminate" or "male prostitute." But the passage also includes the term *arsenokoites*, which combines the words "male" and "intercourse" to refer to a man having sexual intercourse with another man, or in other words, someone who practices homosexuality (cf. 1 Timothy 1:10). Paul's use of the term may have been derived from the Greek version (the Septuagint) of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. This explanation appears to be confirmed in early Jewish tradition also (cf. Sib. Or. 2.73). Hence, 1 Corinthians 6:9 most likely warns against both male prostitutes and homosexual offenders as the NIV understand these sexual vices. If we compare this verse with Paul's Jewish background, his reverence for the Old Testament, and his view of homosexuality in Romans 1:26-32, it becomes inevitable to conclude that Paul opposes homosexuality regardless of the form it might take.

While studies have been conducted to show that homosexuals are born gay, many psychiatrists and psychologists affirm that almost every case of homosexuality involves patients who have had very negative childhood experiences. In actuality, homosexuality is a behavior and preference – not a condition – and this means it is curable. There have been numerous testimonies of those who were once gay, but have been changed forever from their former lifestyle through the power of God in Christ Jesus. Real change is possible for the gay person, but much like drug or alcohol addiction, sexual addiction and homosexual orientation requires a person to be determined to say no to his/her vice, keep away from major sources of temptation, seek counsel or rehabilitation, and depend on God for complete deliverance. Happily, when Paul claims that homosexuals practice immoral sexual behavior, he goes on to say to the Corinthians, "And such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Although we consider homosexuality to be immoral and contrary to biblical teaching, we affirm our compassion for the homosexual and lesbian. We desire to help those in the gay community who have special needs and are searching for spiritual answers. We must remember to hate sin but love the sinner.



Counseling and Psychology

What is Victory Outreach's position on Christians seeking counselors and therapists for personal or relational problems?

Victory Outreach acknowledges that people often need healing on all levels including spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional. We believe that God not only uses ministers as agents of healing, but also doctors, physicians, counselors, and therapists. We affirm that all truth is God's truth, and sometimes God uses medicine, therapy, and other means to bring about healing.

Our basis for this perspective rests on God's *general revelation*. A person is able to find God and truth not only through the Bible – a source of *special revelation* – but also through human reason, conscience, personal experience, human history, nature and the created world (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:19-20; 2:14-15; Matt. 6:26; Heb. 11). Hence, God can use the brilliant minds of humans to develop various types of healing and therapies. Such minds often presuppose truths that are related to God's creative and providential care: the ability to think, be self-reflective, use logic, and draw inferences; the ability to communicate through rational discourse; the ability to observe order and predictability in the created order; and the ability to come to the conclusion that there is purpose and meaning to life. We believe that scientific, medicinal, and helpful therapeutic discoveries are examples of how God uses or works with the minds of individuals to bring about more providential care and healing to a hurting world.

Some people's struggles and anguish are related to severe emotional, behavioral, or mental problems. A Christian who struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, for instance, might need medication and counseling, not only prayer and scripture verses. A person who suffers from depression, suicidal tendencies, or has some type of mental anguish might have a chemical imbalance or another physical problem that requires professional intervention with medication, counseling, and/or therapy. It is perfectly acceptable for a Christian to seek out this type of professional help (cf. Prov. 11:14; 15:22).

Whom do we seek for professional counseling? We prefer to recommend professional Christians before non-Christians. While secular professionals may have some helpful advice and offer adequate prescriptions, an essential source of true healing, God and the Christian worldview, are often left out of the picture. We do not recommend any professional who brings distorted religious views into his/her practice, such as a professional who allegedly heals through having his/her clients regress to "past lives," or a person who attempts to attribute all forms of mental and emotional problems to demon possession (and hence, attempts to cast out demons from Spirit-filled believers).

Balanced Christian counseling takes into account the Christian worldview, which assumes biblical truths and that God, sin, and spiritual aspects of the human being are relevant in counseling. Some important biblical aspects when counseling include grace, forgiveness, love, self-discipline, joy, wise and successful living, a recognition of our human mortality, and an appreciation that human beings are created in God's image and were not meant to be alienated from their Maker (Gen. 1-3; Psa. 23; 27; 32; Prov. 1:1-7; 3:1-6; Matt. 6:25-34; Gal. 5:22-23; 6:4; Eph. 4:29-31; 1 John 5:13).

A Christian counselor or psychotherapist may be able to successfully adapt certain secular methods and techniques into his/her practice provided that he/she is able to maintain a biblical worldview. Once adapted, the approach should not contradict or invalidate the Christian message.

A healing agent that may often be overlooked is the body of Christ (the church), which should readily help individuals in need of spiritual, mental, and emotional healing. The Bible affirms that we are to encourage one another, empathize with one another, bear each other's burdens, help the weak, pray for healing, weep with them who weep and rejoice with them who rejoice (Rom. 12:14-15; 1 Cor. 12:25-26; 2 Cor. 1:3-4; Gal. 6:1-10; Col. 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thes. 2:11-12; 5:14; James 5:13-20).



Leadership in the Home

What does Victory Outreach believe about leadership in relation to the roles of husband and wife in the home?

The ideal paradigm for a Christian living in God's kingdom involves equality among social, ethnic, and gender differences (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11). Unfortunately the ideal is not always obtainable in this fallen age, and Christians often find themselves struggling between the protocols of this world and that of the world to come. We are citizens of two kingdoms: God's kingdom and the world's. The first century believers faced the same predicament. They found themselves under Roman rule and living in ancient Mediterranean culture, a society that expected patriarchal households. In ancient world of that time, the father was the *paterfamilias* or the male head of the home: he established the rules, made decisions, provided for his family was the master of his slaves, and his word was authoritative. This establishment helped maintain order in the ancient home. According to Roman law, the father even had authority over the life and death of other family members (*patria potestas*), but the use of this authority was not a common practice in the first century.

Although Christians had different morals and values than pagans, it is evident that their household roles were similar to (but not the same as) the larger Greco-Roman society. This means that the New Testament writers were sensitive to the wider expectations of the community in which they lived. They wished the Christians to be respected by the non-Christian community surrounding them. To protect Christian families from unnecessary alienation and persecution (Col. 4:5; 1 Pet. 2:12; 1 Tim. 3:7; 6:1; Tit. 2:3-10), they reiterated the importance of household codes, with the father as the leader of the home. Wives, children, and household slaves were to follow his leadership and authority (Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:22-23; 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; 6:1-2; Tit. 2:1-3:8; 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7). Nevertheless, marriages take on their own personalities, and it was possible that in some households, the wife seemed to be the natural leader. Perhaps this was true with Priscilla, who is sometimes mentioned before her husband Aquila (Acts 18:18; Rom. 16:3). This may have also held true for Lydia's household (Acts 16:15). In no case do we find a basis for Christian children ruling over their parents.

In our day and age, many western nations do not follow a patriarchal system, and Roman rule and slavery have been abolished. Nowadays many women have access to the same education and occupational positions as men. In the ancient world, this was hardly ever possible. The ancient household codes would still be applicable in a contemporary culture if that culture were patriarchal. We are reminded that the purpose of the codes is not just to maintain family order but also to protect Christian families from societal disrespect and discrimination. In many of today's western households, however, there is no excuse for saying that a wife's decision is not as important as her husband's. We should consider wisely the proper roles for households in our own culture. Like the biblical writers, we do not wish to be unnecessarily offensive to the larger non-Christian community, and yet we earnestly desire to be true to the intent of Scripture.

While the wife is instructed to submit to the husband (Eph. 5:23), both partners seem to share a mutual submission (Eph. 5:22). While the husband is to love his wife (Eph. 5:25), the wife is also to love her husband (Tit. 2:4). We suggest the ideal relationship in the home is that husbands and wives work together in mutual love, submission, and respect. There is no justification for a Christian husband to "rule" over his wife on the ground of biblical submission, but there is also no ground for a Christian wife to disrespect her husband. Decisions in the home should be done together through prayer and biblical guidance, having the family's best interest in mind rather than one spouse claiming authority over the other.

What if couples make no headway because both partners think their decision is right and the other's is wrong? In a patriarchal society the issue was settled: wives submitted to their husbands. But in progressive and contemporary Christian homes of western society, maintaining unity on this point might require one person giving up his/her "right" to be right, and yielding to the other. Paul found it necessary to surrender his authority this way when it came to eating sacrificial meat. Some weaker Christians in the Corinthian congregation thought it wrong to eat any meat in the marketplace that had been previously offered to idols. Even though Paul affirms his right to eat such food, he would not consume it if this meant offending weaker believers or causing disunity in the church (1 Cor. 10:23-33). This same principle of relinquishing one's authority for the sake of Christian unity may be applied to the Christian home.

What if a spouse is belligerent and always insists on his/her way or no way? This problem most likely runs deeper than a surface need to get one's way. Prayer and good marriage or family counseling might reveal the true source of the problem. The situation might require one of the partners to exemplify extreme patience, love, acceptance, forgiveness, commitment, and voluntary submission to

work through the problem until it is resolved (cf. Col. 3:12-14; Eph. 4:22-24, 31-32; 5:1-2, 22; Phil. 4:6-8; Rom. 12:9-18; Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 4:8; 1 John 4:7-8).

Both partners need to be reminded to exemplify the fruits of the Spirit and Christian love (Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 13; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Pet. 1:5-8). Biblical love is “patient and kind... not rude...love does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor. 13:4-5). This type of godly conduct may become even more necessary for a spouse who is married to a non-Christian partner. The Christian partner will also want to follow biblical instruction related to this situation (1 Cor. 7:12-14; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). In cases where a spouse is continually abusive and violent, a separation might be necessary to protect the innocent.

Harmony and peace may be obtained when Christian couples follow biblical guidelines for proper leadership and conduct in the home. Love, kindness, and forgiveness are some biblical antidotes against household disunity.



Sexual Purity

What is sexual immorality and how does a Christian resist sexual temptation?

In the society of our day, secular media, music, entertainment, Internet and youth icons portray images of sexual promiscuity, sexually enticing dress, and sexually explicit conversations. Victory Outreach values sexual purity and resists the sexually explicit standards of the world and secular media.

In biblical scriptures, immorality includes perversion, incest, rape, bestiality, adultery, prostitution, and homosexuality (1 Cor. 5; 6:9-20; 10:8; Rom. 1:24-29; Jude 7; Deut. 23:13-29; Lev. 18:22; 20:10ff; Prov. 5; 6:24-35). Premarital sex or fornication is also sexually immoral (1 Cor. 7:1-9; 1 Thes. 4:3-7; Mark 7:20-23). Sexual immorality does not merely include the physical act of having sex. Pornography and voyeurism are examples of how sexual sin pervades even the heart and mind. Jesus warned that if a man looks at a woman to lust after her, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:28). We are reminded of how King David was tempted to commit adultery with Bathsheba – he spotted her bathing in the nude (2 Sam. 11-12).

Some people think that the Bible is out-dated on this issue. They claim it was written in a society that did not know about birth control, abortion, and how to stop sexually transmitted diseases (STD). Nowadays a condom supposedly protects a person from unwanted pregnancies and STD. They argue that people can now have “safe sex,” but in biblical days this was not possible, and that is why the biblical writers denounce sex before marriage. They say that we live in a modern or post-modern world where “everybody is doing it, so why don’t you?” This perspective is totally misleading. In actuality, the Greco-Roman world of biblical times was a sex-crazed society. Greeks and Romans rarely associated their religious beliefs with morality. In fact, the gods they worshipped were among the worse examples of morality! Myths about Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo and others mention how these gods seduced underlings and ravished young women.

In the Greco-Roman world, adultery would be acceptable if one could avoid retribution from the husband; hence, extra-marital affairs were common. Demosthenes’ classic statement was that “mistresses [are kept] for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person, and wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring.” Sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDs, syphilis, and gonorrhea were non-existent. Contraception and abortion were made available to wealthy women. Poorer women left their unwanted babies in the street or sewer. Baby girls were often exposed on the edge of town to die of cold, starvation, or wild animals. These children were often picked up by others who adopted them, made them slaves, or sold them as slaves. Consequently, a slave girl was left helpless before her lustful master. If she refused to have sex, she would be punished or the master would simply rape her. Sometimes a master’s wife would have sex with a male slave. Homosexuality was highly praised by the Greeks, and some Roman Emperors practiced it also. Julius Caesar had the reputation of being “every woman’s husband and every man’s wife.” Prostitution became famous in major cities such as Athens and Corinth. In earlier days, the Acropolis in Corinth was said to house 1000 shrine prostitutes. The term “to Corinthiaze” meant to commit sexual immorality.

What was the early Christian response to the sexual addiction and perversion of their time? Paul uncompromisingly exhorts the Corinthian Christians against having sex with temple prostitutes because a sexual union with a nonbeliever would be offensive and disruptive to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-20; cf. 5:5, 13; 10:8; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 12:21). Although Paul considers it better for single Christians to remain single, he allows them to get married if they are having trouble keeping sexually pure (1 Cor. 7:1-9). He encourages married couples not to deprive one another sexually (1 Cor. 7:3-5). He also writes to the Thessalonians: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid fornication” (1 Thes. 4:3). In essence, regardless of how prevalent sexual promiscuity might be in a society, the biblical mandate is clear: “Flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18; cf. 2 Tim. 2:22).

A practical way for the Christians in our age to resist sexual temptation is to refrain from letting the world’s sexual standards affect them. The Bible exhorts us to not be squeezed into the world’s mold, standards, or frame of reference (Rom. 12:1-2). This requires us to be aware of the subtle ways sexual promiscuity tempts us. If a Christian feels he is being lured to pornographic websites, magazines, or movies, for instance, he should “flee” from the cause of his temptation or seek the help of stronger Christians who will pray with him and help him overcome his enticement. Also, it is always wise to choose godly friends rather than those who would tempt us to stumble sexually. Finally, we will find ourselves with more faith to resist temptation when we draw near to God through prayer, worship, devotion, fellowship, and righteous living (cf. Matt. 26:41; Eph. 5:19-21; 6:10-18; James 4:7-8).



Abortion

What is Victory Outreach's view on abortion?

Abortion is legal in many countries, but Victory Outreach stands with the rest of the historic Christian church and denounces abortion as immoral and the taking of an innocent life. We believe it is legitimate for Christians to peacefully protest the government on this issue, but we abhor the use of any violence or burning abortion clinics.

The abortion or pro-choice advocates often claim the fetus is not truly human; therefore, it is not immoral to have it aborted. The Bible, however, presents evidence that human life begins in the womb, and God providentially sustains and develops the person in the womb (Job 31:15; Psa. 139:13-16; Isa. 44:24; 49:1, 5). God called Jeremiah before he was even formed in the womb (Jer. 1:5; cf. Gal. 1:15), and before her conception, God affirmed to Mary that she would bear the Son of God (Luke 1:26-35). In the Old Testament, if a man who was fighting caused a woman to have a miscarriage, he would be punished (Exod. 21:22-25). Although abortion is not mentioned in the New Testament, extra-biblical sources confirm that the early Christians condemned it.

What about women who are raped; should they get an abortion? In cases of rape, while we sympathize with the victim, two wrongs do not make a right. It is the rapist who should be punished; the unborn child should not have to lose its life. If the rape victim gets immediate medical help, however, conception can be avoided altogether through the use of *Emergency Birth Control* pills, if it is within the woman's personal ethical and religious parameters. The EBC pill is not the abortion pill, it is a contraception pill it prevents pregnancy and cannot cause an abortion in a woman that is already pregnant. Nevertheless, even if terminating the pregnancy were allowed in such extreme cases, this would not justify sexual promiscuity and the "abortion on demand" viewpoint. Abortion is an important issue in our age because there is so much pre-marital sex, and many abortions are due to unwanted pregnancies that occur as a result of voluntarily sex outside the confines of marriage.

What if a woman's own life is being jeopardized because of her pregnancy? Most pro-life advocates would constitute this as a legitimate case to end the pregnancy. But the advances of science have made cases of women who die in pregnancy or childbirth very infrequent. Again, if we allow for this exception, it does not justify abortion in general. The exception does not prove the rule, and the rule is this: abortion on demand is immoral.



Appropriate Roles for Women in Ministry

What position does Victory Outreach take concerning the role of women in the church?

The Bible affirms many different roles for women in ministry. Miriam, together with her brothers Moses and Aaron, lead Israel and was considered a prophet (Exod. 15:20; Mic. 6:4). Deborah was a leader and prophet during the time of the Judges. Together with Barak, she led Israel to a great victory over the enemy (Judges 4). She also wrote a song that is recorded in Judges 5. Huldah was another female prophet who led Judah to revitalize their commitment to God (2 Kings. 22). Esther was a queen whom God used to deliver Israel from destruction during their captivity under the Persian Empire (Esth. 1-10).

In the New Testament we read that Mary, the mother of Jesus, wrote a song of praise to God (Luke 1:46-55). The women who followed Jesus were the first witnesses and evangelists of the good news that Jesus had been raised from the dead (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-11; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:10-18). Among the early Christians, Philip's daughters prophesied (Acts 21:8-9), Priscilla taught the Christian faith (Acts 18:24-26), Lydia was a businesswoman and leader in the early Philippian congregation (Acts 16:13-15), Phoebe was a minister (*diakonos* – Rom. 16:1-2), and Chloe, Eudias, and Syntache each seemed to have prominent roles in their respective churches (1 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 4:2-3).

These and other biblical examples demonstrate that God uses women to perform various functions within His community, including teaching and prophesying. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that God was fulfilling a prophecy in which He would pour out his Spirit on both men *and women*, and that both sons *and daughters* would prophesy (Acts 2:14-21).

Paul believed that those who committed themselves to Christ became a new creation in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In Christ, just as there is equality among ethnicities and social statuses, so also there is equality among the sexes. This conclusion leads us to believe that other Pauline passages suggesting that women “remain silent” in the church must be interpreted in light of their unique situations. The two passages referring to this are 1 Timothy 2:9-13 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36.

1 Timothy 2:9-13

Does this text teach that women are not to speak in church; hence, they are not allowed to teach at church? If this were the case, the passage would seem to contradict Acts 18:24-26 where Priscilla (with Aquila), Paul's friend and companion, taught a man named Apollos the way of the Christian faith more thoroughly. It is also evident that females were able to teach males because Timothy learned the Scriptures from his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 3:14-16 cf. 1:5); Timothy's father was not a believer (cf. Acts 16:1).

What, then, was the occasion for Paul recommending that women keep silent in 1 Timothy 2:9-13? Timothy was the pastor of a church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3), which was being threatened by teachers who promoted false doctrine and hoped to gain monetary wealth (cf. 1 Tim. 1:4-7, 19-20; 4:1-7; 6:2-10, 17; 2 Tim. 2:17). With this situation in mind, Paul's exhortation for the women to stay silent seems directed at the rich widows in the congregation who went about from house to house creating problems (1 Tim. 5:3-16; esp. v. 15). The false teachers naturally targeted these wealthy women and influenced them in such a way that the women began to influence others in the congregation (cf. 2 Tim. 2:16-3:7; 1 Tim. 2:12-14; 4:7).

Hence, to prevent false teaching from spreading in the church, Paul gives his solution in 1 Timothy 2:9-13 – he does not want women teachers in Ephesus. Paul brings out how in Genesis, Eve was deceived and transgressed. In a similar way, these false teachers were deceiving the women in the congregation. Paul could support his point by using a universal message (i.e., the deception of Eve) and an absolute principle (i.e., the created order of humans) without making his application absolute or binding on all congregations and all eras. For example, Paul adopts the Adam and Eve story also in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where the created order seems to be an absolute principle, but the application (i.e., women wearing head coverings) is associated with the nature and custom of that particular time and culture (1 Cor. 11:6, 13-14, 16).

What seems to be at stake, then, is not some universal ban on all women teachers or ministers for all ages to come. Rather, Paul's *temporary* solution to the problem in Ephesus was to prevent the women in Ephesus – who had been deceived by false teachers – from spreading false doctrine. His long-range solution appears to be that the women should *learn* (cf. 1 Tim. 2:11) or be instructed with correct teachings.

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, Paul again suggests that women are supposed to keep silent in church. Some have argued that if he is banning all women from speaking in any church, this would contradict 1 Corinthians 11:5, where he permits women to prophesy. Paul cannot be making some universal statement about silencing women if he gives them the freedom to prophesy in congregational settings.

The context of this passage is related to orderly worship. Paul does not prohibit women from teaching or prophesying; the only thing he restricts is speaking in relation to questions they wish to “ask” (1 Cor. 14:35). This may reflect the notion of unlearned listeners interrupting the teacher’s message in order to ask questions (a common practice in the ancient world). Perhaps some of the women in Corinthian congregation were interrupting the teacher or otherwise speaking in a disorderly manner. Paul did not want worship services to devolve into chaos or go off on tangents related to irrelevant questions. He therefore suggests that the women ask their questions to their husbands at home. Many times women in the Greco-Roman world were uneducated, and so their husbands were often a helpful source of information. This passage does not claim that women can never teach or prophesy; the context has to do with maintaining orderly conduct.

We believe the biblical texts involving women’s silence in the church are unique. They engage specific first-century problems relative to the particular congregation Paul is addressing. His solution seems to be temporary and specifically related to the congregation’s situation. Paul’s ideal or universal perspective seems to be that males and females are equal in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Paul worked with women and permitted women in ministry (Rom. 16:1-3; 1 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 4:2-3), and under normal circumstances, the early Christians allowed women to speak and teach others in the church (Acts 2:17; 18:26; 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5). We therefore conclude that women are allowed to speak, teach, and minister in multiple capacities within Christian congregations.



Modesty in Physical Appearance

Does the Bible provide any guidelines for how we treat, clothe, or maintain our physical bodies?

Cultures and times differ regarding standards of modesty. Generally, however, any behavior that calls inappropriate attention to one's body is immodest. The way we eat, drink, dress, or adorn our bodies should reflect the truth that Christ dwells within us. As Scripture makes perfectly clear: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own" (*1 Corinthians 6:19*). That reminder applies to everything we put into, on, or through any part of the body.

Dress: Since there is an obvious connection between how we display our bodies and sexual attraction, the Bible tells women to dress with decency, and not with expensive clothes (*1 Tim. 2:9*). This is true for men as well as women. Clothes that reveal too much can arouse sexual lust, which is sinful. As Scripture warns: "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (*Matt. 5:28*). Of course, this applies to women as well as men. Clearly, Christians should dress in a way that honors Christ and does not lead others away from His Kingdom.

Tattoos & Piercing: Two of today's alarmingly widespread fads alter the outer appearance of the body—tattooing and body piercing. Whether or not they harm the body remains to be determined, but they were both condemned in the Old Testament as evil pagan practices. God set His people apart from the ungodly, who participated in immoral and superstitious practices, by commanding through Moses: "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD" (*Lev. 19:28*).

Although tattoos today may not be associated with a false religion, one should consider if a tattoo might please or displease God. During past wars, many servicemen innocently got tattooed. Afterwards, many of them became embarrassed by those tattoos later in life. As Christians, we must seriously consider the long-range consequences of defacing our bodies with something that, at the time, may seem fun and harmless. Christians with unobjectionable tattoos may be justified in keeping them. However, if the tattoo hinders a person's testimony or Christian witness, its removal should be strongly considered.

Of even greater concern is the practice, largely among young people, of body piercing and insertion of jewelry into navels, nostrils, lips, cheeks, ears, and even the tongue, etc. While simple earrings have come to be accepted as tasteful and inoffensive adornments, piercing one's lips and other areas is clearly heathenish behavior, contrary to the biblical principle of modesty. Piercing is usually done to draw attention or to identify with a group that is more than likely non-Christian. Such practices, historically related to paganism, have no place among those who have been saved by the blood of Christ and belong to God's Kingdom.

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Fads and fashions go in and out of style, but the ways of the Lord are timeless and pure. Christians are taught by Scripture to be "completely humble and gentle... patient, bearing with one another in love" (*Eph. 4:2*). While some of the aforementioned practices are clearly sinful, others may be merely misguided attempts at attention. Christians need only to look to the Lord for all the attention that they need. In looking to the Lord, we must always ask whether our physical appearance and the way we treat our bodies is pleasing to Him or not. Our choices must reflect positively upon Christ and our witness for Him.



Non-Christian Religions

Why does Victory Outreach deny the validity of non-Christian religions?

Based on God's revelations to the prophets and apostles, the Bible clearly presents a Christian worldview. Scripture specifically details the nature and character of God and man, man's destiny at death, and ethical and moral matters that are in accordance with our faith. The sacred blood of Jesus Christ is the only answer to our sinful separation from a holy God. Peter was explicit and direct about Jesus of Nazareth: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to man by which we must be saved" (*Acts 4:12*). If we believe the Holy Bible is the sacred word of God, and we do, then it is crystal clear that Christianity is the one true religion—the way, the truth, and the light.

All non-Christian alternatives subscribe to radically different views about God, man, the universe, and the way to salvation. Logically, two opposing viewpoints cannot both be absolutely correct. Therefore, we are obliged to make a choice. The fundamental problem for all the other "major" religions of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam is that they all deny the divinity of Jesus Christ. Paul stressed that his contemporaries must choose between Christ and competing religious beliefs. The Christian message reigns supreme, as Paul taught, due to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (*Acts 17:29-31*).

Tragically, the world is full of false prophets and new age seductions, easy liberal alternatives to the narrow path of Christianity. People are often attracted to something new and exotic, especially if an interesting person introduces it to them. The largely godless media and their celebrity darlings encourage us to "do your own thing." They propagate the humanistic and egalitarian messages that we must be tolerant of everything because nothing is absolute or better than anything else. They insist that truth and reality are relative to one's cultural perspective. They preach the heresy that our Christian God is only one version of "truth" and anyone else's version is equally valid and right. They say Christians are intolerant and narrow-minded because we believe in one God, the Father Almighty, His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

The problem with all of their doubting, their skepticism, their scorn, and their "sophistication" is that we have the Word of God, the Holy Scripture, to support and elevate our beliefs to the level of absolute truth. The Bible teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way for sinners to be saved and attain everlasting life.

What Must We Do?

It is our duty and imperative to witness for those truths by distinguishing, in our tolerance, between the sinner and the sin. If we tolerate non-Christian beliefs and behavior, we are failing in our responsibility to shepherd our fellow man to salvation, for without Christ they will perish. Of course, we must tolerate and respect other human beings as individuals made in the image of God, whether or not they accept the Christian mandate. However, we must never tolerate destructive ideas and "lifestyles" that are hostile to Christian revelation and society at large.

A powerful weapon in the fight against evil is a thorough knowledge of Scripture. The study of Christian apologetics (the defense of the faith) is made easier today by an abundance of print, CD-Rom, video, and internet resources. Of course, the testimony of people whose lives have been transformed by Christ remains the best evidence of the absolute truths of our Christian faith.

As evangelical Christians, we declare our unconditional belief that in Christ, and only in Christ, is there salvation. Our faith needs no equivocation or apology, for we are founded upon the rock Himself. We, therefore, disavow universalism and the toleration of worldviews that do not acknowledge the absolute way, truth, and light of our Lord, Jesus Christ.



Observing the Sabbath

When and how should Christians observe the Sabbath?

The Sabbath is the Lord's Day, as John called it (*Revelation 1:10*). That fact is essentially all we need to know to guide us in our reverence for the Sabbath. Christians used to be asked to refrain from work, sports, entertainment, and even reading secular magazines and newspapers on the Sabbath. Today, it could be argued that perhaps some of those restrictions were unreasonable and even unnecessary in order to worship God on His day. However, it's a good idea to refresh our memories regarding certain Scriptural passages that discuss when and how we should observe the Sabbath.

It almost goes without saying, for Christians, that the Sabbath is to be celebrated on Sunday. The early Christians gathered for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week (*Acts 20:7*). Sunday worship was a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, which took place on the first day of the week (*Luke 24:1*). While we are not commanded to observe Sunday as the specific day of rest and worship, the principle of the Sabbath is that one day in seven should be set aside for physical and spiritual renewal.

One of the Ten Commandments is to "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (*Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12*). Jesus tells us that God started the observance of the Sabbath for our benefit (*Mark 2:27*), even setting the example by "resting" on the seventh day of the creation week (*Genesis 2:2,3*). In fact, the word Sabbath means "rest" and derives from the verb meaning "to cease." Clearly, God wants us to cease our normal work schedules on His day. Although this is not a binding commandment, the very act of acknowledging God and His Son on Sunday gives us a much needed spiritual respite from the world (*Matthew 11:28,29; Hebrews 4:1-11*).

What Should We Do?

So what is the right way to spend our Sundays? That's a difficult judgment call for today's believers, who have so many attractive and entertaining options: football games, fishing trips, the mountains, the beaches, movies, the shopping malls. What we have to ask ourselves is whether or not our activities are pleasing to God. Is merely attending church enough? Perhaps not, especially if we simply go through the motions without truly engaging with the Lord.

Ultimately, of course, the proper observation of the Sabbath lies within our hearts. No one can force a deep spiritual relationship with God upon us. If we don't willingly and gratefully embrace the Sabbath, then no mandated rules of our church will do us any good. We should look at it like this: the Sabbath is our opportunity to give thanks and worship to God, presenting Him with the sacrificial gift of our undivided attention. What an opportunity Sundays afford us to study Scripture and engage in deep prayerful self-reflection (confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness), perhaps even doing so with fellow believers! That sort of an activity would certainly keep the Sabbath holy and restful.

To believe that any activity other than "work" constitutes the "rest" that God intended for us is a mistaken rationalization. Those who subscribe to this "pleasurable rest" theory sleep late, play golf, or go merrily off to the mall. Again, such behavior is not sinful or specifically forbidden. But we have to ask ourselves if habitually squandering our chances to bring glory and honor to God, on His day, is the best way for a Christian to behave. We should not settle for doing the minimum. Where God is concerned, we should always strive to do the maximum—properly keeping Sunday a holy and restful day.



Political Issues

Should Victory Outreach be involved in political issues?

The relationship between church and state has recently become an even more heated debate in America. Prayer in schools, vouchers for school choice, freedom for pornographers, abortion, and homosexuality are only a few of the important issues over which Christian beliefs clash with “rights” awarded by a liberal government. With alarming and tragic frequency, government has attempted to redefine and thereby give tacit approval to objectionable and often blatantly sinful behavior. As Christians we must be cognizant of the fact that what the government says we have a right to do is not always right to do in the eyes of God.

Despite these profoundly important issues, Victory Outreach remains apolitical—neutral—on purely political issues. We recognize that the church and state have different roles and both institutions are ordained by God (*Romans 13:1-7*), should respect each other, and not overstep those given roles. However, when 2000 years of Christian philosophy—as well as the foundation of our country, the Constitution, and the god-fearing principles of its Founding Fathers—are being assaulted on so many fronts by a grotesque form of liberal (and often atheistic) secular humanism, Bible-believing churches and individuals must raise their voices in warning and protest. Far too often, government is defying biblical principles and interpreting sinful behavior as civil rights, such as with abortions and homosexuality. As the body of Christ, the church positively must respond.

As an organization, Victory Outreach remains dedicated to our specific ministry. Thus, we strive to refrain from over-involvement in political issues. However, we cannot stand silently by while the government passes immoral laws and legislation that clearly defies Scripture. In these matters, God’s law reigns supreme and takes precedence over man’s law. Jesus’ disciples ignored the order of the established authorities to cease teaching the truths of our faith. So too must we “obey God rather than man” (*Acts 5:29*).

Therefore, with full understanding of the importance and seriousness of our position, Victory Outreach encourages our members and supporters to influence society and the political process by voting for candidates of faith, maintaining strong moral convictions and holy lifestyles (*Matthew 5:13*), praying for government officials (*1 Timothy 2:2*), and encouraging and promoting legislation that strengthens the nation’s morality. We must use every occasion and opportunity to make our voices heard both corporately and individually, loudly exposing and decrying any political position in opposition to the kingdom of God and His moral absolutes.



Pornography

Why Victory Outreach firmly opposes pornography

Obviously, true Christian believers must firmly and completely oppose pornography in all its sinful manifestations. Everywhere we turn, we are bombarded by disgraceful and disgusting displays of people degrading their “temples of the Lord” for gutter thrills and gratification of their own fleshly desires. It is no exaggeration to say that pornography shreds the social fabric of the world, destroying values, standards of moral behavior, and traditional family life.

The Dangers of Pornography In essence, pornography appeals to humanity’s lowest, most base impulses. It pulls us away from God and down into Satan’s gutter. 2,500 years of Judeo-Christian tradition has attempted to elevate man from the animals by emphasizing the sacred nature of human sexuality. Pornography drags man back down to an animal level by cheapening and degrading sex and nudity. The line is crossed when nudity is presented for the purpose of arousing sexual desire, lust, and thoughts of fornication. The vast majority of today’s nudity and sexual situations in movies and on the internet is without redeeming artistic value, depicted solely to arouse lustful desires, and often degraded even further by having nothing whatsoever to do with a man and woman joined together in holy matrimony. Such material has a devastating impact on a child’s moral development, on attitudes about women, and on male/female relationships in general.

In amazingly brazen denials, the defenders of pornography claim that it cannot be blamed for sexual abuse, adultery, rape, violence, child abuse, or degrading human dignity. It certainly can. People who otherwise were avoiding and fighting Satan’s temptations have found the allure of pornography too much to overcome. Of course, succumbing to sin is a personal choice, a weakness, and cannot be directly blamed upon anyone else. When we sin, it is our own fault and we must accept personal responsibility for that sin. However, removing the occasion of sin from our lives is a practical way to help avoid the sin itself. Tragically, Satan is bringing the occasion of sin into every home with a TV set or a computer. Through pornographic movies, TV shows, and internet sites, fathers, mothers, and children are living with constant temptation, right in the sanctity of their own homes.

The Sacredness of Sex God created men and women so that they could consummate their sacred love for one another after committing themselves in the bond of holy matrimony. Their sexual intercourse then has meaning and purpose for it becomes a celebration and demonstration of their love for one another as they strive to create a new life, sanctified by God’s grace. Pornography mocks and destroys all of that sacredness, blatantly scorning love, commitment, marriage bonds, virginity, chastity, and fidelity. By encouraging sexually immoral thoughts (*Matthew 5:28*) and actions (*1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:19*), pornography ruins marital and family relationships.

The Justification of Pornography The purveyors of pornography claim that their evil material is protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which they say guarantees their right to produce print, film, and live stage pornography. Clearly, the Founding Fathers never intended the First Amendment to be construed in such a way. Free speech was declared a right in order to allow people to express and publish ideas, which are

fundamentally different in nature than acts of pornography and gross obscenity. In recent years, liberal judges, by concurring rulings, have rewritten the Constitution to cater to the immoral masses and organized crime, which is behind the production of pornography. Christians must strongly oppose judges, lawyers, legislators, and politicians who manipulate the original protection of freedom of religion to exclude Christianity and biblical morality while encouraging all kinds of immorality through the reinterpretation of our Judeo-Christian constitution.

By loosely defining the word *censorship*, liberals accuse those against pornography of being self-appointed censors trying to dictate to everyone else what they can watch or read. Actually, only a government agency or official can censor or prevent the publication of ideas and entertainment. In fact, Christians are incessantly demonized and censored for expressing their convictions about issues, including what should be the law of the land. Of course, as God loving followers of His Word, we believe that the ideas of Christianity, which enhance and build society, should be freely and widely expressed, while pornography, immorality, and obscenity—like other vices that destroy society—must be eradicated if our civilization is to survive.

The challenge and threat from pornography and perverted ways of looking at sex is so insidiously pervasive, we even have to fear the so-called professional sex therapists. Many of these misguided “intellectuals” actually advise married couples to view pornography in order to add excitement to their marriage relationship. This activity is clearly wrong for Christian couples because it reduces married love to the level of an animal act, encouraging lust rather than true love, often portraying infidelity in a positive light.

What Can We Do? Before any more children fall under the influence of pornography and grow up without moral principles or standards, we must stand up tall and decry its presence at every opportunity. We should be sure to vote only for political candidates who understand its Satanic nature and will work to replace the liberal judges who have supported its cause. Most importantly, we must continue to teach our children right from wrong, good from evil, holiness from sin. Since Satan’s presence permeates many forms of popular entertainment, we must closely supervise the young, while supporting one another in our constant desire to remain faithful to God’s Word, keeping our eyes upon Him and the promise of everlasting life to those who follow His holy ways.



Pride

How is pride destructive to believers and the church? When does healthy self-esteem cross the line into arrogance and sin?

Although pride can be positive—such as being satisfied with one's work, treasuring something valuable, or holding a hero in esteem—excessive pride is the deadliest sin of all, having caused Satan's fall from heaven even before creation (see Ezekiel 28 which begins by condemning the pride of the king of Tyre but describes the pride of Satan in 28:14-17, NIV). The Bible's Hebrew and Greek words for "pride" or "proud" all describe a haughty spirit or bad attitude in the heart: "a haughty spirit before a fall" (*Proverbs 16:18*). God despises such arrogant pride for it caused angels and man alike to fall from His kingdom. Prideful people tend to ignore or deny God, thinking they can do it all on their own. Secular Humanism and atheism both spring from roots coiled deep in the serpent's soil of pride.

The proud person, having declared himself free from God, imagines himself superior to others. Such self-centeredness leads to ignoring other people, using them for personal gain, or even injuring or humiliating them (*Psa. 10:2-4, 1 Tim. 1:12,13*). Collective pride leads to class snobbery, racism, and prejudice. Even when pride is deliberately concealed, it drains believers of the energy necessary to be completely devoted to God. Although God does not expect us to totally ignore our selves and our abilities, we must be ever vigilant for pride to rear its ugly head.

What Can We Do? An arrogant pride is so insidious the proud person often cannot recognize himself as such. Therefore, it might be helpful to ask ourselves if some of the following common manifestations of pride apply to us: bragging about how wise we are (*1 Cor. 3:19-21*); thinking we're superior to others (*1 Cor. 4:6,7*); having a selfish ambition or vain conceit (*Phil. 2:3,4*); boasting of future plans (*James 4:13-16*); ignoring advice from older, spiritual people (*1 Peter 5:5,6*); speaking badly about persons behind their backs (*Psa. 101:5*); wearing a proud, haughty look (*Prov. 6:17*); getting drunk and bragging about ourselves (*Isaiah 28:1*); enjoying ruling people (*Matt. 20:25,26*); accepting praise when we don't deserve it (*Acts 12:21-23*); and refusing to submit to anyone else (*Eph. 5:21*). —adapted from Ralph Harris, *Symptoms of Pride*

In order to root out such prideful behavior, we should pray the prayer of David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (*Psalms 139:23,24*). If we feel we have conquered pride, then we must guard against becoming proud of that victory!

Parents must carefully distinguish between positive and negative manifestations of pride, lest they deny their children words of praise out of fear that they will make their children arrogant or haughty. Children denied any praise whatsoever can grow up feeling inferior and lacking a healthy self-esteem.

We must understand and convey God's love for us to our children and other adults. The New Testament records eight references that tell us to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (NIV). We cannot love (or appreciate with appropriate praise) others if we do not love ourselves. Recognizing the need for self-esteem without self-centeredness, Paul advised: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment" (*Rom. 12:3*).



Reverence and Respect

Does God expect Christians to revere church sanctuaries and facilities? What part do reverence and respect play in our relationships with spiritual leaders, the elderly, and each other?

In today's liberal, politically correct culture, we are bombarded with nonsense about everything being relative and nothing being any better than anything else. Most "intellectuals," celebrities, and members of the media love to spout such transparently absurd ideas as if they are, ironically, gospel truth. The insidious notion that 'nothing is sacred' is fundamental to society's decadence and disorder. 2,500 years of Judeo-Christian tradition and Scripture has taught us to worship God, honor our father and mother (*Eph. 6:2,3*), and obey authority (*Heb. 13:17*). A mere 50-60 years of liberal propaganda has displaced and, in some quarters, even "killed" God, mocked and toppled the family structure, and taught legions of people to disrespect and disregard many once-revered institutions and offices of authority.

As with everything, we need to turn to Scripture for guidance and sustenance in times of such alarming upheaval. Of course, the Bible clearly states that we are to show reverence to God and to everything that represents His person and presence: "Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (*Heb. 12:28,29*). Although *reverence* and *respect* are similar in meaning, often used interchangeably, *reverence* implies worship, a more appropriate attitude toward God and anything associated with Him.

Respect for People Of course, no matter how important they may be, people are to be respected, not worshipped. When we obey parents and authority, we show them respect, not just verbally but by acting in such a way that avoids insult and injury. In fact, we should be respectful to everyone, regardless of their station, age, or religious beliefs: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (*Rom. 12:10*). Men and women must respect one another if they want healthy, holy marriages. Youth should respect the wisdom and experience of the elderly, as the elderly should appreciate the enthusiasm, vitality, and abilities of youth. As Peter advises: "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older....All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (*1 Peter 5:5*). Although believers can generally expect no reciprocation, we should extend our Christian respect to non-believers. Showing respect, even to those who deny the Lord, is the first step toward leading such sinners to the path of salvation.

Respect for the House of the Lord The Old Testament reminded the Israelites to "Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD" (*Lev. 19:30, 26:2*). At that time, the sanctuary was a tent, not a great temple. Clearly, the presence of the Lord transforms even a simple tent into a place deserving our reverence. Therefore, church sanctuaries and facilities must be respected and cared for, as they are the dwelling places of the Lord. Any deterioration, or wear and tear must be addressed as quickly and effectively as means allow. Visitors associate a church's reverence for God with the appearance of the place where He meets with His people. The facility need not be luxurious, just well cared for, to show reverence.

Behavior in the sanctuary should always be respectful and reverent towards God. Playing, running, shouting, and idle socializing are inappropriate, not only during worship services and altar prayer time, but also when the sanctuary is empty. The way we dress should also reflect our respect for God while we are guests in His house. Of course, if a sinner, stranger, or any visitor comes in off the street, we should welcome them no matter how they are dressed.

Informality, variety, and spontaneity in worship have been God's special gift to Pentecostals, who have no formal liturgy. Let us guard, however, against that informality sliding into unintended irreverence and disrespect for the things of God, His people, and His places of corporate worship. Humor and casualness must be tempered and watched they can be inappropriate if they interfere with community edification or our relationship with God and others. Music could also interfere if we fail to patiently bear (*Eph. 4:1-3*) and respect music that we may not care for. As long as the service and the music are drawing others closer to the Lord, we should be unselfish and glad for them; however, never at the expense of reverence and respect. In all our differences, let us respect one another, celebrating our union as a congregation of God's people, one body in Christ.



Regular Church Attendance

Why is regular weekly church attendance so important? Why can't a believer stay at home and develop spiritually just through Bible reading and prayer?

The necessity of setting aside one day a week to worship God is stressed and commanded throughout the Old and New Testaments (Ex. 20:8). Hebrews 10:25 issues the command in no uncertain terms: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." The Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus (Mark 2:28) was faithful to the Sabbath law, regularly frequenting the House of God (Luke 4:16). If Jesus felt compelled to regularly attend a house of worship, we, His followers, should do no less.

The Old Testament observance of the Sabbath evolves in the New Testament to commemorating Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week. The New Testament church met on Sunday to bring their offerings to God (1 Cor. 16:2). Faithful to this instruction, the constitution of Victory Outreach states that the church "shall represent, as nearly as possible in detail, the body of Christ as described in New Testament scriptures."

Unfortunately, some Christians claim that since they know the Bible basics they needn't attend church services. Others claim they don't attend because they can't stand being around the "hypocrites" who attend church. But neither "reason" is why we go to church. Believers go to church to continuously celebrate with other believers and to grow in their Christian knowledge and faith. As Paul told the Thessalonians, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 Thess. 5:11). We cannot do that by ourselves.

Christian fellowship in a local church is essential to our Christian commitment and spiritual health. We have been called to encourage one another (1Thess. 4:18), comfort one another (2 Cor. 1:3,4), and bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). An assembly of believers is essential to fulfilling the command of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19,20). Theoretically we can witness by ourselves without attending church; however, that only works to a point. Only the dynamic of a group of believers, encouraging, challenging, and strengthening each other can effectively show sinners and unbelievers to the power and glory of corporate worship and body ministry at its fullness.

God did not create people to live isolated lives. Christians need relationships with other Christians. Although some hermits live solitary lives of meditation, Scripture nowhere teaches permanent solitude as a lifestyle. As a Pentecostal church, Victory Outreach believes in the presence of the Holy Spirit in public worship. When believers gather together, the Holy Spirit edifies all those assembled: "All these [Gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1 Cor. 12:11,12).

What Can We Do? Local church leaders must plan and conduct inspiring services through which God can manifest His presence to everyone in attendance. Each worshiper should experience the Holy Spirit's call to a complete commitment to the kingdom of God.

If your church falls short of offering inspiring services, rather than leaving the church and having no fellowship with believers, you should accept the spiritual challenge of interceding on behalf of the church. Get involved any way you can. See if you can make a difference in your church. Remember that God answers the persistent prayer of a righteous person (James 5:16). We are all part of the body of Christ. We all have a responsibility to edify the group in which He has placed us. By faithfully attending services and praying for the Holy Spirit's presence, we can outreach and interact with others who may very well be looking for someone like us to encourage and support them in their journey toward the Kingdom of God.



Social Dancing

Should Christians participate in social dancing or even attend dances? What does the Bible say on this subject? What are the concerns about dancing and its impact on one's spiritual commitment?

The role of the church is to provide sound spiritual guidance to its congregation, helping them to ensure that their behavior is pleasing to the Lord and their souls are prepared for eternal life with Him. Most issues involving sexual relationships between men and women are black and white and need very little clarification by the church. As Christian believers, we know that we are to remain pure and chaste in all actions and thoughts regarding sexual relations. However, the position of many Christian churches regarding social dancing—and its power of arousing physical and emotional desire—has been very vague and varied, depending upon the denomination.

What Does the Bible Say? Not one of the nearly two dozen mentions of dance, danced, or dancing in the Bible refers to social dancing between a male and a female. Dancing took place either to worship God or celebrate a conquering hero, such as David. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, the dancing that greeted him must have been inappropriate for he expressed anger over it (*Ex. 32:19*). Herod was apparently so aroused by the dancing of Herodias' daughter that his good judgment was clouded and he granted the request for the execution of John the Baptist—an order he did not want to give (*Mark 6:22-29*). Since the days of the New Testament church leaders have struggled with the issue of dancing as they have tried to distinguish proper Christian behavior from that of worldly society. Although its lists of vices and sinful practices do not include dancing, the New Testament repeatedly cautions against the arousal of emotions and passions attendant with physical contact between the sexes. We are specifically warned to avoid temptation, especially lust and sexual temptation (*1 Cor. 6:18, 1 Tim. 6:9-11, 2 Tim. 2:22*).

The Defenders of dancing point to its role in helping people gain poise and social graces. They note how many non-Pentecostal churches hold dances for their young people, arguing that dancing is an enjoyable activity for developing friendships, and nearly everyone dances, so those who don't will be excluded and rejected. Since a large percentage of Christian youth attend public high schools, they feel drawn to their school dances and proms lest they be outcasts. Some parents even believe that social dancing is good for their child's development.

The Key Questions Become: Does dancing jeopardize the spiritual welfare of some individuals who may experience an arousal of sexual desire and, thus, ultimately lose their salvation? Does a church that condones social dancing risk spiritual decline for allowing the world's vices to infiltrate its midst?

The Answers Are Hard, But Clear: Although couples who engage in social dancing may not slide into immoral behavior, Christians are enjoined never to frequent the occasion of sin. The best way to avoid evil is to avoid those temptations that lead to evil. *1 Thessalonians 5:22* says we are to, "Avoid every kind of evil." Social dancing clearly puts people into alluring, close physical contact, which makes intimate behavior attractive and inviting. Therefore, Victory Outreach opposes social dancing because it can potentially tempt good people into evil behavior.

No church truly doing its job to save souls for eternity can stand idly by and allow its congregation to walk into the lion's den of temptation. Whether it's a high school dance, a fancy nightclub, or a cheap roadside bar, dance settings specialize in seductive and enticing atmospheres. The music, the immoral lyrics, the dim lighting, the immodest attire of some who attend—all encourage levels of intimacy that often lead to greater temptations.

Of course, many people faced with this warning and injunction against a favorite activity such as dancing might, quite naturally be offended and defensive, insisting that their intentions are pure and morals inviolable. Everyone must consider what's at stake—our immortal souls. Is attending dances worth that risk?

What Should We Do? As Christian believers, we have been called out of the world at large—a world that rejects and mocks our moral standards and convictions on purity and holiness as outdated. All we need do is look around at the world created by that liberalism: rampant and often perverse fornication, broken relationships, divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, abortion on demand, sexually transmitted diseases, and all the resultant emotional and spiritual nightmares inflicted upon friends and family members. Of course, we are not attributing all of these sins to dancing. However, can anyone seriously deny that what happens on dance floors—whether at high schools, night clubs, or bars—often leads directly to immoral sexual behavior and, thus, to the tragic list stated above?

Some Christians have recently opened "Christian dance clubs," featuring Christian contemporary music. They are attempting to eliminate objections to dancing by providing wholesome, supervised settings. While such ventures may be noble, the very act of dancing, itself, often leads to immoral behavior, regardless of the setting.

For a Christian, the bottom line remains the same: no individual, parent, or church should sanction any situation that risks our eternal salvation. Since God condemns sin and all the occasions of sin, the church must stand strong against any practice that may lead to sin. In the face of the world's moral erosion, Victory Outreach calls all Christian adults and parents to abstain from social dancing for themselves and their children, obeying God's desire for His people to be separate and holy (*2 Cor. 6:16-18, Titus 2:11-14, 2 Tim. 2:21-22*).



Suffering

What does the Bible say about suffering? Why must we suffer? How are we to endure our suffering?

Everyone at some point in life wonders "Why me?" or "Why must good people suffer?" or "Why does God allow people, especially children, to suffer?" Since He is all-powerful, God could eliminate pain and suffering if He wanted to. Then life, we think, would be so much more pleasant.

The Cause of Pain and Suffering Is Original Sin It's important to remember that God did not create suffering. By their disobedience, Adam and Eve brought sickness and suffering to mankind. "By man came death...in Adam all die" (*1 Corinthians 15:21,22*). To Eve, God said, "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children" (*Genesis 3:16*). To Adam, God said, "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (*Genesis 3:17-19*).

Their original sin brought a world of pain and suffering, one in need of a Savior. So instead of eradicating sin when it first appeared in the Garden of Eden, God had a divine plan of sending His Son into the world to be our Savior and give us victory over sin. Victory Outreach believes strongly that divine healing is one of the many spiritual benefits in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (*Isaiah 53:5, NKJV*). Scripture describes suffering as the lot of all humans, culminating in the ultimate suffering—death—everyone's appointed physical end (*Hebrews 9:27*).

The Necessity of Suffering As an agent of spiritual growth, suffering can touch believers only to the extent God permits. God allows Satan to temporarily afflict us with pain and suffering as part of His divine plan to demonstrate His triumph over the curse Satan has brought on the human race. Suffering teaches us deeper spiritual truth (*2 Corinthians 12:7*), by humbling us or steering us from a wrong path (*Numbers 12:10*), or using us as an example to others of God's faithfulness in providing strength in the midst of suffering.

For most of us, our emotional pain, financial difficulties, assorted sorrows, and relationship conflicts are nothing compared with the sufferings of millions in the 20th century. Its two world wars (including the Holocaust), numerous bloody smaller conflicts, sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, savage acts of terrorism, and unprecedented natural disasters were all prophesied by Jesus: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains" (*Matthew 24:6-8*). Quite apparently, sin has exacted a great toll on mankind as its reign of terror nears an end.

What Should We Do? First of all, Christians should not be alarmed. God has a plan of healing and deliverance for all who suffer. Although we don't know why our prayers for deliverance are not always immediately answered, here is what God's Word instructs us to do during our suffering:

- Pray. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray" (*James 5:13, NKJV*).
- Celebrate our communion with Christ and His sufferings. "Indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (*Philippians 3:8,10, NIV*).
- Wait upon the Lord for His strength. "He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength... But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength" (*Isaiah 40:29,31 NIV*).
- Draw encouragement from God's faithfulness. "This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope...Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed...His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness" (*Lamentations 3:21-23, NIV*).

No one fully understands God's ways concerning suffering. But we take solace in the truths of His Word. Scripture affirms that God heals and delivers; we have seen miracles of healing and deliverance in answer to prayer. Thus, our faith must mirror Abraham's, who asked rhetorically: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (*Genesis 18:25*, NIV). God can do no wrong, so we trust Him and His ways.



Thought Life

Why is one's personal thought life so important? Are fantasies sinful? When do thoughts become sins?

A person's character and actions are profoundly affected by their thoughts (cf. Proverbs 23:7, KJV). Since the world's material and fleshly temptations constantly challenge our efforts to maintain pure thoughts, Christians would do well to take Paul's words to heart: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8). Of course, since we are surrounded by sin, we cannot control everything that crosses our minds. However, we must monitor our thoughts and expel them if they are displeasing to God and leading us toward sin.

Attractive images in movies and on TV, scantily clad people walking down the street, lyrics to music—the cultural and worldly temptations are around every corner, invading our minds with impressions meant to seduce. Though temptations are not sin, they can lead to sin if allowed to germinate. Jesus warned His followers: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Mark 14:38). James knew full well that "every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished bringeth forth death" (James 1:14, 15, KJV). That's why he admonishes us to "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

When Do Thoughts Become Sins? We may wonder why God cares about private thoughts that affect no one but ourselves. In reality, however, very few thoughts affect only the person thinking them. Thoughts generally lead to attitudes, moods, or behaviors that profoundly affect those around us. When we are tempted by an impure thought that flashes across our minds, we have not sinned unless we linger upon it rather than reject it.

To be more specific, sexual feelings and romantic attractions are normal, healthy gifts from God. But they become sinful when we dwell on thoughts of biblically forbidden sexual conduct. Sexual fantasies can lead directly to masturbation and the rapid deterioration of our spiritual health. When allowed to grow, sexual thoughts can produce acts of emotional and physical abuse of others, and sometimes even rape, incest, and child molestation.

What Should We Do? To maintain a pure thought life, we must first safeguard those areas of life that we can control. Degenerate magazines, books, music, radio stations, television shows, cable programming, movies, videos, computer programs, and unguarded Internet access have no place in a Christian home. Persistent and prolonged exposure to such garbage could corrupt anyone's mind. Christians must ask the Holy Spirit to guide them in making necessary changes in these areas (Gal. 6:7, 8).

First, we should replace such bad influences with pure things that reflect God's moral standards and truths. A practical beginning is to expunge from our lives all sinful things, while becoming accountable to a mature believer for our behavior. Second, a prayerful fasting will help the purging process. Then, once free from the grip of sinful influences, we should set and maintain a daily schedule of Bible study and prayer. Christian bookstores and catalogs offer a wide variety of resources to assist our spiritual growth. In every step we take, sowing "righteousness in" will reap "righteousness out."

Believers can never let their guard down against invasion by tempting thoughts. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit stands ready to guard the gates of our mind. With His help, we can foster edifying thoughts and reject evil thoughts that fail to mirror the mind of Christ within us (Rom. 8:6, 12:2).



Tithing

What is the position of Victory Outreach on tithing?

The practice of tithing predates even Old Testament law. In response to God's blessing and faithfulness, Abraham tithed (*Genesis 14:18-20*), which undoubtedly led to God blessing him. Proceeds from tithing were, by law, earmarked for the needy (*Deuteronomy 14:22-29*) and the support of the religious leaders (*Numbers 18:21-29*). Though some people believe tithing was never intended for New Testament Christians, there are many others that do. Victory Outreach believes God designed tithing helps the ministry in its quest to spread the good news of His gospel throughout the world. Although the New Testament does not command believers to tithe one-tenth of their income, there is also no statement declaring the Old Testament plan as no longer valid.

Why tithe? Giving one-tenth of one's personal income to support the work of God is a recognition that everything we have comes from God. The practice encourages self-discipline and thrift, checks greed, testifies to our faith, promotes God's work in the world. Although tithing is not a condition for salvation, it is an important sacrifice for Christians to show their love for God and their church. In sparing 10% of our income for the Lord's work, God promises us that we will receive far more than that amount in our everlasting reward: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...Test me in this...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (*Malachi 3:10*).

Those who oppose tithing do so by taking Jesus out of context, starting with this passage from Matthew: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices... But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." They stop there, deliberately failing to finish the verse: "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (*Matthew 23:23*). Jesus obviously meant for the Old Testament practice of tithing to continue. Nor is tithing all we should do to help the church and its ministry of spreading the gospel. Scripture reports that God's people should give voluntary offerings in addition to the required tithe.

How Should We Tithe? Naturally, we should tithe and give offerings with a good attitude, out of love, for cheerful giving pleases God (*2 Corinthians 9:7*). A grudging spirit gains nothing in the way of heavenly blessings. Nor should people withhold tithes as a statement against decisions and directions espoused by spiritual leaders. Our tithes rightfully belong to our church, though we may perhaps designate some of our offerings (beyond the tithes) to ministries outside the church. In identifying with a local body of believers, we are obeying God's instruction that we assemble together with believers (*Hebrews 10:25*).

When we give with a humble spirit—not like we're making a deal with God—then He will certainly fulfill His promises, as He always does.



Truth and Integrity

What is “truth”? Why do Christians place so much importance upon “telling the truth”?

Today’s moral relativists teach the destructive notion that there is no absolute truth, that truth is a construction, an interpretation that varies according to a person’s perspective and culture. While that position makes some sense in matters of aesthetics—such as when people disagree about which type of music, or fashion, or food is better than another—in all other matters, especially matters of morality, absolute truths most certainly do exist. Truth does not vary from person to person or from situation to situation. Truth is universal and timeless, despite the legions of contemporary voices each claiming to have discovered their own “personal truths.” In fact, Truth comes from God and is recorded in the Bible.

What is truth? 2000 years ago, Pontius Pilate asked that question. All of us ask that same question over and over, in so many different situations and applications. Does truth consist of provable facts? Is truth pragmatic—if something works, it’s true? Is truth a feeling, an intuition, or a rationally logical conclusion? Must we have hard evidence to assert a truth or is faith alone enough to say something is true? Is something true even if no one believes it? These and many more speculative, philosophical questions could engage our attention endlessly if we were so inclined. But common sense should tell us that some things are true and some are false. If we are Christians who believe in Scripture, in the Ten Commandments, and in just being a good person, we usually can tell the difference between the truth and the lie.

The Importance of Telling the Truth. Telling the truth is a fundamental biblical principle. Lies and deceit are responsible for many of today’s problems. From teenagers lying to their parents about where they went after school, to world leaders lying to one another about their military intentions, lies generally originate from a self-centered desire to get what we want when the truth won’t get it for us. When the trust in someone’s integrity and truthfulness is broken by a lie, it is very hard to get it back. Being able to trust the truthfulness of family members, friends, work associates, and world leaders is essential to not only healthy relationships, but also a civil society and a peaceful world.

The Epidemic of Dishonesty. It almost seems as if the entire world—most people, most dealings, most businesses, most of the media—is predominantly dishonest. Everywhere we turn, every day of our lives, we are faced with a dizzying array of lies, deceptions, deceit, delusions, exaggerations, omissions, and other assorted manifestations of untruth, all designed to benefit the liar at our expense. Advertising, politics, business and commerce, even those we perceive to be friends often seem to totally disregard accuracy, fidelity, and reality when presenting to us their versions of “truth.” Because we have to be constantly on our guard to detect all the daily attempts to deceive us, we cannot avoid asking the question: What in the world is going on here?

What’s going on is Satan’s war on truth. The materialistic, liberal secular humanistic, radical relativistic mindset has infected the world. People have been told over and over “If it feels good, do it,” “Go for it,” “Get it now,” “You deserve whatever you want,” “There is no right or wrong, just personal choices,” and so many other addled adages that many of them have become spiritually sick. They no longer care for truth, honesty or integrity, because those things get in the way of having what they want. Having turned away from God and His Word, the world has embraced itself. If there is no truth, then anything goes, which is the exact message of the self-centered, godless group that has infected society with its lies and lying.

Hypocrisy. Rampant hypocrisy—feigning an outward appearance of truth and forthrightness that masks hidden wickedness and abuse of the truth—is the apparatus that maintains the vast charade. The celebrities, “media personalities,” newscasters, politicians, and “captains” of advertising and business—who, by their example, sanction and encourage the corrupt culture of dishonesty—wear fancy suits and smug faces of supreme respectability and debonair decency. They lie as a matter of course—to themselves as much as to the world—in order to keep the acclaim, fame, and profits coming. One wonders if they ever contemplate the state of their immortal souls.

Fraud. The members of the hypocritical “aristocracy” mentioned above are all frauds in their own way—deceiving us with their glossy images and glitzy displays of material affluence and pseudo-philosophizing about their liberal illusions. Of course, fraud also refers to dishonest financial dealings, of which the Apostle Paul was all too familiar: “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated [or defrauded]? Instead,

you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers" (1 Cor. 6:7, 8). Jesus Himself cautioned us about fraud: "You know the commandments: 'do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother'" (Mark 10:19). Between His injunctions against lying and implied dishonoring is defrauding.

Is It Ever Right to Tell a Lie? The Old Testament has examples of people who told lies that resulted in something good happening. We can all cite situations where we have felt a little lie was better than the truth. However, the Bible does not provide exceptions to the commandments. It is never right to tell a lie. Justifying lies is a slippery slope of dishonesty that leads to the moral relativism and situational ethics that have infected our society.

Especially despicable to Christians are spiritual leaders, ministers, or "faith healers" who manufacture an illusion of the Holy Spirit's intervention due to their skills and prayers. While they may justify their actions by claiming that believers were benefited, if truth has been compromised, then no good can come of it. Spiritual leaders must be able to testify with Paul: "Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one" (2 Cor. 7:2).

Telling the truth is often hard because it means we may not get what we want. Talking straight, admitting the facts, or keeping a promise sometimes costs us time or money or effort. But getting caught in an act of dishonesty or breaking a promise forever casts doubt upon our integrity. Besides, a truly honest person "rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6). The business world and legal system rely so fundamentally upon truthfulness that they require written contracts and documents to prevent deceitfulness or misunderstandings. Most importantly, without any written contract, God expects us to be truthful and trustworthy in all our words and deeds.



War and Conscientious Objectors

What is Victory Outreach's position on war and conscientious objectors?

Victory Outreach has a clear position on war: "As a Movement we affirm our loyalty to the government of the United States in war or peace. We shall continue to insist, as we have historically, on the right of each member to choose for himself whether to declare his position as a combatant (one who willingly serves in positions of violence), a noncombatant (one who serves only in nonviolent ways), or a conscientious objector (one who refuses to participate in any form of military service because of personal convictions regarding war)."

Clearly, Victory Outreach affirms its loyalty to the United States government, during war and peace. However, each church member must follow his or her own conscience in determining whether to be a combatant, noncombatant, or conscientious objector.

Biblical principles support our position Scripture calls for civic loyalty: "Everyone must submit himself to governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (*Romans 13:1*). Despite our strong reluctance to take up arms against our fellow man, on occasion, we are left with little choice: "He does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (*Romans 13:4*). Regardless of the situation, Scripture calls for believers to consult their conscience in *all* matters: "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (*Romans 14:12*).

Reconciling the Sixth Commandment The Hebrew word for "murder" in "You shall not murder" (*Exodus 20:13*) is "raisach," which means an act of *willful* and *personal* vengeance. An individual soldier's acts of killing in war have been commanded by the collective will of the nation and, therefore, are not *willful* or *personal*. For the greater good and the preservation of innocent civilian lives that would otherwise be lost without it, war is sometimes the inevitable and only course of action.

Do not misunderstand: Victory Outreach abhors war. We are committed to prevent its occurrence in every accountable, sensible, and responsible way possible. We look forward to that glorious day when the Prince of Peace—Jesus Christ—establishes His reign over this violent, wicked world.



Work Ethic

Why are personal initiative and a strong work ethic so important for Christians and for society in general?

Although the work ethic is the backbone of civilizations, many people still view it as an unavoidable necessity to be done with as little effort as possible. That attitude toward work opposes the Christian attitude: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Christians need to keep in mind that we represent Christ in the workplace. Work is God-ordained, noble, and an opportunity to reach the world for Christ, as commanded in the Great Commission.

What does Scripture say about work? The idea that work is God's way of punishing mankind for Adam and Eve's sin is interpreting "by the sweat of [his] brow" (Gen. 3:19) negatively and out of context. Adam was given specific work assignments of ruling over the animals and tending the Garden. Beneficial and productive, man's work should mirror God's, who creates, builds, and plants (Gen. 1:1, 2:7, 19; Psa 127:1; Amos 9:15). "On the seventh day [God] rested from all his work" (Gen. 2:2). What a marvelous six days of work God put in! Jesus' parables contain many references to everyday work and the Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians to "Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Theses. 5:12, 13). On several occasions, Paul warned them against idleness (1 Theses. 5:14; 2 Theses. 3:6, 11) and attempting to avoid work: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Theses. 3:10). Those who take welfare handouts when they are physically able to work are guilty of the sin of sloth.

What sort of work is best? Scripture does not rate work; all work is honorable. Manual labor is just as pleasing to the Lord as intellectual labor. High paying jobs are no better in God's eyes than low paying jobs. Christian workers should view their jobs as a way of using the special gifts God has given them in service of others.

What should we do? A strong work ethic needs to be instilled in children by giving simple "work" assignments to younger children and more responsible tasks to older children. Paying them an appropriate allowance for good work will help reinforce a strong work ethic. Allowances are not bribes; they are practical teaching tools of the ways of the world. If we work, we get paid. Children who learn that valuable lesson at an early age are more likely to carry it with them throughout life.

While at work, we need to have and promote a positive attitude, which can lessen the burden of dreary jobs and bring cheer to fellow workers. Being grateful for our work and the good health necessary to do our work is contagious. We must not allow the world's negativity to infect our uplifted and uplifting spirit. Since work comprises roughly 25-50% of our time on earth, we should use it to give glory to God and good example and cheer to others.

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AIDS/HIV

Is It God's way of dealing with the rampant sexual immorality of our times?

God created us with a free will to make our own choices. It's a wonderful gift of freedom, but it comes with moral responsibilities and dire consequences when we make immoral decisions. When we scorn God's moral laws, we welcome Satan into our lives. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve introduced evil, perversion and disease into man's world when they made a very bad decision by yielding to Satan and committing their Original Sin. Today, HIV & AIDS have infected the lives of many people who likewise invited Satan into their lives by engaging in immoral sex or drug abuse. For many homosexuals and drug abusers, Satan has employed this demonic virus to assault their lives. The medical fact is that the majority of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. is contracted through immoral sexual activity or drug abuse. Thus, we can only conclude that this disease is a direct consequence of immoral choices (see *Galatians 6:7,8; Deuteronomy 30:15-19*).

Although exceptions do not disprove the rule, some innocent people have contracted HIV/AIDS through no sin of their own. Thus, we must not stereotype and rush to judgment upon everyone who has HIV/AIDS. We don't want to compound their suffering by wrongfully blaming their illness upon an alleged sin. Such fallacious reasoning—that illnesses are always the result of sin—existed even in Jesus' day. Recall when the disciples of Jesus asked about a blind man: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus wisely replied: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (*John 9:2,3*).

As true Christians, we properly respond by decrying the sin but loving the sinner. We must extend our compassion and love to those afflicted with this horrible disease, especially those who have not yet accepted Jesus into their lives. Their grave illness demands that we witness for Christ, that we lead them to everlasting redemption and salvation in the Lord. In their terrible state, they need God more than ever. It is our responsibility and glorious opportunity to perceive the HIV/AIDS afflicted through spiritual eyes, to not turn our backs and run away, but rather to reach out to our suffering brethren and shepherd them home to their forgiving and loving God.



AIDS/HIV

To what extent is the Christian community to minister to people affected with these diseases?

The undeniable connection between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality has created a spiritual and practical dilemma for Christians. We have wrestled mightily with the very real problem of how to minister to the sinner without seeming to condone the sin. After all, homosexuals have become increasingly militant in demanding that Christians accept their unbiblical, immoral lifestyle. As always, when faced with moral dilemmas, we must turn to Scripture for guidance.

Recall the many times Jesus was faced with the diseased and those guilty of sexual improprieties. When the Pharisees brought an adulterous woman before Jesus, they asked Him why she shouldn't be stoned according to the laws of Moses. Jesus responded, "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." After self-examination, one by one, they all dropped their stones and walked away. "Neither do I condemn you," said Jesus. Yet, after saving her life and forgiving her sins, he admonished her to change her ways: "Go now and leave your life of sin" (*John 8:8-11*).

We are so blessed as Christians to have the Lord's example to follow in our response to homosexuals suffering with AIDS. We must first acknowledge that we too are sinners. We are saved through Christ's blood on the cross, but before we came to Him we too were lost in sin. Just as the Pharisees dropped their stones, we too must not attack, but be compassionate. If we Christians shirk the challenge, who will lead the AIDS sufferers beyond their mortal agony to an eternal life with God in heaven? Of course, just as Jesus always did, we must convey the moral truths. Homosexuals must be taught the Biblical truth about the sin of their homosexuality. As Christians, we are responsible for explaining to them how they can receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

To that end, we must set aside our prejudice, fear, and apathy, and minister to the AIDS afflicted. As congregations, we can accomplish this mission through prayer, education, and practical help, such as support groups and rehabilitation counseling for the afflicted.

In extending our compassion and care, we must, however, make it absolutely clear that we cannot and will not disregard the Bible's teachings about homosexuality. In their misguided liberalism, certain Christian groups now claim that it is possible to be both gay and Christian. Clearly, this humanistic rationalization contradicts fundamental Scripture and constitutes a grave delusion that could have eternal consequences.

Undoubtedly, God loves homosexuals, despite their sinful ways. Nonetheless, as all sinners, homosexuals must accept Christ's forgiveness and repent their sins, or forever lose their souls.

Alcohol, Tobacco, & Drugs

What's wrong with smoking and drinking?

Without question, alcohol, illegal drugs, and tobacco all do great harm, both to the addicted person and society at large. Alcohol and illegal drugs can incapacitate the user, making him unproductive and/or dangerous to himself and others. They and tobacco all cause various diseases and illnesses that drain individuals, families, and the economy of financial resources that could otherwise benefit society. Drug abuse and its inherent criminal activity also add to society's burden in higher insurance and law enforcement costs. Clearly, Satan employs these addictive substances to enslave people and keep them from God.

The spiritual consequences of using these substances are even greater than the financial and physical costs. As *First Corinthians 6:19,20* eternally reminds us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." The moral is clear: we must never defile our bodies with addictive substances, not even in moderation.

Tobacco. Smoking and chewing tobacco may not impair one's judgment or lead to crime, but it has been proven to kill people. The United States Surgeon General has long warned of the dangers of smoking, mandating tobacco companies to place warning labels on their products. It has even been proven that non-smokers can be victims of second-hand smoke. Clearly, the "temple of the Holy Spirit" is severely harmed by tobacco.

Alcohol. The approximately 14 million problem drinkers in the United States cost us over \$100 billion every year in alcohol-related accidents, illnesses, violent crime, and loss of work time. Immoral, indiscreet, or violent behavior is often caused by drinking, as are heart, liver, pancreas, and brain diseases. Drunken drivers account for half of the fatal automobile accidents every year. Binge drinking kills our college students.

Alcohol has always destroyed lives. The Scriptures abound with evidence of alcohol's evil powers. Alcohol inflames passions, impairs judgment, and leads to violence (*Lev. 10:8-11; Prov. 20:1, 23:29-35, 31:4,5*). While drunk, Lot sexually assaulted his two daughters (*Gen. 19:30-38*). Xerxes publicly humiliated Queen Vashti in a drunken display (*Est. 1:9-22*). Noah's family suffered shame due to his drunkenness (*Gen. 9:20-27*).

Illegal Drugs. Of course, drug use is not specifically mentioned in the Bible; however, the user and society are affected even worse than by alcohol or tobacco. Certain drugs are so insidious they can addict the user on their initial ingestion. They take control of lives, altering personalities, damaging internal organs and thought processes, ruining relationships, and destroying careers.

The Only Answer Is Abstinence. Illegal drugs and alcohol are proven to contribute to suicide, child and spousal abuse, road rage, work-related problems, and a host of other socially destructive behaviors. Tobacco kills tens of thousands of smokers every year.

In all things physical and spiritual, Christians must adhere to the highest standards of character, integrity, and purity. Arguments for the "moderate use" of alcohol, narcotics, or tobacco scoff at Scripture and ignore many of society's most serious problems. As Christians, we must follow the apostle Paul's admonitions: "I urge you . . . in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1,2).

Clearly, abstinence constitutes the only prudent and moral position.



Astrology, Psychics, & Transcendental Meditation

Should Christians practice astrology and other mystical practices?

When people move outside of Scripture to attempt to understand the truths of creation, human nature, and the workings of the world, they invariably go astray. Various forms of mysticism and the occult offer the Faustian allure of challenging God by acquiring presumably powerful knowledge. Such mystic practices seduce and delude people into believing that they've found some alternative way of attaining truth and meaning in their lives. Astrology, Transcendental Meditation, and various other forms of the occult—so-called psychics, crystal balls, Ouija boards, horoscopes, magic, divination, palm reading, tarot cards, and the like—are all counterfeits for the genuine work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians.

These misguided ways of attempting to be “enlightened” or to reveal the mysteries of life often begin innocently enough. It may be merely entertaining, at first. What's the harm, you might think, in getting a cheap little thrill by reading your daily horoscope, or joining some friends for a séance, or tagging along on your lunch hour with a co-worker who visits her psychic for a palm reading. Unfortunately, Satan works by weaving a subtle spell that usually begins in innocence and escalates, like any addiction, from curiosity to a controlling obsession that alienates us from God's Word. God's Word, after all, is all we need to direct and inspire us. We commit blasphemy against God when we turn away from His Word and seek forbidden knowledge and understanding through the occult.

Astrology is not to be confused with astronomy, the science that studies the size, movement, and composition of celestial bodies. A pseudo science, astrology claims that the various positions of stars and planets in space influence people's actions and determine future events.

Scripture specifically denounces occult practices that claim to give knowledge that only God can (e.g., *Deut. 18:9-14* and *Lev. 19:31, 20:6*). Isaiah ridicules “stargazers” or astrologers: “Let you astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you” (*Isa. 47:13*). In the book of Daniel, astrologers are grouped with magicians, sorcerers, and other agents of the occult whose “special powers” cannot interpret the dream of the king of Babylon. Only Daniel, whose “insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom” came from the “most High God,” arrived at the accurate interpretation (*Daniel 5:14,18,26-28*). Although today's astrologer's claim that they do not worship the heavenly bodies, their Biblical predecessors certainly did. Several passages speak of bowing down or worshipping the sun, moon, and stars (*Deut. 4:19, 17:2-5; 2 Kings 17:16, 21:3-6; Jer. 8:1,2; Zeph. 1:4-6; Acts 7:42*).

Some try to justify astrology by suggesting that the Three Wise Men were astrologers. While there were wise men and priests called *magi* in ancient Babylonia and Persia who practiced astrology, it was much different than today's astrology. In fact, these Magi were likely successors of the Chaldean wise men of which Daniel was once chief. They could have known the prophecy of the star given in *Numbers 24:17*. Regardless, God clearly forbids any sort of occult practices (*Isaiah 47:13; Jeremiah 10:2; Deuteronomy 4:19; cf. Deuteronomy 18:8-14*). Thus, since the Three Wise Men found the baby Jesus, it was obviously God and not the stars who guided them.

Transcendental Meditation One of many “New Age” cults, TM “teaches” that God does not exist and that nature and humans are divine in and of themselves. TM's most devious aspect is that it cleverly downplays its origins in eastern religions, even as it promotes their beliefs by attempting to co-opt Christianity. TM asserts that the followers of any religion, including Christians, can also practice TM without conflicting with their core beliefs. The many gods of Hinduism, they say, are so beneficent that they gladly welcome one more god into their midst. Besides, its proponents argue, TM can be used by those in the western world simply as a relaxing, recreational activity that contributes to better mental and physical health. What's wrong with that, they ask?

What's wrong with that is this: TM and Hinduism are pantheistic, teaching that nature and man are gods. According to them, our God, our Lord Jesus Christ, our Holy Spirit do not exist. Nor is Man a sinner; he is a being capable of experiencing his own divinity. Believers in TM have their own secret words, called *mantras*, that they hypnotically chant. They claim that chanting these mantras

simply soothes their spirits, but mantras are actually taken from the Hindu sacred text, the Vedas, and chanted to communicate with various Hindu deities. Though they claim to be promoting only people's happiness and health, the followers of TM are clearly engaged in recruiting unsuspecting individuals into their cult.

It is all so misguided and false. If we want to "transcend," all we Christians need to do is "meditate" on the truths of God's Word (*Psa. 1:2*).

Concerns All of these humanistic pseudo-philosophies and religions have diabolically seduced many people looking for answers in the wrong places. God assures us to simply look to Him and His Word for whatever we want. His promise is in these words: "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (*Phil. 4:19*). Why would we ever trust a psychic, the stars, or a flock of Hindu gods, when our God of the Bible is always right here for us?



Baptism in the Holy Spirit?

Can a person receive eternal life in heaven without the baptism in the Holy Spirit? If so, why should we be baptized in the Spirit?

Receiving eternal life does not depend on being baptized in the Holy Spirit; for salvation is by grace through faith alone (*Habakkuk 2:4; John 6:28, 29; Galatians 3:6; 5:6; Ephesians 2:8*). It is a gift purchased for us by Christ when He was crucified. All we have to do is accept the gift. Just as the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus was assured of entering paradise that very day we too are assured a place in heaven with the Father if we believe in Jesus Christ. It is most unfortunate that some have said, "Unless you have spoken in tongues you will not go to heaven." This is not true. It is contrary to the Scriptures.

At the same time, although the Bible does not say the baptism in the Spirit is required for salvation, it does tell us that Christ commanded His first followers to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them (*Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8*). The Bible commands us to "be filled with the Spirit" (*Ephesians 5:18*). This personal encounter with the Holy Spirit should be sought and cherished by every believer. With it comes a new and fuller dimension of spiritual understanding and a flow of spiritual gifts (*1 Corinthians 2:9-13*)



Birth Control

Does Victory Outreach have a position on birth control?

The command of God to mankind first mentioned in the Bible is found in *Genesis 1:28*: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." This was a command of God to procreate. God created human sexuality as the means of filling the earth and having stewardship over the earth. In Bible days marriage and children were considered normal life experiences (*Genesis 2:23,24*). Barrenness was seen as a curse from God (*Genesis 29:31; 1 Samuel 1:3-11; 2:5*). A large family was viewed as a sign of God's blessing (*Psalms 127:3-5*). Then as is still true in many societies around the world today, children provided the social security system for the parents.

Some within the Church believe the commanded function of sexual relations to produce children to fill the earth and to increase the Church is so important that they forbid the use of any birth control methods. They believe any sexual act, even by married couples, that does not have the potential to produce a child is wrong. Within Victory Outreach this view is rare.

In Victory Outreach we believe there are valid reasons for delaying, limiting, or not having children. There are those who realize they may need more time to mature before trying to raise children. There may be those who should never be a parent. Financial matters must also be considered. Some couples decide to wait until they have finished their schooling before having children. Living in a country in which the lives of the parents and children are in constant danger due to religious persecution might be reason to use birth control to await a safer time for starting or expanding a family.

Still the normal expectation is that most Christians will marry and bring children into this world to be raised in the love and admonition of the Lord. In the past various groups, such as the Shakers, have tried to form religious communities based on total abstinence from marriage and sex. These groups rarely last beyond one generation for obvious reasons.

CONCERNS:

The use of chemically induced or surgical abortion as a means of birth control is flatly rejected. Victory Outreach has an official position opposing abortion. Any birth control method that functions to destroy a fertilized egg, rather than actually preventing conception, is considered unacceptable. Every couple should take this into account when selecting methods of birth control.

Having children requires that parents make a commitment to raising their children to be competent, committed members of their society. This requires sacrifice of time and money that could have been used by the parents for themselves. Unfortunately, there are too many parents in our materialistic, self-centered, society who are having children, but are unwilling to commit themselves to the sacrifices required to raise children well.

This is also an issue for Christian couples. While we in the church recognize the legitimacy of good family planning and the use of birth control, we need to strike a balance. We must look beyond our ambitions and seek God in making these personal decisions. This is not to say every Christian couple must have children. It is simply to recognize that God's plan for our lives may or may not include children. And regardless of circumstances, whether planned or unplanned, wanted or unwanted . . . children are a gift of God to be cherished. As *Psalms 139:13-16* makes clear, the Lord is concerned about each person from the womb. Any decision to have or not have children should be made carefully and prayerfully.



Christian Involvement in Law Suits

Should Christians be involved in lawsuits? Are there biblical principles that apply to Christians in these matters? Is it permissible for Christians to sue others who harm them?

As Christians, we must never engage in any activity that would discredit the church and detract from our mission to witness for Christ and bring glory to God. Thus, our legal affairs and forays into judicial proceedings, such as lawsuits, must be very carefully considered. As always, we need to consult Scripture for guidance.

Satisfaction or compensation for losses or injuries is clearly acceptable in the Old Testament. Although the Mosaic Law of retaliation (eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life—*Ex. 21:23,24*) may seem barbaric or cruel compared to current judicial punishment, it was extremely effective in reducing acts of revenge and long-lasting feuds. The maximum penalty was one-for-one, which helped prevent, for example, the wholesale slaughter of the enemy's family in response to one man's murder. Usually in less serious cases, money exchanged hands as compensation for one's loss (cf. *Ex. 22:12 to 23:9*).

As with most matters, Jesus taught a higher standard of behavior than required under Old Testament law. He condemned vengeance, insisting that we turn the other cheek when injured, or give up our cloak, or go the second mile. We are to pray for, forgive, and even love our enemies (*Matt. 5:38-48, 6:14,15*). When we meet evil with good, we break the cycle of retaliation and shame the wrongdoer into changing his ways (*Rom. 12:17-21*). Taking such a righteous approach when we are wronged, shifts the focus from perceiving ourselves as a victim to embracing our injury or loss as an opportunity to share our spirituality with our "enemy." Before seeking restitution, our first priority should be reconciliation. Early Christians were advised to follow such a path toward reconciliation. If it proved to be unsuccessful, a third-party believer was asked to arbitrate. If that failed, the matter was presented before the entire church. If the wrongdoer refused to obey the judgment of the church, he was to be treated as a pagan (*Matt. 18:15-20*).

The teaching of *Romans 13:1-5* seems to suggest that a believer is justified in seeking legal redress against an unbeliever because the secular government exists to uphold justice, prevent lawlessness, and punish the wrongdoer. The apostle Paul himself exercised the right of defending himself under Roman law (*Acts 16:37-40; 18:12-17; 22:15-29; 25:10-22*). Obviously, "turning the other cheek" does not involve giving up our legal rights as citizens. In fact, the swift and sure punishment of wrongdoers acts as a preventative measure against future crimes.

Nonetheless, Paul advised believers not to sue other believers, lest the cause of Christ be injured by such an action (*Cor. 6:1-8*). Lawsuits in Paul's day were usually financial disputes between wealthy people in the Corinthian church, which was praised for its "wisdom" (*2 Cor. 11:19*), though it had no one "wise enough to judge a dispute" (*1 Cor. 6:5*). In this particular incident, the plaintiff apparently filed suit rather than obey the teaching of Jesus (*Matt. 5:38-48*) or involve the church according to *Matthew 18:15-20*. Paul admonished the plaintiff, telling him he should have simply endured the wrong rather than disgrace the church with a lawsuit (*1 Cor. 6:1-7*). He also chastised the defendant for having committed the wrong (*1 Cor. 6:8*) and the church for not handling the matter (*1 Cor. 6:2-6*).

When a believer is wronged by another believer, the offended believer must seriously consider whether to rely upon God's judgment or bring the state into his case. After careful consideration and prayer, if the believer decides to pursue legal action, he should first have a face-to-face meeting with the offending party. If that fails, he should turn to a believer mediator. If he still does not receive satisfaction, he should bring the case to the church—the pastor, the recognized board of elders or deacons, and if need be the membership.

If all of these measures fail, then the injured believer must balance *Matthew 5:38-48* and *6:14,15* with *Romans 13:1-5*. In order to be certain about his personal motivation, the believer should ask himself the following questions before initiating a lawsuit:

1. Is my desire for a redress of injury motivated simply by personal gain, or am I involving the secular power of the court in order to uphold justice and prevent lawlessness?
2. If I bring action before a secular court, will that, in the context of American rather than Corinthian society, bring harm to the Church and the cause of Christ?

3. Am I totally honest with my claim (or defense), or am I seeking through self-deception to gain (or avoid) a compensation that is more (or less) than the injury suffered?
4. Since the Holy Spirit will never counsel a believer contrary to the Word He has inspired, after a thorough season of prayer, what course of action "seems good to the Holy Spirit"?
5. As an additional safeguard, what is the counsel of other believers who are in a position of leadership or eldership in the body of Christ?

Considerations

Various forms of insurance compensate people for a wide variety of injuries. In most court cases involving such injury disputes, the insurance company pays the claim for its insured defendant. A suit brought by an injured believer against the offender's insurance company does not stem from personal malice, but is rather an effort to reclaim financial losses stemming from the injury. In such cases, the believers have not harmed the church, but have simply used the courts, as sanctioned by public policy, to make things right for the victim.

Throughout the United States, there are various mediation groups formed and operated by Christian attorneys. If both parties agree, then the judgment of such a Christian conciliation group is certainly preferable to a court's involvement.

Regardless, before taking legal action, the Christian believer must ask himself whether filing a lawsuit will truly promote justice, punish the wrongdoer, and protect the innocent, while not negatively reflecting on the cause of Christ.



Civil Disobedience

Does Victory Outreach have a position on civil disobedience in situations where public law is in moral opposition to the law of God?

The debate over the separation of church and state has never had a more vigorous workout than it does today. In issues as wide ranging as abortion and humanistic public school instruction, Christians must demarcate between God's laws and the state's laws. The Bible asserts that "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except that which God has established . . . He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted" (*Romans 13:1, 2*). However, counterbalancing that command, the disciples responded with divine inspiration when the state authorities ordered them to cease and desist teaching or speaking in Jesus' name: "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (*Acts 4:20*).

Christians must obey God (*John 14:15*). Therefore, when any government passes a law, regulation, or ordinance contrary to God's law, or in any other way demands that we do things that God forbids, or attempts to stop us from doing what God wants us to do, then we must obey God and peacefully disobey the government. Of course, there's a difference between biblically warranted civil disobedience and our own possibly selfish reasons for protest. When an issue arises over which we feel compelled to protest, we must search for Scriptural justification, consult with church leaders, and pray that we make the right decision based on God's Word.

Every day, in many issues, Christians are faced with the dilemma of watching the secular population doing things that government permits but that God forbids. Often when Christians protest, public opinion runs high against us. This is our cross that we must take up against those who would disobey God's infallible Word. While we are called to be Christ-like models of biblical truth, we must remember that even those legions of non-believers who reject Scriptural truth are souls for whom Christ died. Furthermore, we must reject Old Testament examples of resorting to violence, despite the justness of our cause. Jesus initiated a new covenant of compassion and understanding toward even the worst sinners. He exhibited anger and judgment only against the religious self-righteous, hypocrites who harshly judged anyone who failed to live up to their standards.

While we must be cautious about civil disobedience, we must not sit back passively and allow evil to operate under the sanction of government decree or law. Some Christians apathetically remain silent in the face of the grossest violations of God's law. To do so is to give comfort to Satan: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (*James 4:17*). Our proper response must be measured: compassionate and non-judgmental, but firmly committed to publicizing and promoting the Scriptural truths of God's Word.



Daily Devotions

Christians need to study the Bible and pray on a regular daily basis.

All born-again believers must forever grow and develop as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. Personal Bible reading and prayer are indispensable to those goals. Neither the clergy's ministrations nor our corporate life in the church can substitute for our personal devotions to Our Lord and His Scripture. Only regular daily prayer and Bible study can adequately prepare the altar of our hearts to fully receive His Word and teach it to others.

Our very Christianity itself was established upon and grew from the direct teachings of Jesus to His disciples. Luke (24:32) records how the early disciples marveled at Jesus as He shared with them the Word. He warned them that an ignorance of His Scripture would lead to error (*Matthew 22:29*). In fact, Paul knew that prophetic revelations were embodied in Scripture (*Romans 16:25,26*). James even looked to Scripture for guidance regarding proper social behavior (*James 2:8,9*). Of course, Jesus himself set the precedent for personal prayer by going off alone to pray to His Father (*Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 22:41,42*). Devout followers of Jesus do well to heed His example.

Unfortunately, much of the world these days ignores the Word of God, a dire situation prophesied by Amos: "I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (*Amos 8:11*). Unbelievers seem to have taken over the social and media discourse, spreading their poisonous doctrine of secular materialism. As a result, an alarming number of believers have been infected by the dual diseases of pleasure-seeking and spiritual apathy, thus neglecting their Bible study and relegating prayer to only routine functions.

On a daily basis, we take care of our material bodies with food and water. We must, likewise, replenish our spiritual bodies, our souls, with a daily intake of Scripture and prayer. Here are some recommendations for enriching your personal devotional life: 1) Use a Bible-reading guide to chart your daily reading. 2) Accompany your Bible reading with prayer, before and/or after. 3) Use prayer request lists. 4) Keep a journal of your thoughts. 5) For fresh inspiration, read devotional classics. 6) Consult world maps for global intercession.

Your spiritual growth requires prayer and a true engagement with your studies, not rote recitation and incidental contact. The effort may be great, but the rewards are eternal. For when you deliberately and consistently meditate on God's Word, you will hear His voice and come to know the incomparable joy of spiritual communion with Him.

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Discipline and Self-Control

Christians believe that a life of discipline and self-control is essential.

From all around us come the fast and furious messages: “If it feels good, do it”; “Love the one you’re with”; “Just do it”; “Go for it”; “Do what you like.” Through movies, TV shows, music videos, radio “personalities,” and advertisements, Hollywood and Madison Avenue sell the same anti-Christian, self-centered, immoral ideology: if you want it, grab it. The instant gratification of “anything goes” promotes the secular materialism that has discarded traditional virtues in favor of personal “values,” suggesting that there are no absolute fundamental truths, that all is relative to one’s humanistic perspective. When you deny the existence of God—as many of the atheistic humanists do—you can do whatever you want. You don’t need discipline or self-control if any pleasure is okay and no behavior is wrong.

The evidence clearly indicates that our very society is undisciplined and out of control. We are alarmingly close to the “terrible time in the last days” of which *Second Timothy 3:1-5* warns: “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, *without self-control*, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

Christians should soberly note how directly “without self-control” causes all the other evil behaviors in that dire list. Our response should be to stand apart from the evildoers responsible for fulfilling this biblical prophecy. In this decadent and self-centered world, the disciplined Christian simply must abstain from all ungodly things (Psalm 1). The Holy Spirit stands ready to assist us in purifying our lives by eliminating the works of the flesh: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (*Gal. 5:19-21*).

The nine fruit of the Spirit (*Gal 5:22,23*) aid in our purification. Of course, as Jesus noted, love is the first fruit we must grow within us: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (*John 13:35*). Self-control is the last fruit mentioned because it regulates all the preceding fruit or virtues of the Spirit. Without restraint, love slides downward into passion. Too much joy becomes shallow frivolity. Peace without purpose invites idleness. A blind and unthinking patience wallows into apathy. Gentleness warps into weakness; while goodness serves to promote itself. Without reason, faith resembles blind superstition. Extreme meekness mutates into mere timidity.

Many celebrity voices make fanciful invocations to love, joy, and peace. Yet, in this out-of-control world, true love, joy, and peace can only be attained through practicing the essential Christian disciplines of prayer, Bible study, fasting, and meditation on noble things. In fact, Peter lists self-control among the seven virtues that complement our faith (*2 Peter 1:5-7*). “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins” (*2 Peter 1:8,9*).

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Most of the truly insidious media messages—casual sex is pure pleasure and morals are old-fashioned; drugs are fun and no big deal; following God’s and parents’ rules is for losers and little kids—are aimed at impressionable youth. To combat their destructive impact, spiritual leaders must be models of self-control, teaching youth to be disciplined followers of Our Lord. Pastors, Sunday school teachers, and parents are all obligated to show young people, by their example, how Christian self-control results in a happier, godlier life.

Of course, there are hundreds of millions of adults in the world who produce, propagate, practice, condone, and even encourage those perversions and degradations that seduce our youth. They are a formidable force, pulling mankind away from God. Fortunately, however, armed with faith, hope, and the Word of the Lord, we are more than a match for Satan’s evil ways. But we need to take action, starting with the way we live our own lives. We need to be walking, talking models of godliness.

The unbelievers and wayward in the world may not consciously know or acknowledge it, but the decadence of their lifestyles starkly reflects the absence of meaning and purpose in their lives. They desperately need to see our Christian example of how to live disciplined lives that shun the vices, sin, and wasteful ways that so severely jeopardize their eternal souls. It is our blessed calling to lead others to appreciate the positive effect that self-control can have upon their lives.



End-Time Events

What does Victory Outreach believe concerning end-time events?

The Scriptural description of end-time events should be taken literally, not symbolically (as some churches believe). Many terrifying events will occur during the end times. Those Christians who are snatched away in the Rapture will escape much of the suffering, but not all, so it is essential we heed Christ's warnings and instructions on how to live in the last days (Matthew 24:4-46). Exactly how individual events will happen, their sequence, and the identity of those mentioned in the biblical record are matters of dispute. As with everything, we look for clear statements of Scripture to guide our beliefs. Leaving the speculation to others, we will address only matters clearly delineated in Scripture.

The Rapture. The central figure of the entire Bible, Jesus Christ, is also its primary prophet. The first phase of Jesus' Second Coming is the Rapture of the living saints, when Jesus will suddenly appear and whisk His true believers away. Those believers who died before the Rapture will be resurrected with incorruptible bodies. The bodies of the living saints also will be changed as they are snatched away. The full revelation will be a glorious surprise. Paul mentions this blessed event in Titus 2:13, but it is best described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17, and 1 Corinthians 15:51,52.

The Tribulation. A time of suffering will come upon the entire world once Jesus has removed the saints. The "70th week" of Daniel (Daniel 9:27), the Tribulation will last 7 years. The second half of the Tribulation is called the Great Tribulation. Pre-Tribulation scholars believe that the Rapture will occur before the beginning of Daniel's 70th week. Mid-Tribulation scholars believe the Rapture will occur in the middle of the 70th week, or before the Great Tribulation. Post-Tribulation scholars believe that the Rapture will occur at the end of the 70th week, or when Christ comes to set up His eternal kingdom. The consensus belief in Victory Outreach is that pre-tribulation is more accurate since the Bible teaches that the Rapture could happen at any time and will be a surprise (Matthew 24:42-44; Mark 13:33-37). The post-tribulation position conflicts with those teachings.

The Tribulation is God's judgment upon Israel for abandoning the Messiah, Jesus Christ. However, the Tribulation will affect the whole world due to its ungodliness and terrible treatment of the Jews. In the first half of these 7 years, the Antichrist will assume power and be perceived as the great deliverer from economic chaos. But the plagues described in Revelation 15:1-16:21 will dominate the second half of the Tribulation. The identity of the Antichrist is, as yet, unknown, though several current world leaders have been mentioned as candidates. Victory Outreach prefers not to join the speculating as to the Antichrist's identity or whether he is already alive.

The Second Coming. Different from the Rapture, The Second Coming of Christ will be His visible, bodily appearance at the Mount of Olives from which He ascended to heaven after His resurrection. After joining the raptured saints in heaven during the Tribulation, Christ will claim His entire kingdom. He and the saints will ride on white horses (Revelation 19:11,14) to reclaim that which Satan temporarily claimed. The ensuing conflict between God & Satan is called the Battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16). At the end, Satan will be bound and cast into hell for 1,000 years (Revelation 20).

The Millennium. Once Satan's influence is gone and Christ reigns alone, the Millennium will be a glorious time of perfect relationships (Isaiah 2, 11, 12, 32, 35, 60 and 65; Zechariah 14). At the end of the 1000 year Millennium, God will release Satan to test the love, faith, and loyalty of His people who will have been born during the Millennium. Satan and his followers will enjoy a short-lived rebellion: fire from heaven will consume them and they will be cast into the lake of fire for all eternity (Revelation 20).

The Great White Throne Judgment. God's judgment fire will purge the earth of all the wicked who have ever lived. They will then be resurrected to face their Judge, "from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away" (Revelation 20:11). After their evil deeds have been judged, they will join Satan in the lake of fire forever. This terrifying fate should be all the motivation we need to help the world's lost finally submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The Holy City. New heavens, a new earth, and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, will replace the corrupt world built by Satan and his followers. "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10), thus making way for the new heavens and earth. Whether real or symbolic, the glorious description of this city in Revelation 21 and 22 offers us a mere glimpse of the magnificence of eternity.

What Should We Do? Since Jesus is surely coming for His people (cf. 2 Peter 3:3,4), we must prepare our hearts and souls for His imminent arrival. It is one thing for atheists and other assorted non-believers to be skeptical and unprepared, but for Christ's own people to be so casual and apathetic is unconscionable. Victory Outreach preaches a clear, unapologetic message that Jesus is coming soon, no matter how long He delays His coming. Peter has two explanations for what may seem like a long delay in the fulfillment of divine prophecy. First, God measures time differently than man does. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Peter 3:8). Second, God's delay affords more opportunity for the lost to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

In preparing ourselves, we should not fixate on prophecy and predictions about the future. Those who study Scripture solely for information about end-time events are no better prepared than those who read horoscopes or visit fortunetellers. Believers need to read their Bibles for spiritual growth and the comfort it provides through the knowledge that God will defeat Satan and Jesus will surely be coming for His people. We must focus on Jesus, the centerpiece of Bible prophecy, not on the events alone.

Christian believers should not take the preceding outline of end-time events as the definitive statement regarding what lies ahead. This collection of Scriptural references to end-time events merely reinforces the importance of focusing on Jesus Christ and His mission to seek and save the lost (Mark 10:45). Now and forever, we must take it as our mission to prioritize our lives around His promised return.



Entertainment

Are movies, television shows, and other forms of secular entertainment acceptable for Christians?

Today's seemingly unlimited entertainment options threaten to tempt and seduce the senses with enticing visions of the material world. Young people are particularly susceptible to such attractive images. Wanting to fit in and be accepted by their friends, they often allow themselves to be exposed to material displeasing to God. Having experienced similar feelings, parents and mature adult Christians understand the dangers of indiscriminate participation in today's culture. They know how one's spiritual relationship with God can be eroded by exposure to un-Christian ways and world views.

In order to best respond to the entertainment issue, we must first consult Scripture for guidance and then evaluate specific media for their suitability to a Christian audience. The closer we become to the Lord, the more obvious it is that much of today's entertainment has a corrosive effect on Christian virtues.

General Biblical Principles. God calls Christians to live lives separated from sin (*Rom. 6:12-19; 1 Thess. 4:3,4*). "Be holy, because God is holy" (*Lev. 11:44,45; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:15,16*). Holiness means "spiritually pure" and "set apart for divine purposes." Unfortunately, Hollywood wallows in positive portrayals of sinful activities condemned by Scripture as unholy. This includes adultery, sexual activity before marriage, glorifying homosexuality, and other activities that stir wrongful desires. We cannot hope to maintain our holiness if we deliberately expose ourselves to unholy images and messages. Scripture explicitly warns against the following: anything that defiles the body, or corrupts the mind and spirit; the inordinate love of or preoccupation with pleasures, position, or possessions, which lead to their misuse; manifestation of extreme behavior, unbecoming speech, or inappropriate appearance; and any fascination or association which lessens one's affection for spiritual things (*Luke 21:34,35; Rom. 8:5-8, 12:1,2; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:11; 1 Tim. 2:8-10, 4:12; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17; Titus 2:12*).

What about those activities that are neither condemned nor approved by the Bible? The apostle Paul taught that some issues of conduct are morally neutral and become sinful only when one violates his/her conscience toward God, or causes another to do so (cf. *1 Cor. 8:1-13; Romans 14*). Even if we feel safe from corruptions, we must often temper our liberty lest we risk another's holiness (*Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:13*). Anything that separates us from God is unholy. In both the Old and New Testaments, the words for "holy" and "holiness" imply a separation from that which defiles or is unclean. We must always remember that as individuals and as a church we are the body of Christ and the temple of God (*1 Cor. 3:16, 6:15*). Thus, our leisure time activities must not distance us from serving and worshiping God as His living temples (*1 Peter 2:4,5*).

Some might argue that they have a right to participate in such entertainment because it is not against the law. Of course, most Christians understand that God's laws are stricter and more holy than man's laws. Quite simply, what we have a right to do is not always right to do. Paul underscored this principle twice in his first letter to the Corinthians. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (*1 Cor. 6:12*). Paul was referring to meat that had been sacrificed to idols, but the principle applies to all activities, including entertainment. Further along in his letter he wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify" (*1 Cor. 10:23*).

As Christians, we should strive to please God with our whole being—our mind, soul, and heart (*Matt. 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27*). Chastity and prudence, then, dictate that we judge all forms of entertainment by how edifying and right they are in the eyes of God. An entertainment might be morally

permissible, yet be spiritually unprofitable. For instance, an excessive pursuit of entertainment takes time away from our relationship with God. Instead becoming closer to Christ, we are squandering our time pleasuring ourselves and dulling our spirituality

Of course, wholesome entertainment has its place. Children need "fun times" with their family, laughing and playing together. Such entertainment need not always be of a spiritual nature, but it should never involve portraying sinful behavior in an attractive, positive light.

Movies and Videos. Although Hollywood labels their products, their system is secular, not religious. A production can receive an "R" rating for violence, nudity, sexual content, and offensive language, all the sort of "entertainment" that Christians desirous of edification should avoid. With its rating system, Hollywood reasons that some content is not appropriate for younger people because they may not be able to distinguish fantasy from reality. Such reasoning suggests that once you are 17 years old, anything goes. The secular censors have their secular standards, but God's people must adhere to a higher set of standards. Our spiritual health suffers when we expose ourselves to depictions of actions and lifestyles that are contrary to God's Word. Even many "G" rated films and videos that appear harmless often propagate ideas contrary or even hostile to biblical truth and Christian behavior

We need not sample such movies to be aware of them, because the rating systems and published reviews report the graphic details for us. Unfortunately, the very rating system and reviews that alert conscientious Christians to objectionable content help others find it. Even if we do find a decent movie to attend, we must also be aware that public movie theaters sometimes provide an occasion and setting for teenagers or unruly adults to engage in unwholesome behavior that we don't want our children to see.

Television. No other worldly influence has impacted society and the lives of Christians more than television. Most of the major networks usually put a liberal, secular humanist slant on their shows, whether it's a "news" report, sitcom, "reality show," or drama. Even religious programming too often is presented in a glitzy fashion that adversely affects what believers expect from their local church. Advertisers generally follow the adage that "sex sells," presenting their products as fast ways to satisfy your gratuitous desires. It all seems so exciting that a viewer's caution is often cast into the winds of pleasure.

Although the movies on television should be scrutinized as mentioned above, the sitcoms, action shows, and late night programs are especially seductive. The actors and the funny lines they recite are so "entertaining," we often lose sight of the fact that they may be depicting an ideology contrary to Biblical truth. A subtle and ironic way of making a point, humor is often a tool of Hollywood's social engineering project. To be specific, *Friends* and *Seinfeld*—just to name two enormously popular shows—appropriate humor to make light of pre-marital sex, homosexuality, vulgarity, religious belief, and a whole host of other subjects that Christians take seriously. Action shows often glorify violence and casual sex as part of the weekly plot line. Late night "talk" shows are generally a forum for Hollywood's "celebrities" to promote their pet projects and attack their pet peeves, usually liberal causes and Christian beliefs, respectively.

Of course, the insidious invasion into our homes by cable television must be carefully monitored. Some "cable access" programs and HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax (just to name a few) air numerous shows with blatant pornography, non-Christian themes, and evil practices. Christians should require their cable company to thoroughly block all poorly scrambled video and audio signals of cable channels that air objectionable programming.

Some Christians have banned television from their homes as a way to protect their families. Short of such a heroic action, godly Christians should carefully monitor television and never use it as a baby sitter for their children.

Internet. As low as standards are for movies and television, the situation is even worse on the internet where there are no standards at all. While blocking software prevents access to certain sites, these measures are voluntary and inadequate for eliminating all objectionable sites. Every Christian who surfs the Internet should adhere to the same pledge that one distance learning school has recommended for its students: "I pledge before God that I will keep my heart and mind pure by avoiding any contact with pornography or

inappropriate relationships, especially via the Internet. I will use my computer resources entirely for the glory of God."

Reading Material. Quite frankly, bookstores and magazine sections of retail stores overflow with immoral and unbiblical reading material. You might think traditional morals and virtues would be safe in a library, but think again. In many communities, under the guise of unlimited access without censorship, the library has as much or more immoral and even pornographic literature than do bookstores. Then there are the computers that offer unblocked, unfiltered Internet access. These degradations have taken place because activist groups with anti-Christian agendas have pressed for the inclusion of literature promoting their causes, while Christians have been apathetic or silent.

CONCLUSIONS

Although Christians know that anything that offends the Lord is wrong, some are nonetheless reluctant to condemn such objectionable forms of entertainment lest they be called prudish or judgmental. Tolerance is touted as a good thing these days, yet tolerance of ungodly things cannot possibly be good no matter how attractively Hollywood might spin the story. Wholesome entertainment, exercise, and relaxing activities please God, while degrading and unholy activity offends Him. The conscientious Christian must make careful distinctions between the two, always remembering that on our day of judgment we must make an accounting of how wisely we have spent our time in this life.



Environmental Protection

What is Victory Outreach's position on the environment?

Although protecting the environment is essential to preserving life on earth, many of today's environmentalists have taken that concern to the pagan extreme of worshipping the creation and not the Creator. We believe that such worship of the land and its vegetation, the oceans, the wind, the animals, and other aspects of creation is an abomination to the Creator, God.

The apostle Paul addressed this problem of idolatry in his letter to the church in Rome. Some people in his day had even begun to worship images of man, birds, animals, and reptiles. In *Romans 1:21-23*, Paul wrote, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Today's environmental pagans are propagandists of the New Age Movement, which claims that the earth itself is divine. Tragically, this environmental extremism has misplaced society's focus from God and His Word, to the preservation and often worship of His creation, the earth.

Indeed, the earth *was* created by God (*Genesis 1:1-31; Isaiah 37:16*); thus, we must be good stewards of God's creations. Yet, Scripture teaches that eventually the earth will be consumed by fire and cease to exist as we know it (*Zephaniah 1:18; Isaiah 51:6*). For now, the earth serves as the home of the human race, God's highest creation, made in His own image (*Genesis 1:27*). Before the earth is destroyed, Christ will return to bring His Church of believers to heaven, their eternal home currently unknown to mankind (*Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13*).

Of course, in spite of the ultimate end-time events, Christians must act responsibly in using the earth's resources over which God has given mankind dominion (*Genesis 1:27-30*). However, we must not overemphasize the importance of the physical planet and its various life forms. Our emphasis must be on the spiritual issues affecting life and eternity. Scripture teaches that spiritual matters, not material, are God's priority. God did not send His Son to save the earth, but to save the people who inhabit it.

We respect and love the earth that God gave us, but our worship is reserved for God, the Creator and giver of life.



Faith for Answered Prayer

What is Victory Outreach belief in faith for answered prayer?

Victory Outreach has, from its beginning, been on the cutting edge of aggressive faith—a biblical conviction that God does the miraculous through simple faith in Him. While not mentioned specifically, the issue of faith is so central it underscores and touches all of the church's doctrines. The most obvious application of faith is seen in the doctrine of divine healing, considered one of the cardinal truths of our Fellowship. This doctrine listed in Article 12, Statement of Fundamental Truths, states "Divine healing is an integral part of the gospel. Deliverance from sickness is provided in the Atonement and is the privilege of all believers (*Isaiah 53:4,5; Matthew 8:16,17; James 5:4-16*)."

In our day, however, some have extended this truth from "believing in faith" to "claiming in faith." In such cases human desire is imposed upon the sovereign will and purposes of God. In Victory Outreach we believe to make such demands on God is contrary to the spirit of Scripture.

This imbalance in applying faith grows out of an effort to see and experience the supernatural. As an example, people who are ill or in need require healing or some form of provision in their life. In an act of faith, they petition God through prayer to answer their needs. Time passes. With no immediate answer in sight they grow weary of waiting and demand answers. In response, isolated Bible verses are used to support their insistence that God must perform according to their demands. Sadly, what begins as a sincere longing to see God work degenerates into a spirit of insistence. Ultimately, this attitude prevents a trusting rest in God's care and His provision.

Sometimes when prayers aren't answered as one requests, other zealous believers comment, "You didn't have enough faith," or "You need to increase your faith." But to make such statements is as futile as to say "Stop being sick." This gives emphasis on faith in faith itself rather than faith in God. He and He alone is to be the object and focus of our faith

How do we stay on the cutting edge of faith while still avoiding the extreme? The answer is paradoxical—the willingness to trust and believe while also experiencing a spirit of acceptance to God's sovereign purposes. In other words, we pray in faith but are content to leave the results with God.

The danger of missing the essential faith balance in one's prayer petitions, therefore, is twofold: 1) That we shrink back from believing God for the supernatural—that full expectation that He is going to act; and 2) that we cross over the line and become god-players—the imposing of our agenda on God. All Christians must find a balance between aggressive faith and obedient compliance to His will. To this balance the Scriptures give strong testimony.



Fasting

Does Victory Outreach teach fasting?

Victory Outreach has always held that fasting is a practical way of demonstrating one's control over human will and desires of the flesh. Spirit-driven, private and voluntary, fasting is typically practiced by church members abstaining from certain foods and liquids. Accompanied by prayer, fasts bring people closer to God by intensifying their fervor and heightening their focus.

Fasts are appropriate for many reasons: to make a statement against sin; to separate from the world and be closer to God; to strengthen one's faith; to better hear a potential call to ministry; and to inspire deeper devotion. Most importantly, fasting must spring from a pure heart and sincere desire to help others and honor God.

The Scriptures refer often to fasting. In the Old Testament, in addition to the mandatory fasting that accompanied the Day of Atonement, fasting usually occurred during some national crisis, such as famine, pestilence, or war, that sparked a "spirit of mourning" (*Leviticus 16:29-31*). Israel's prophets often called for a fast as a means of repentance (*Joel 2:12*). However, fasting became a routine and many people fasted only because they thought they'd get something for themselves. They ignored the spirit of fasting: the unselfish desire to bring justice and good will to others in need (*Isaiah 58:2-6*).

The Pharisees, in New Testament times, forced the people of Israel into a showy, self-aggrandizing tradition of fasting. Jesus rejected such public displays, insisting that a fasting person must go about his business in the usual way and keep his fast a secret before God (*Matthew 6:16-18*). As we know, Jesus went to the wilderness for 40 days to practice His fast (*Matthew 4:1,2*). The apostle Paul fasted both voluntarily and involuntarily due to life's circumstances (*2 Corinthians 6:5*). Usually, fasting was accompanied by prayer. Scripture records that most fasts lasted just one day. The longest fasts were for three to six days. Nowhere does Scripture encourage long fasts that would jeopardize one's physical or mental health.

Fasting should never be considered a way to get on God's good side. It is not to be taken as a sign of one's devoutness or religious superiority. Fasting must be done in humility and privately, to bring us closer to God and His will, not to impress our friends and neighbors with our righteousness.



Financial Practices & Credit

What does the Bible say about personal finances, such as extended credit? Also, what obligations do Christians have in reimbursement of personal debt?

Despite the fact that the culture and society of Biblical times were very different than ours, its principles are fundamental to all times and all people everywhere. While few of the business or financial issues that concern us today are specifically referred to in Scripture, several timeless truths are applicable as guidelines for our monetary practices.

Trying to make ends meet poses a daily challenge for most people. We must learn to be skilled at living within the budget dictated by our incomes, while trying to save, put money aside for emergencies and retirement, and deal with inflation and interest rates on those debts we cannot avoid incurring. Often, we are faced with needing to purchase something—such as a car, an appliance, or even new clothes—that simply cannot wait until we have the full amount in cash. So we consider going into debt to make that purchase.

Jesus seems to have permitted borrowing (*Matt. 5:42, Luke 6:35*). However, Christians must be very careful when considering going into debt. We must exercise self-control, not allowing ourselves to covet what we cannot afford. Nor should we embrace the messages of materialism that encourage us to spend and acquire lest our neighbors perceive us as being poor. "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint" (*Prov. 23:4*). Remember, "A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished" (*Prov. 28:20*).

If we truly do need something, then it is acceptable to consider installment buying. However, when we are seduced by the Madison Avenue machine into believing that a luxury item is a necessity—such as an expensive car, a fast boat, or the latest technological gadget—some of us succumb and go deeply into debt to satisfy our desire for instant gratification. That sort of debt can lead to financial ruin. Of course, when we purchase *necessities* on credit—such as a house or car—it can actually be an investment. Paying rent or driving an old vehicle that constantly needs repairs is like throwing money down the drain.

The Problem of Credit Cards & Out-of-Control Debt

The biggest potential problem area related to borrowing—and the main cause of bankruptcy—is the habitual use of credit cards for incidental purchases. Recall that Paul taught that we should "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law" (*Rom. 13:8*). Of course, Paul is primarily referring to our obligation to love one another. However, applying the statement to financial debts is appropriate because failing to pay one's debts is certainly not a demonstration of love. In fact, many of us go into debt to buy things that we feel will demonstrate our love to our friends or children. We must keep firmly in mind that the spiritual growth of our family is far more important than buying *things*. Some parents work so many hours to buy more things that they are rarely home with their children. Toys and "stuff" are no substitute for the presence of loving parents. "Children are a heritage of the LORD" (*Psa. 127:3 KJV*). Neither money nor possessions are more important.

First and foremost, a Christian must maintain his good reputation or "honest report" (*Acts 6:3 KJV*) by always repaying his debts. Scripture refers to someone who fails to repay his debts as a wicked person: "The wicked borrow and do not repay" (*Psalms 37:21*). Obviously, we must always pay for what we have bought, or return the items if circumstances prevent us from meeting our obligation to pay. There is no true debt as long as specified credit payments are faithfully and regularly made according to the purchase agreement. Otherwise, there *is* debt and we have sinned.

Is Bankruptcy an Option?

Since it is a means of avoiding obligations, bankruptcy is not an option for a conscientious Christian. The only correct solution for a Christian mired in debt is to seek the help of a non-profit debt consolidation company, while learning to budget all future finances well within his means.

The Necessity of Tithing

Sadly, many believers acquire whatever they want, and even go into credit card debt if they feel like it, yet still cannot manage to tithe their obligatory 10% to the Lord. They justify their short-changing of God by saying they can't afford it and they'll contribute when they can. Or they ask where in the New Testament it says that Christians are required to tithe. The Old Testament acknowledgment that everything we have comes from God also applies in the New Testament. Jesus praised the Pharisees for their tithing even as He chastised them for not being just, merciful, and faithful (*Matt. 23:23*).

The road to good financial health is longer without tithing than it is with tithing. God graces those who make His money the first priority in their budgeting and spending.



Gossip and Appropriate Speech

Since the words we speak tell a great deal about us, what should we say and not say? Is gossip a sin?

God gave us the precious gift of speech. For that reason alone, we should be consistently careful not to abuse it by saying anything ugly, profane, or otherwise hurtful and destructive. Yet, everywhere in the media, from celebrities to politicians, we see the misuse and abuse of the spoken word. Indeed, we ourselves often succumb to the temptation of using words to fight with and hurt one another. In fact, Scripture describes words being used as weapons, swords and arrows (*Psa. 57:4; 64:3; Jer. 9:8*). James discusses how powerful words can act as the rudder of a ship or a spark that starts a forest fire (*James 3:2-12*).

Our very character is often revealed by what we say and how we say it. "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (*Matt. 12:34*). Many of today's "actors" and "recording artists" recite profane lines in movies and sing songs laden with ugly lyrics that ironically reflect the facts of their personal lives. But we need not look beyond our own church community for examples of the misuse of speech. Good Christians may not allow outright profanities to escape their lips, but many do use substitutes, perhaps without knowing it. Believers must carefully evaluate their vocabularies. Our speech should be witness to God's living presence in our lives.

Sometimes even telling truths can be wrong if that truth needlessly hurts someone. Just because something is true, says Paul, it is not always right to mention. Many "truths" are not constructive, uplifting, or beneficial to others. Making negative comments about someone's looks, talents, or private matters—even if we believe those comments are true—is un-Christian and shows a lack of self-control. We simply must refrain from any words that might embarrass, hurt, or offend (*James 3:2*).

No doubt, many of the disagreements and tensions among Christians, locally and globally, have had their origin in offensive, careless words, perhaps spoken in haste, without consideration of how they sound to others. "Think before you speak" may not derive from Scripture, but it is in the spirit of loving one another and working toward the unity of the church. While we are pausing to think, the Holy Spirit has a chance to transform our thoughts into godly words that achieve productive communication.

Gossip

Decidedly unproductive communication is that idle talk and tale telling known as gossip. The Bible explicitly and often condemns gossip. "Do not go about spreading slander among your people" (*Lev. 19:16*). "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (*James 1:26*). Jesus himself said, "Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (*Matt. 12:36,37*). Gossip consists of spreading ideas and using words contrary to a Christian, Spirit-filled life. Both James describing the power of the tongue and Paul preaching to the Ephesians warn that gossip is the devil's work, a fire out of hell (*James 3:6; Eph. 4:25-32*). Gossip turns language into a cruel weapon, distorting reality and warping wisdom into foolishness (*James 3*). Gossip opposes love (*1 Cor. 13:6; Gal. 5:14,15*)—hurting rather than helping, angering rather than soothing (*Prov. 16:28; 2 Cor. 12:20*). As an act of betrayal, gossip destroys trust (*Prov. 20:19*).

Knowing how destructive and sinful it is, why do people gossip? One reason is a lack of self-control. Perhaps they just like to talk and sometimes they aren't aware of what they are saying. Another reason is revenge. They may perceive that someone has hurt or wronged them, so they are striking back through ugly words. A third reason is that they are playing God, passing judgment upon someone whom they believe is guilty of a sin or offense against them or the community. It is perversely exciting to learn of our neighbor committing adultery or having had some sort of conflict with the authorities. Telling our friends about such juicy information may make us feel powerful or superior somehow. Obviously, those feelings are depraved and prideful. It is painfully clear that all of our reasons for gossiping are themselves sins. For people whose confidence and strength is in the Lord, and whose joy comes from loving Christian service, gossip has no place.

So how can we stop ourselves from gossiping? (1) Never talk negatively about others. Even when making prayer requests, be careful to reveal only enough information to explain the need. Do not ask leading questions or poke around in other people's business. (2) Do not betray a confidence (*Prov. 11:13*). If you simply must share a confidence to help someone, speak only to a pastor or other appropriate person. (3) Refuse to listen to gossip and explicitly express your disapproval. (4) Be a peacemaker, a diplomat, the one to extinguish the fire (*Prov. 26:20*).

The Power of Prayerful Words

The Spirit-filled believer should pray for grace and strength to be holy in his utterances. Our prayerful words should always reflect our complete devotion to the Lord. When we commune with God in prayer language infused with the Holy Spirit, we decrease the likelihood of being tempted to gossip. Let us emulate how Jesus conversed with the Father in prayer (*Luke 22:41,42*). Ultimately, we must take to heart and heed Paul's words to the Ephesian church: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph. 4:29).



Infant Baptism, Age of Accountability, Dedication of Children

What is Victory Outreach's position concerning the baptism of children, their security in the Kingdom, and the practice of dedicating them to the Lord?

Just as human parents should, God loves children unconditionally. After all, Jesus responded to the question of who is the greatest in the kingdom of God, by saying, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 18:3*). In Leviticus, God specifically prohibited the Israelites from sacrificing their children to the pagan god, Molech (*Leviticus 20:1-5*). Obviously, God would never condemn innocent children to the eternal fire of hell. Until they reach the age of understanding (sometimes referred to as "the age of accountability"), they enjoy a place in the kingdom of God. If a child dies before knowing Christ and accepting Him as his personal savior, that child inherits eternal life in heaven regardless.

Nonetheless, Scripture makes perfectly clear that all adults and children who acknowledge Christ, repent, and are born again must be baptized (*Acts 2:38,41; 8:36-38*). Some adults argue that the baptism they received as infants fulfills the New Testament mandate of water baptism (*1 Peter 3:21*). However, Victory Outreach believes that salvation (acceptance of Christ and His forgiveness of our sins) must be followed by a water baptism as practiced in the New Testament. We urge all new converts to follow the biblical pattern of water baptism in obedience to Christ.

Until children reach their own understanding of salvation, parents should introduce them to the presence of the Lord, just as Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple "to present Him to the Lord" (*Luke 2:22*). Many parents brought their infants and little children to Jesus for Him to touch and bless them (*Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17*). Parents should publicly dedicate their children, preferably during a church service. In dedicating their children, parents acknowledge those children are gifts from God, vowing before Him and the congregation to be godly examples while leading their children to Christ at the earliest possible age.



Law and Crime

Does Victory Outreach have a position on the law and crime?

Although obedience to God's law is the highest priority, Christians must also obey man's laws, unless they contradict God's. Since civil authorities are ordained by God, Christians must obey those whom God has delegated the right to govern (*Romans 13:1-7*). Nonetheless, there is one exception to this biblical principle, illustrated in the Bible through Peter and John. When these disciples were challenged by religious authorities to stop doing what God had instructed them to do, they replied, "We must obey God rather than men!" (*Acts 5:29*).

We must be very cautious when invoking this exception. Human government is essential to maintaining a civil society, one usually in step with God's own laws. Therefore, Christians must never denigrate or disrespect human law and authorities. However, obedience to human laws should never force or lead a Christian to sin against God's law.

As our society devolves into ever lower states of secularization, Christians face more laws, policies, government programs, and social engineering schemes that contradict fundamental Scriptural truths. Christians must actively protest such evil without resorting to tactics and behavior that would cast doubt upon the Lord's presence in our lives. To be specific, in protesting against human laws permitting abortion, we must remember that God's law commands the protection and preservation of human life. The Bible does not give anyone the right to kill doctors who may be violating God's law. Anarchy would break loose if everyone took such matters into their own hands.

Though few unbelievers would admit it, much of human society looks to Christians for a higher moral standard and example. We base our moral choices on our love for God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. When we really understand how much God loves everyone (even those who are attempting to live their lives without Him), we cannot possibly commit criminal acts against anyone. While being a law-abiding citizen is essential to living a good life, being a faithful follower of God's Word is the only assurance of everlasting life as a citizen of His Kingdom.



Materialism

What is the biblical position on materialism and worldliness?

Many people in today's secular society value wealth and material possessions above anything. Media, celebrities, advertising, and even our friends and neighbors often seem obsessed with the accumulation of material goods and the instant gratification of their every desire.

Today's material attitudes are a stark contrast to the life of Jesus, who told his disciples to give up everything and follow him. He lived in humble obscurity, teaching His followers not to be anxious about the future, for God would provide for them (*Matt.6:25-34*). In fact, the "gospel paradox" of *Mark 8:31-38* teaches that life comes out of suffering and death. Just as Jesus died for us, we must take up our crosses before achieving our eternal life. Christians must put their trust in God for daily needs and value spirituality over material things. Worldliness only separates us from eternal truth.

Although wealth in itself is not condemned in Scripture—it is considered a gift and a blessing, especially when not sought (*1 Kings 3:13*)—many Scriptural passages warn of the dangers of wealth and the unrighteous mammon (*Luke 16:9,11*). When wealth is accumulated for its own sake, people become selfish, greedy, and covetous. Since we are simply stewards of God's wealth, we should use it to help the poor, the weak, and the oppressed (*Ezek. 22:29*). The true Christian shares his wealth generously.

Thus, it is very important to note that the Bible does not encourage poverty. In fact, the Lord looks favorably upon those godly Christians who make money honestly and fairly, through hard work, and then are willing to share their good fortune through acts of beneficence and philanthropy. Much good can come from wealthy people tithing generously to their church, establishing non-profit charitable organizations, or simply helping their community through various monetary donations. John Wesley exemplifies the Christian approach to wealth. Nearing middle age, Wesley calculated how much money he had lived on during his early years and proceeded to maintain his annual expenses at the same level, putting the extra income to the Lord's work.

Christians who work hard and provide for their families, while maintaining a healthy, spiritual attitude toward material things, are storing up riches for their eternal life with the Lord. Whether we are wealthy or poor, the Lord loves us. True godliness is measured not by money, but by our prioritizing our spiritual health over our material wealth (*1 Tim. 6:17-19*).



Miracles

Does Victory Outreach believe that God still performs miracles today?

Without any doubt whatsoever, God still performs miracles today, as He always has. Not only were the miracles recorded in the Bible historical events—not myths or folk stories—Scripture gives no indication that God would ever stop performing miracles. In fact, nearly every day there are confirmed reports of a miracle happening somewhere in the world. Obviously, history's greatest miracle worker, Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (*Hebrews 13:8*).

What exactly is a miracle? The philosopher David Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature." But is not life itself a miracle? Do we not refer to "the miracle of birth"? A miracle is not simply an unexpected happening or something beyond human understanding. For believers, a true miracle is a supernatural event through which God reveals himself to us. Such events are not violations of nature, for nature is God's creation to use as He deems best.

We usually think of miracles as being like those Old and New Testament events: the dead being raised to life or an inexplicable recovery from sickness or certain death. Pentecostal believers have seen many documented instances of divine healing when medicine and doctors had failed (See *Acts Today*, GPH). Despite these numerous healings of the sick and injured, cases of the dead being raised to life is extremely rare, possibly to remind believers that those who have died in Christ will one day live again (*1 Thessalonians 4:16,17*). As Scripture teaches, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (*Hebrews 9:27*, NIV). Therefore, the greatest of all miracles for the born again believer (*John 3:3,7*, *1 Peter 1:23*) is the salvation experience when God forgives sin and accepts the redeemed believer as a member of His church.

Essential for recognizing a miracle is faith. Although, the validity of a miracle cannot be proved or disproved by science, skeptics rely solely on science, asserting that determining the credence of an event depends upon sheer rationality, logic, and concrete facts. Unbelievers like to denigrate believers by calling us naïve and unsophisticated. Tragically for them, theirs is the naïve and unsophisticated viewpoint—a vast blind spot to the wonders of God's creation. A doubting Thomas, the unbeliever disparages and scoffs at what he cannot rationalize with his mind, prove with logic, and support with so-called facts. Such a limited view of creation is pathetically naïve and sadly unsophisticated. Only those who open their minds to the wondrous infinity of God's creation can begin to comprehend the glorious possibility—indeed, the absolute necessity and certainty—of His hand at work upon us through the transformative power of His supernatural miracles.

The grand irony of the unbelievers' position is that many of them glamorize and glorify today's radical relativity, stressing how anything goes, nothing is absolute, and everything is possible. So, if everything and anything is possible in their worldview, how do they explain away their dismissal view of miracles? Their contradictory stance rests upon the quicksand of unbelief. If they were to admit the existence of an omnipotent God who performs miracles, then they would have to acknowledge God's laws and commandments, a thoroughly disagreeable contingency for unbelievers who wish to live unholy lifestyles with no fear of eternal damnation. Better, they believe, to deny the existence of God, live however they want, and claim, among other sacrileges, that miracles are really due to some unknown natural phenomenon or a hoax perpetrated by Christians.

Believers also must guard against other Christians who say that miracles ended with the close of the New Testament. Furthermore, we must be careful not to claim as miracles events that are not divine interventions of God. Nor should we attempt to replicate supernatural manifestations of God. Christians should never pretend to be miracle workers or fabricate "miracles" in a misguided attempt to impress unbelievers. God moves as He chooses and His love for us is the greatest miracle of all.

Though not generally described as a miracle, the Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues (when the Holy Spirit prays through the Spirit-filled believer) is a supernatural revelation of God's presence in the life of the believer. The working of miracles is one of the other gifts of the Spirit described in 1 Corinthians 12, all of which are still observed in the Pentecostal church. Truly, God is still working miracles today to reveal Himself and call us to salvation and a closer relationship with Him.