

Dear WJI Students,

This is part of a project I'm working on to help Christians in journalism think through how to apply their faith to their vocation. It's not done yet, so I apologize for whatever typos still reside in here. We'll be talking about some of these things in class. I hope you find it helpful.

Cordially,

Les Sillars

Redeeming Objectivity

Journalism as a Public Service and a Christian Calling

I occasionally encounter eager young Christian journalism students who say they want to become reporters to correct all the liberal bias they see in the godless, secular media. They see their calling as “just reporting the Truth.” I try not to dampen their enthusiasm, but I have to warn them: if they take such an attitude into mainstream newsrooms their careers will be Hobbesian: nasty, brutish and short. “If you're going to work in the industry,” I tell them, “you have to respect the conventions of the industry.”

On the other hand, I also sometimes meet young Christians who want to be journalists but believe that the price of admission to the field is that they leave their Christian convictions at home when they go to work, or do journalism that is indistinguishable from that of their colleagues. Many have been taught, incorrectly, I suggest, that a real professional can lay aside his or her worldview in the practice of journalism.

Instead, I believe that every Christian journalist can and should apply his faith to his calling. This does not mean that you should try to sneak Bible verses into your stories or that you should only write about hot-button social issues or those with a clear moral component. Being a Christian should affect a journalist's work, and he or she should seek

to apply biblical truth to everyday stories. “Respecting the conventions of the industry” does mean that a Christian reporter must first understand how journalism works and where there are good reasons for the common traditions, standards, and practices, appreciate their value and seek to work within them.

Today, by far, the most important concept in American journalism, a core value for over 80 years, is “objectivity.” Not all journalists are still slavishly devoted to it; rather, adherence to objectivity is perhaps shakier today among journalists than at any time since it appeared. But the concept still largely defines what journalists do and how they understand themselves; it is the style most news is written in or against. This chapter will introduce the concept of objectivity, its origins, and its importance. I will try to provide a framework for applying biblical principles to the practice of journalism that honors Christ and is not merely acceptable in the industry, but one that embraces journalism’s finest ideals.

THE OBJECTIVE JOURNALIST

According to the commonly-held understanding of objectivity, the job of the journalist who writes news (as opposed to opinion journalism like columns, editorials and most articles in publications like *National Review*) is to present “the facts” in a fashion untainted by bias or partisanship and regardless of his own personal beliefs. At its best, as Kovach and Rosenstiel point out in their excellent book, *The Elements of Journalism*, journalism provides the information a free and democratic society needs to be self-governing. In such a system, the journalist who is not “objective” and thereby allows his personal agenda to influence his work fails his audience, his employer and society as a whole. That is, he fails his audience because readers expecting (and perhaps paying for) a complete and accurate account of events receive something less; he fails his employer because an audience that suspects it is being manipulated through inaccurate or unfair

reports will likely abandon that publication for another; and he fails society by not providing the information society needs to make good decisions and hold its leadership accountable.

Yet many observers of the news say objectivity is impossible, a mere myth. Journalists always bring to their task their own backgrounds, perspectives, educations, values, experiences and beliefs, and these necessarily influence their selection, interpretation and presentation of events. Moreover, conservatives regularly complain, with much justification, that the “mainstream media” (i.e. national organizations like network television news companies, major newsmagazines and large metropolitan and national newspapers) are “biased” in favor of liberal people, organizations and ideas and against conservative ones. Lobby groups and media watchdog organizations on the political left, oddly enough, charge that the major media have a conservative bias rooted in the fact that they are owned by corporations; such complaints are usually related to coverage of business and foreign policy, which leftists say ignores radical critiques of capitalism and “American imperialism.”

The situation is complicated further by the wide variety of approaches to objectivity among journalists and professors in journalism schools. Many younger journalists and increasing numbers of journalism professors attempt to dismiss objectivity altogether as a relic from an earlier age. “Truth” with a capital “T” is either non-existent or impossible to nail down, say advocates of the postmodern approach to journalism, and it doesn’t matter which, so the practice of journalism is essentially the exercise of power. Journalists can use it either to preserve existing social and political structures or break them down, but this notion of a neutral party just presenting “facts” is simply naive.

On the other hand, some journalists still hold that objectivity is not only possible but required. Society will suffer badly if there is no honest and independent broker of information about matters of public importance, they say, and only the journalist working

for a credible news organization that affirms the notion of objectivity is in a position to provide that service.

Most professional journalists probably fall somewhere in the middle—they support the idea of objectivity as an ideal even though they may doubt that any individual journalist can be completely objective and are openly skeptical that “Truth” is possible to find or report. They believe that although objectivity is impossible in a philosophical sense, journalists can and should be functionally objective—generally fair and accurate and balanced in their reporting. Overarching all this is the reality that most news organizations require its reporters and editors to produce news that looks and sounds “objective,” regardless of what they believe about objectivity itself, because audiences expect it.

Finally, objectivity as a concept is losing its foundational place in journalism because new technology is rapidly changing the nature of the media landscape itself. “News” used to be the exclusive domain of newspapers, magazines and broadcasters. To get to the public, information had to be funneled through one or another of the news organizations and the high cost of setting up new newspapers and television stations (never mind competing with established media for advertising dollars) meant that a fairly small group of companies largely controlled the flow of public affairs information through most of society. Consequently, news organizations had some control over who provided “news,” weeding out (by not hiring) those who declined to submit to the accepted, professional standard of objectivity. Now, however, the Internet has created a whole new pathway for information to get to the public, mainly via blogs and private websites. The field is wide open. A “journalist” no longer need be employed by anybody but himself, and anybody with a computer can contribute to the ever-expanding flood of prose and images crashing through the Internet.

How should a Christian moving into the newsroom react to all this? Is objectivity possible? Is it even an appropriate goal? These are not easy or simple questions. “The

concept of objectivity is now so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct,” say Kovach and Rosenstiel. Worse, as journalists pursue the already badly misunderstood concept of truth, “whether it is secrecy or inability, the failure of journalists to articulate what they do leaves citizens all the more suspicious that the press is either deluding itself or hiding something.”

Some, from both the political left and right, claim it would be more honest if journalists were forthright about what they personally believe and let audiences decide if they want news slanted accordingly. Marvin Olasky in *WORLD Magazine* noted that, not so long ago, readers often had only one source of information about a particular event—their newspaper—and so it was important for that one source to be “objective,” to provide a neutral basis of facts on which to base public discussion.¹ The Internet, by making available a wide range of sources on any given event, makes that argument obsolete. Audiences today would be better able to assess the facts for themselves if they understood the biases of the journalists; people might even seek out news sources from a variety of perspectives to get a more genuinely “balanced” view. Moreover, it would allow journalists to freely interpret the events of the day without being bogged down by outmoded and even deceptive notions of objectivity. “Opinion journalism can be more honest than objective-style journalism,” argued Michael Kinsley in the *Washington Post*, “because it doesn’t have to hide its point of view.”² Pointing out that European newspapers never adopted the “conceit of objectivity” yet somehow manage adequately to inform their readers, he added that “Writers freed of artificial objectivity can try to determine the whole truth about their subject and then tell it whole to the world.”

In any case, say critics of objectivity, the farce of “objective” journalism is on the way out. The “old media” are just dinosaurs feeling the cold, bloggy winds blowing off the rapidly advancing technological glaciers. The credibility of the “elite media” has

¹ Marvin Olasky, “Paper-thin argument,” *WORLD*, Feb. 4, 2006.

² Michael Kinsley, “The Twilight of Objectivity,” *Washington Post* March 31, 2006, A19.

collapsed, charged conservative blogger and writer Hugh Hewitt in a piece for *The Weekly Standard* titled “The Media’s Ancien Regime,” and “the fortunes of the big five papers . . . as well as the old TV networks and big weekly newsmagazines [are] visibly in decline”:

The elite media are hopelessly biased to the left and so blind to their own deficiencies, or so in denial, that they cannot save themselves from irrelevance. They’re like the cheater in the clubhouse, whose every mention of a great round is met with rolling eyes and knowing nods.

Defenders of the “ancien regime” deny the news industry is that badly biased. Some assert that abandoning objectivity altogether would corrode the democracy-supporting function of the news by polarizing the public into warring camps that, for a lack of a common base of facts, cannot speak to each other. Political scientist James Q. Wilson argued in the *Wall Street Journal*³ that political debate in the U.S. is increasingly characterized by “an intense commitment to a candidate, a culture, or an ideology that sets people in one group definitively apart from people in another, rival group.” The characteristics of polarization: “when a candidate for public office is regarded by a competitor and his supporters not simply as wrong but as corrupt or wicked; when one way of thinking about the world is assumed to be morally superior to any other way; when one set of political beliefs is considered to be entirely correct and a rival set wholly wrong.” Yes, concede defenders of objectivity, there is a wide variety of perspectives available via the internet and other channels, but how many people seek out a truly diverse set of sources? Objectivity is not merely possible, it is very important in preserving a workable political system that won’t collapse under the weight of the rancor of its participants.

Some of the old guard recognize the problems with recent understandings of objectivity and suggest that journalists could be more flexible in how they understand the concept without ditching this idea that it is possible to speak to the whole of society.

³ Feb. 15, 2006.

Brent Cunningham, in an essay in the *Columbia Journalism Review*,⁴ agreed that objectivity “can trip us up on the way to ‘truth.’” It excuses lazy reporting because journalists, having gotten a quote from “both” sides, often don’t bother to push for a deeper understanding of their story. Objectivity also encourages a tendency to rely wholly on official sources because those are “reliable” and “verifiable” and, more to the point, easy to contact. Objectivity makes reporters reluctant to bring up issues that their sources don’t, lest they be charged with bias in bringing new problems to the table.

He offers two solutions:

Journalists (and journalism) must acknowledge, humbly and publicly, that what we do is far more subjective and far less detached than the aura of objectivity implies — and the public wants to believe. If we stop claiming to be mere objective observers, it will not end the charges of bias but will allow us to defend what we do from a more realistic, less hypocritical position.

Secondly, we need to free (and encourage) reporters to develop expertise and to use it to sort through competing claims, identify and explain the underlying assumptions of those claims, and make judgments about what readers and viewers need to know to understand what is happening.

In sorting through all these conflicting attitudes toward objectivity, a Christian journalist should understand first the nature of “bias” in the context of an industry that prizes “objectivity.” To do that, we’ll need a better understanding of what objectivity is. Let’s first review briefly the history of the concept.

BRIEF HISTORY OF OBJECTIVITY

The first American colonial newspapers, appearing in the early decades of the 1700s, were published by printers who had no notion of objectivity. They were concerned about providing timely news, which they referred to as the “freshest advices,” and although they probably preferred to provide accurate information, colonial newspapers were infamous for printing rumors and speculation. Part of the problem in the days before

⁴ Brent Cunningham, “Re-thinking objectivity” *Columbia Journalism Review* July/August 2003.

electronic communication, of course, was that there was no way to verify most of the information they received. Some printers proclaimed their neutrality on particular issues to avoid offending one side or another in the dispute, but there was no recognized journalistic obligation to be impartial.

During the American Revolution the press became heavily politicized, partly through conviction and partly through pressure.⁵ It was divided into two camps: the larger and generally more aggressive Patriot press and the embattled Loyalist printers. American and British leaders

put great stock in the persuasive reports in the newspapers. Clearly, both Loyalist and Patriot factions saw the printed word as the spark behind any great upsurge of public feeling. Journalists, political leaders, and generals sincerely believed that printed efforts at winning the public heart were necessary-even vital-to their cause. They expected their press to behave accordingly. News reports in the Revolution, therefore, were certainly never meant to contain mere factual coverage or to describe battles and events objectively. Instead, coverage of news was a deliberate, highly valued attempt to paint the two sides in their most persuasive colors. Journalists, for their part, perceived that they could not-and indeed, would not-avoid taking sides.⁶

After the Revolution, as the fledgling political parties developed, most newspapers were initially non-partisan. But around 1800, as the conflict between the Federalists and the Republicans sharpened, political debate in newspapers changed from a “marketplace of disembodied ideas to a battleground for political warriors.”⁷ Editors believed they had a duty to promote the true and right, and to fail to take a stand was simply to fail. Newspapers were not impartial brokers of information, as some expect

⁵ Stephen Botein, “Printers and the American Revolution” in *The Press and the American Revolution* edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester, Mass: American Antiquarians Society, 1980), 11-58. He argues that printers generally opened their press to diverse points of view, but in times of political unrest found it wise to be partisan. For accounts of how specific papers reacted to pressure to become partisan, see James L. Moses, “Journalistic Impartiality on the Eve of the Revolution: the *Boston Evening Post* 1770-1775” *Journalism History* 20 (1994): 125-30 and Ralph J. Randolph, “The End of Impartiality: *South Carolina Gazette* 1763-75,” *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (1972): 702-9, 720.

⁶ Wm. David Sloan and Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press 1690-1783* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 191.

⁷ Jeffrey L. Palsey *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 176.

today, but an integral part of the political system,⁸ not least because many publishers depended financially on the parties for subsidies and government printing contracts. Similarly, after 1800 in major cities a host of Christian newspapers arose whose focus was not on politics but on “the Progress of the Gospel.” These papers, often edited by clergy, were filled with theological essays and accounts of missionaries and church news of various sorts and typically required denominational support to survive.

But in 1846 Congress passed legislation requiring bids be let on printing contracts, thereby depriving editors of considerable support. In 1860 the federal government established its own printing office, ensuring that only economically independent newspapers would survive.

More importantly, in the 1830s the Penny Press introduced a new business model for newspaper journalism. A handful of big city publishers realized that they could make far more money by selling advertising if they managed to build very large audiences than they could by relying mainly on subscription revenue. To attract such large readerships, these journalists turned from essays on politics and religion to crime and accidents and local affairs (as well as coverage of politics). Instead of offering expensive annual subscriptions, these publishers had newsboys hawk their product on the streets for a single penny. Instead of raising the bulk of their revenue by selling content to subscribers, they rented eyeballs to advertisers.

The transformation was gradual. Many papers continued to operate with informal party ties until late in the nineteenth century and for some party loyalty continued into the twentieth. But by the middle of the nineteenth century the pattern had been set; profitability and influence demanded that a newspaper appeal to the largest possible audience. The days of partisan journalism, where editors preached to the political choir and clergy bored their readers with turgid essays, were on their way out.

⁸ Wm. David Sloan, “The Early Party Press: The Newspaper Role in American Politics, 1788-1812” *Journalism History* 9 No. 4 (Spring 1982): 23.

The commitment to party was gradually replaced, in theory, by a dedication to independence. Journalists who wanted to speak to the whole community, and not just certain segments, must promote the public interest and general welfare of the people. Or, at least, they must be perceived as doing so. In exchange for the protection of the First Amendment to publish freely, they would offer news free from any hidden agendas. Editorials and columns could and should contain opinion and promote the writer's ideas and perspectives. The news columns, however, should be free from any suggestion that the reporter's commitment to one side, person, cause, organization or idea would taint his presentation of the facts. Eventually independence hardened into detachment—the idea that there must be no connection between the interests of the journalist and the interests of those he covered. As he covered people in his own community, the journalist, some presumed, should have no emotional or personal interest in the outcome of any given debate. It mattered not whether one side or another won—it should be all the same to him.

Over the nineteenth century, as journalism historian T.Z. Mindich explained, editors began adopting the strategies and concepts that would in the twentieth century coalesce into this notion of “objectivity”: detachment, nonpartisanship, the “inverted pyramid” story structure (lead with a summary of the news, followed by details in descending order of importance), naïve empiricism (a reliance on “facts” to communicate truth) and balance (giving both sides in a debate roughly equal space). At this time “objective,” empirical science was increasingly regarded as the royal road to truth, and this reinforced these ideas among both journalists and the public. By the late 1890s the concept was complete, Mindich argued, when the *New York Times* began striving for “balance.”

The concept may have been complete before 1900, but then it was called “realism,” the belief that if reporters just dug out and arranged the facts the truth would

emerge.⁹ The term “objectivity” was not commonly used nor did the concept become a near-universal ideal until after World War I. Sociologist Michael Schudson proposed that the ideal of objectivity arose at that time in part as a reaction against the radical skepticism current in American society: “It was not the final expression of a belief in facts but the assertion of a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted.”¹⁰ Mindich calls it “remarkable” that years after

consciousness was complicated by Freud, observation was problematized by Einstein, perspective was challenged by Picasso, writing was deconstructed by Derrida, and ‘objectivity’ was abandoned by practically everyone outside newsrooms, ‘objectivity’ is still the style of journalism that our newspaper articles and broadcast reports are written in, or against.¹¹

On the contrary, there is nothing remarkable about it. As Schudson points out, objectivity arose as an ideal because, although it may have been unattainable, journalists needed some way to reassure the public and possibly themselves that journalism could still be trusted. Had there been no epistemological doubt underlying society in the early years of the twentieth century, there would have been much less need for the ideal of objectivity or for the characteristics of news stories that communicated to the reader that the reporter was striving for it—balance, detachment, attribution of sources, use of verifiable facts, and a neutral tone.

Kovach and Rosenstiel also make the point that, in the beginning, journalists understood “objectivity” to be a “scientific” method designed to counter the bias and subjectivity present in every reporter. One of the most important figures in the drive for a scientific approach to objectivity was Walter Lippmann, who wrote: “It does not matter that news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because news is

⁹ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 72-73.

¹⁰ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 122.

¹¹ Mindich, *Just the Facts*, 5.

complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues.”

Meanwhile, journalism was (like many other fields such as medicine and law) becoming increasingly “professionalized” in the first half of the twentieth century. Universities set up journalism schools and journalistic associations (like the American Society of Newspaper Editors) appeared and began to formulate ethics codes, like the ASNE’s 1922 Canons of Journalism. This process locked into place, in a sense, the journalistic standards that were prevalent in this time, and one of the most durable was this new notion of objectivity.

But it wasn’t long before journalists understood objectivity not as a method designed to combat the subjectivity inherent in the human process of reporting and writing news, the way the term had originally been used, but as a characteristic of the reporter himself or the story itself.¹² Beginning in the 1930s, less than two decades after the term appeared, some journalists had already begun to question “objectivity,” deeming it unrealistic.

The shortcomings of this revised approach to objectivity were quickly apparent. The major lesson, hammered home to journalists in the 1950’s in the aftermath of Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s highly visible campaign denouncing alleged Communists, was that mere accuracy is not enough. Some reporters who had dutifully taken down the Senator’s accusations and delivered them straight to the public in an objective fashion—duly attributed to McCarthy, in a neutral tone, with no hint of partisanship—felt that the Senator had simply used them, as indeed he had. One *Washington Post* editor told a 1952 gathering of the Association for Education in Journalism: “There can be little doubt that

¹² Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 73-75. Walter Lippmann’s best-known works, in which he sets out his ideas of objectivity and the role of the press in society, include *Liberty and the News* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995), and *Public Opinion* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1922). For a good discussion on Lippmann’s view of objectivity, see Marion Tuttle Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices: American Press Criticism 1880-1950* (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991), 112-4. Marzolf adds that another factor in the rise of objectivity was concern about the dangers of propaganda in the aftermath of attempts to manipulate public opinion in World War I.

the way [McCarthy's charges] have been reported in most papers serves Senator McCarthy's partisan political purposes much more than it serves the purposes of the press, the interest of truth." And in the 1960's a skepticism of government, fostered in opposition to the Vietnam war among other cultural upheavals of that decade, led increasing numbers of journalists to question whether the "just the facts, ma'am" approach to objectivity could cut through the accelerating spin and ever-more resourceful public relations techniques governments and others were beginning to use. Reporters began to sense a need to explain, to analyze, to interpret, and to put into context what they saw and heard.

That's about where we are today, although attitudes about objectivity among journalists have shifted back and forth occasionally over the last 40 years. Journalists are torn by competing impulses and commercial realities. On one hand those in mainstream news organizations need to be (and, just as importantly, need to appear to be) "unbiased," nonpartisan, fair and reliable sources of information, and so avoid alienating large portions of their audiences. On the other, they desire to explain to the world not just what the facts are, but what the facts mean; to analyze the statements of public figures, such as the President, to see if they are accurate; to present a true picture of the world as the journalists themselves see it. To many, especially those who disagree with reporters' conclusions, such attempts seem extremely subjective and undermine journalistic claims to be "objective."

SORTING THROUGH BIAS

All journalism is "biased" in that all journalism reflects worldview-driven values. Bias is seldom mere partisanship or bigotry (although occasionally it is) and journalists fiercely resent being accused of it. Bias is the result, as I explained above, of the fact that journalists always bring to their task their own backgrounds, perspectives, educations, values, experiences and beliefs, and these necessarily influence their selection,

interpretation and presentation of events. Let's take a slightly more detailed look at how that plays out in the real world of journalism.

Reporters, like everybody else, have foundational beliefs about the nature of reality, God, Man, and the relationship between them—our “worldview.” Out of these foundational beliefs arise values, and reporters make decisions based on these values about what is good or evil, right or wrong, important and newsworthy or trivial.

Journalism is selective; reporters cannot include every fact, idea, opinion, or perspective in a given story. Therefore, guided by their values, they select those things that seem to them most important and most useful to their audiences for understanding the story. They usually exclude information or approaches that seem to them beyond the bounds of reasonable discussion, and they usually exclude perspectives limited to the fringes of their audience.

Consequently, every news story reflects the values of the journalists who produce it. But many stories appear “objective” and “unbiased” because the appearance of bias disappears if there is consensus in a community on those particular values or that particular issue. Everybody (well, almost) agrees murder and racism are evil, for example, so journalists freely portray these things as bad and wrong. They feel no need to “balance” a story about murder with quotes from unrepentant serial killers, or a story about lynching blacks with defensive comments from the Ku Klux Klan. If an accident starts a house fire in which children die, everybody agrees this is a tragedy and reporters cover it as a tragedy. The daily news must include who won the football game or the election—not merely because it's convention (the common understanding of how news should be done), but because everybody agrees those are crucial pieces of information for understanding either event.

But when journalists write about issues on which a community or a society is divided, then charges of bias are more likely to appear from people who feel that their values have not been acknowledged, accounted for, or explained. The less consensus

there is in the audience, the more apparent bias becomes to those who have different values than the journalist. When the *New York Times* runs a sympathetic profile of a lesbian couple's struggles to gain legally-sanctioned "marriage," for example, opponents of gay marriage regard such coverage as an obvious example of that paper's liberal bias in favor of the practice. When WORLD Magazine describes in favorable terms legislative attempts to limit access to abortion, pro-abortionists accuse the magazine of not being "objective." Even though most journalists generally try to take into account a variety of perspectives in most contentious stories, how hard they try varies widely according to how they assess a particular issue and their own publication's written and unwritten practices for such cases.

There is no liberal media conspiracy, but neither should there be serious doubt about the existence of a significant tilt toward the political and cultural Left, particularly among print and television journalists at the largest and most influential news outlets. A 1981 study of the personal beliefs of 240 journalists at "elite" media institutions (network news broadcasts, major newsmagazines and the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*) by Lichter and Rothman found that these journalists were far more secular (86 percent seldom or never attended church) and liberal than the American public on social issues with strong religious implications such as abortion (90 percent approved of abortion on demand) and homosexuality (75 percent had no moral objection to homosexuality).¹³ Other surveys showed that small-town reporters and editors do not skew quite so far left but still typically lean liberal.

The Lichter and Rothman survey is now 30 years old. There is little reason to suspect much has changed at the major networks and newspapers, although the rise of Fox News over the last decade and the reach of conservative talk radio has provided

¹³ S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites" *Public Opinion* (Oct/Nov 1981), 42-44. See also Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter, *The Media Elites: America's New Powerbrokers* (New York: Hastings House, Book Publishers, 1986), 21, 29.

those unhappy with liberal bias with more alternatives. While many major media institutions (and many smaller ones) have made attempts to “diversify” their staffs, in practice this means hiring racial and ethnic minorities and homosexual journalists who share the worldviews and values of their superiors. Some major papers have hired columnists known to be conservative in an effort to provide some balance on the editorial page (in the fall of 2003 the *New York Times* picked up conservative David Brooks, for example) but this enthusiasm for intellectual diversity among columnists does not generally extend to reporters. “The tendency, for many reasons,” observed Kovach and Rosenstiel, “is to create newsrooms that think like the boss.”¹⁴

Many journalists assert that just because a reporter votes Democratic and favors abortion, his news stories are not necessarily slanted. They argue that journalists are professional enough to separate their opinions from their stories so that the news is generally fair and balanced. William “Skip” Hidlay, executive editor of the Asbury Park Press in Neptune, N.J., said in *Editor & Publisher’s* 2004 article on newsroom bias: “I have never asked a reporting or editing candidate their political beliefs. I don't think it's valuable. In my opinion, it is irrelevant because good people keep political leanings out of their stories.”¹⁵ Even *Editor & Publisher*, a venerated defender of traditional newsroom values, was taken aback, in light of the evidence of bias, by the industry’s unanimity on this question:

Although views, of course, vary, what was most surprising in talking to editors was that, after all the controversy, so few acknowledged that a political imbalance exists at their paper or, if it does, that it was anything they were particularly concerned about or acting vigorously to correct. The majority of editors said they did not care about the ideological makeup of their staffs, and they seemed to

¹⁴ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 189. They add, “Ethnic, gender and racial quotas are a means of approaching [intellectual diversity]. But they will accomplish nothing in themselves if the newsroom culture then requires that these people from different backgrounds all adhere to a single mentality.”

¹⁵ Joe Strupp with Shawn Moynihan and Charles Geraci, “The Bias Wars” *Editor & Publisher* July 26, 2004.

sincerely believe that professionalism -- their own, and their reporters' -- regularly overcomes any personal beliefs.

Although bias in the news is admittedly difficult to measure, a handful of scholarly studies have made credible attempts that essentially confirm what conservatives and conservative media analysts, like the Media Research Center,¹⁶ have observed for years, despite the denials of journalists like Hilday. In the Nov. 2005 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Groseclose and Milyo compared how often major media cite particular think tanks and policy advocacy groups with how often members of Congress cited the same groups in speeches. Their conclusion: “Our results show a strong liberal bias.”¹⁷

But it is important to note some qualifications. Not every story in, for example, the *New York Times* leans left; much of what appears in even the reputedly most liberal papers and newscasts is driven by values on which society has reached consensus or with which biblically faithful Christians can agree. The major networks received praise from all sides, for example, for how they handled coverage in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001; there was consensus that the attacks were a serious threat to the nation and the broadcasters treated it as such. When Republican Representative Randy “Duke” Cunningham was caught in the fall of 2005 selling his votes in Congress to lobbyists, coverage was hostile because bribery in this society is universally condemned, but few complained of liberal or anti-Republican press bias in that case.

Also, while reporters at large news outlets generally lean liberal, in opinion journalism the situation is mixed. The majority of columnists at major papers are liberal,

¹⁶ For a wealth of anecdotal evidence, a fair description of the nature of media bias, and a round-up of relevant research on media bias, see the MRC’s website, mediaresearch.org, and particularly the page “Media Bias Basics” (<http://secure.mediaresearch.org/news/MediaBiasBasics.html>).

¹⁷ Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo. “A Measure of Media Bias” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* Nov. 2005 p. 1191ff. These researchers find evidence of liberal bias by comparing the number of times journalists cite particular think tanks and policy groups compared to members of Congress. This article also contains an excellent review of the quantitative, peer-reviewed research literature on bias.

but editorial pages do often include conservative voices and a very few, such as the *Wall Street Journal's*, actually lean right. A handful of shows on Fox News (such as “The O’Reilly Factor”) are generally conservative and conservatives dominate talk radio, led by Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and others. Some of the most widely syndicated and read print columnists, such as Cal Thomas, are also conservative on both political and religious issues. Blogs, even the most widely-read ones, have much smaller audiences than the major media, but there are many of them and they articulate a wide range of perspectives from ultra-conservative to hard-line Communist.

Another important factor is that some of what appears to be bias flows out of the nature of journalism itself, particularly the focus on conflict. Reporters are biased, conceded Cunningham in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, but “not in the oversimplified, left-right way that Ann Coulter and the rest of the bias cops would have everyone believe.” Reporters, he wrote, “are biased toward conflict because it is more interesting than stories without conflict; we are biased toward sticking with the pack because it is safe; we are biased toward event-driven coverage because it is easier; we are biased toward existing narratives because they are safe and easy.” Cunningham is mistaken to imagine that journalists are not generally liberal (worldviews drive how the news is reported and presented, remember) but he is correct that sometimes the stories that draw accusations of bias are as much the result of the meat-grinder of everyday reporting than any conscious or unconscious attempt to slant the news.

Journalists usually see themselves as the means of holding powerful institutions accountable, especially government, while partisans interpret negative coverage as, well, partisan from the other side. For example, some media observers charge that mainstream journalists’ persistent focus on American casualties in the Iraq war while ignoring American soldiers’ reconstruction efforts was obvious liberal, anti-President Bush (and some even charge anti-American) bias of a press corps that is blindly opposing the war. Reporters who write such stories tend to see themselves as informing the public about the

many failures of the Bush administration's conduct and policy. Even Karl Rove, President Bush's top political advisor, told an audience of college students in 2005 that, although the media is generally liberal, "I think it is less liberal than oppositional . . . Reporters now see their role less as discovering facts and fair-mindedly reporting the truth and more as being put on the earth to afflict the comfortable, to be a constant thorn of those in power, whether they are Republican or Democrat."¹⁸

A Christian who is a journalist must understand, then, that all journalism is biased in the sense that all journalism is the product of worldview-driven values. The perception of bias is typically the result of a clash between the values of the journalist and the values of his accuser. It's fair to say that most reporters have mixed motives; personal opinions obviously play into decisions to slant coverage in a positive or negative direction, but there are often journalistic reasons as well that, at least on the surface, make some sense. As a reporter at a secular publication, a Christian needs to present himself and his work as "objective" and avoid the accusation that he is "biased." He must therefore understand both how journalism works, as described above, and the common ways news coverage can be slanted.

In 1994 the Media Research Center published a book by Brent Baker called *How to Identify, Expose and Correct Liberal Media Bias*. It was aimed, obviously, at frustrated conservative news-readers who wanted to challenge unbalanced or unfair coverage, but it provides a concise overview¹⁹ of seven frequently-used ways journalists can tilt news reports, no matter who they are:

¹⁸ Dana Milbank, "Rove's reading: not so liberal as leery" *Washington Post* April 20, 2005, A4.

¹⁹ For an excerpt that includes more detail, see the MRC's website: <http://secure.mediaaresearch.org/news/identifybias.html>

- Bias by Commission: A pattern of passing along assumptions or errors that tend to support a left-wing or liberal view.
- Bias by Omission: Ignoring facts that tend to disprove liberal or left-wing claims, or that support conservative beliefs.
- Bias by Story Selection: A pattern of highlighting news stories that coincide with the agenda of the Left while ignoring stories that coincide with the agenda of the Right.
- Bias by Placement: A pattern of placing news stories so as to downplay information supportive of conservative views.
- Bias by the Selection of Sources: Including more sources in a story who support one view over another. This bias can also be seen when a reporter uses such phrases as "experts believe," "observers say," or "most people think."
- Bias by Spin: Emphasizing aspects of a policy favorable to liberals without noting aspects favorable to conservatives; putting out the liberal interpretation of what an event means while giving little or no time or space to explaining the conservative interpretation.
- Bias by Labeling: Attaching a label to conservatives but not to liberals; using more extreme labeling for conservatives than for liberals; identifying a liberal person or group as an "expert" or as independent.
- Bias by Policy Recommendation or Condemnation: When a reporter goes beyond reporting and endorses the liberal view of which policies should be enacted, or affirms the liberal criticism of current or past policies.

In a secular and liberal-leaning newsroom, of course, colleagues and editors may well be scrutinizing the work of known Christians and conservatives for exactly these same practices, only they will have substituted “liberal” for “conservative.” No problem—remember that a truly biblical approach does not mean distorting the news and the practices Baker describes, above, are clearly intended to distort. You should have no intention of suppressing facts or information that you feel may undermine causes in which you believe, or of emphasizing only those angles you happen to agree with.

The calling of a Christian into journalism is not about helping one side or another win an election or a culture war, even though in a polarized political climate it may feel as if you have no choice but to pick sides. It is about humbly serving society and your audience by seeking, to the best of your ability, to present an accurate picture of the world. Christian journalists generally believe, of course, that a true and accurate picture of the world will probably help push society toward embracing biblical righteousness but, first, there are no guarantees, and second, that is a secondary goal. The first responsibility

of a Christian journalist is to get the truth out there; God will hold people responsible for the decisions they make with that information.

That's all background—now let's take a look at how a Christian can apply all these things to journalism. As we go, we'll consider these concepts both in the context of a Christian working for a Christian news organization and for a Christian working for a secular media outlet.

Principle #1: Seek truth while viewing the world through a biblical lens.

The first requirement of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics is "Seek truth and report it," even though many of its members may doubt this is possible. As a Christian, you can agree fully with both the words and the intent, but you also have the Scriptures to help you sort through what is good and evil, right and wrong, trivial and important.

If you are a Christian working for a Christian publication, such as WORLD, your task is straightforward. Editor-in-chief Olasky has described how to translate a biblical perspective directly into copy in his excellent book, *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism*.²⁰ He emphasizes first that Christian journalists must be committed to the authority of Scripture and some key theological truths, in particular "God saves sinners." Stories and issues come in six categories, he suggested, roughly analogous to how rafters class river rapids; one is easy and six is very hard.

Class 1: *explicit biblical embrace or condemnation*. "Biblical objectivity means showing the evil of homosexuality; balancing such stories by giving equal time to gay activists is ungodly journalism. Similarly, in an article showing the sad consequences of heterosexual adultery there is no need to quote proadultery sources."

²⁰ Marvin Olasky, *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996).

Class two: *clearly implicit biblical position*. Abortion is the classic example. No Scriptures explicitly condemn the practice, but many passages teach the sanctity of human life.

Class three: *partisans of both sides quote Scripture but careful study allows biblical conclusions*. “On poverty-fighting issues,” he writes, “partisans from the left talk of God’s ‘preferential option’ for the poor, but the biblical understanding of justice means giving the poor full legal rights and not treating them as more worthy than the rich by virtue of their class position.”

Class four: *biblical understanding backed by historical experience*. Regarding limited government, I Samuel 8 warns of the dangers of the power of kings but, more importantly, “the historical record over the centuries is clear, and in recent American experience we have particular reason to be suspicious of the person who says, ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help you.’”

Class five: *biblical sense of human nature*. “On class-five issues there is no clear biblical mandate and no clear historical trail, but certain understandings of human nature can be brought to bear.” Olasky cites the human tendency to make war as a good reason to support military preparedness, for example.

Class six: *navigable only by experts, who might themselves be overturned*. Basically, use your best judgment.

“When you take a very strong biblical stand on a class-one or class-two issue, you will be objective,” he writes. “When you take a more balanced position on a class-five or class-six issue by citing the views and approaches of a variety of informed sources, you also are being biblically objective, because we cannot be sure on an issue when the Bible is not clear. Objectivity is faithful reflection of the biblical view, as best we can discern it through God’s Word. When there is no view that we can discern, then we cast about for wisdom where we can find it.” His point, of course, is that when you report on the world the way God sees it, you are being objective.

He calls the process of applying this biblical perspective to journalism “directed reporting.” He writes: “A *directed-reporting* article is factually accurate and based on solid research, but it has a clear point of view and an emphasis on showing rather than telling.”

Keep in mind Olasky’s subtitle: *How to Revitalize Christian Journalism*. This approach is appropriate for a Christian working for a Christian publication. If you work for a secular newspaper or magazine you, as a biblically faithful Christian, should still commit to the authority of Scripture and the foundational theological truths of our faith, but applying worldviews and values to the practice of journalism is no longer quite so direct. You still view the world through a biblical lens and you must reflect reality accurately, for as Isaiah warns in 5:20, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

But in the process of speaking to society you have to work within the bounds of the genre of newswriting. You must also respect the fact that many if not most in your audience, as well as the majority of your colleagues, will probably not share your commitment to the Bible. This brings up the next principle.

Principle #2: Embrace what is good and biblical about the traditional journalistic approach to “objectivity” and accept what is acceptable.

No journalist can be fully objective; only God knows all and only he is completely objective. But journalists adopted objectivity first as a method, not a philosophical ideal. For a Christian many of the methods of associated with “objectivity” are not merely acceptable, they are required. “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” is the ninth commandment, and this demands that a Christian working as a journalist be accurate, that he verify his facts, that he be fair in his portrayals of people, issues and events, and that he not distort reality to advance an agenda, no matter how worthy that cause might be.

The point is to redeem the concept of “objective journalism” by using whatever in the concept is consistent with biblical principles in service to society. In doing this, you serve the Lord. This applies equally to all Christians in journalism, whether they work for WORLD or the *New York Times*.

Other aspects of objectivity are not biblically required but are certainly appropriate for a Christian working for a secular news organization. Regarding “balance” (giving roughly equal space, time or emphasis to both or “all” sides of a controversy), for example, believers should have no trouble reporting and writing about the variety of perspectives on any given issue.

All reporters categorize stories in a fashion similar to Olasky’s six classes of rapids because all news decisions are, at some level, driven by worldviews and values. The difference is that where a journalist working for WORLD uses the Bible as the authoritative standard for separating right from wrong and important from trivial, a journalist in the secular arena uses his own judgment, of course, but he also must respect societal consensus. Where there is consensus on an issue, journalists need not be balanced; the less consensus there is, the more balance is appropriate. Society has come to a consensus that racism is wrong, as I mentioned above, so journalists need not “balance” race-related stories with quotes from the Ku Klux Klan. Gay marriage is hotly contested (for now, anyway), so news stories aimed at the broadest possible audience dealing with this issue should generally reflect the range of positions.

Sometimes the biblical standard and the societal consensus on an issue will agree and sometimes they will not. Some Christian journalism students presume that, when biblical standards conflict with those of society or their colleagues, they must make news decisions based on the biblical standard, not the societal standard. They believe, for example, that they cannot in good conscience quote a spokesman for a pro-abortion organization because that would be promoting evil.

This attitude is mistaken, for four reasons. First, it is a public service to report on the positions, strategies and intentions of major organizations or individuals who have a major impact on society. Society needs to know exactly what Planned Parenthood thinks about abortion-related policy or legislation—both what their representatives say publicly and what the organization’s practices are in reality. Christian journalists should never be afraid of the truth or reporting it, and they should scrutinize the assertions of organizations they personally support as thoroughly as those with whom they disagree—perhaps even more so.

Second, one of the great strengths of Western society is its commitment to the free expression and exchange of ideas in the search for Truth. Communities set their own boundaries of discussion and the boundaries in American society are very broad. Christians in journalism should contribute to furthering discussion—even giving space to clearly unbiblical ideas—because they recognize that society is not the Church. If you cannot stand the thought of quoting a pro-homosexual spokesman, you are not well-suited to engaging ideas in the public square in Christian publications or anywhere else. Even WORLD, which sees no need to quote favorably anti-Christian organizations, makes a strong effort to find out and report accurately what those organizations think and do, and why.

Third, a journalist working for a mainstream newspaper or broadcaster is agreeing to work within the standards of his employer and serve that organization as faithfully as possible. This does not mean the standards are set in stone for all eternity or that they can never be challenged; it does mean that if you want to play in the game (and take the paycheck), you have to respect the rules of engagement. One of those rules is accurately reflecting the range of significant perspectives on a given issue. It is your responsibility to help your employer reach the broadest possible audience; if you want your work to have the greatest possible impact, you do as well. Deliberately restricting the range of perspectives limits your publication’s reach. That’s fine if your publication targets

Christians, conservatives, liberals, dog lovers, sports nuts, or some other segment of society. If you aspire to speak to your whole city, or state or nation, however, you must reflect the range of reasonable views.

Finally, respecting the balance standard will provide you with an opportunity to report biblical perspectives that your publication might not otherwise include. A believing journalist can make the case that Christians likely will be well-represented among almost any given mainstream audience (around 40 percent of Americans call themselves “evangelical”) and their concerns and perspectives should not be shut out of the public discussion. A Christian in journalism should not approach his job merely as a chance to sneak Bible verses and pro-life arguments into news stories; on the other hand, a thoughtful, biblical approach to issues should provide useful perspectives and insights that go beyond the conventional wisdom and greatly benefit society.

Just as “balance” is not biblically required of a Christian journalist but may be acceptable practice, a Christian can cheerfully agree to use a neutral tone, standard journalistic attribution of sources, and the inverted pyramid story structure. As explained above, there are good historical reasons for the rise of many of these practices and you should recognize their value.

Principle #3: Seek to understand the worldviews and values of everyone involved in a story—those of your sources, your audience, your editors/fellow journalists, and you.

Reporters tend to focus on events, issues, personalities and arguments, the here-and-now considerations that are easily captured by sound bites and some quick analysis. As a result, they often make news decisions based on their own worldviews and values without ever consciously considering what those values are or how those relate to audiences or sources or the story itself.

But the journalist who determines to figure out the values and worldviews that drive people and events has a major advantage over his competitors. Reporters can generally figure out what happened, and most will ask why it happened. Few, however,

go beyond to ask, “What does this person believe that would cause them to act in this fashion? What, deep down, does this person think is important? How does he or she see the world?” The fact that you, as a Christian, (hopefully) have some exposure to theological and philosophical questions should help you identify when such questions are relevant to your story. Asking these questions helps explain why people do things, allows you to come to a deeper understanding of the issue and the event, and ultimately helps you to produce stories that are more accurate, fair and (if necessary) balanced. You need not inquire about the investigating officer’s beliefs regarding God and sin when you write up a traffic accident, but those questions might prove very enlightening when interviewing a murderer. A politician’s view of human nature (naturally good or born sinful?) will help explain the welfare reform legislation he is proposing.

Understanding the range of worldviews and values in audiences helps journalists understand when they should be more balanced, or less balanced, and helps journalists avoid unnecessarily annoying audiences by not respecting widely-held perspectives. More importantly, it helps journalists communicate effectively, even if sometimes that means offending readers. A friend of mine named Brad is a dedicated Christian and the former city editor of a small Virginia daily. When Vermont legalized civil unions for homosexual couples a few years ago, he ran on the front page a large Associated Press photo of two well-dressed men kissing at their city hall ceremony, along with the AP story. He knew that readers in the generally conservative community, he told me later, would be appalled by the photo and they were. Readers complained bitterly. However, he felt readers should know what was happening in another state on an important issue. The photo communicated things that the story alone simply could not, and so readers recognized much more clearly the clash between their own values and the direction of public policy, even though the photo and the story below it were models of journalistic “objectivity.”

Finally, you need to understand the worldviews of your colleagues. This is more than simply fitting in. To be effective in the newsroom you need to earn their trust and respect, and they will not give it if you fail to respect them when dealing with controversial issues. A biblical worldview means that you should disagree with unbelieving colleagues on many important issues—that's fine. Know when you need balance and when you can appeal to the concept to argue for a more complete perspective on events. If you insist on pushing only a biblical point of view and excluding others, you may well offend your editor, who will then regard it as his duty to kill your story to prevent it from offending readers or viewers. However, if in your story you acknowledge perspectives that you know your editor considers important, he should be much more willing to allow you to include views that you feel are important.

This is no guarantee. You may encounter colleagues who profess balance and objectivity and professionalism but, in practice, are openly or secretly hostile to biblical perspectives. Discussing the issue in frank but civil terms may help. Appeal to the standard of balance, if appropriate. If the violation of professional standards is flagrant, you may want to take the issue higher up the chain of newsroom authority. Eventually, if you continue to push the issue, it may cost you your job. Be prepared. On the other hand, not every battle is over ground worth dying for; sometimes it may be appropriate to withdraw graciously, at least until next time.

Principle #4: Be fiercely independent.

Independence is especially necessary for Christian publications, and particularly when dealing with large, influential Christian organizations. Some, particularly those on the front lines of political and cultural battles, see Christian newspapers and magazines as designated public relations tools and Christian journalists working for secular media as infiltrators they can count on. The primary function of a Christian in journalism, they presume (although few would say so in so many words), is to balance out the liberal bias of the mainstream press and give positive coverage to their efforts. Sometimes these

groups resent attempts to hold them publicly accountable for failures or mistakes—even questions to find out whether they may have made mistakes—and they will be genuinely baffled when you decline to pursue stories about their many good works. They may accuse you of being divisive or undermining the cause of Christ, and some will encourage their followers to complain directly to you or cancel subscriptions over your un-Christian behavior.

Some of these organizations don't understand that journalism is a calling and that your primary responsibility is to your readers and to God, not to their particular political or cultural battle or preserving their positive public image. This does not mean that you should never take these factors into account. Sometimes you may not publish a negative story about a Christian candidate because, even though it may be true that he smoked pot once in college, running it the day before the election would unjustly hamstring his campaign. Be prepared to make hard decisions.

Principle #5: Be humble.

Hard decisions are common in journalism. Only God is fully objective in every sense of the word—recognize that you are fallen and, particularly on issues on which the Bible provides no clear guidance, you may be wrong. Someone with true humility recognizes that he is serving God by serving society and so resists the tendency to rely on his own wisdom. As emphasized above, true humility in journalism requires that we submit ourselves to the teachings of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

All of this is easier to say than to do, particularly in a working environment that does not recognize the authority of Scripture. But be encouraged. If God is calling you to work in journalism, whether for Christian or secular publications, He will provide the means and the opportunity to honor Him in what you do.

One final note: Journalists are notorious for sinking into cynicism. After years of covering corrupt or inept politicians, sleazy businessmen, and decadent athletes for a seemingly indifferent public, some reporters wonder why they bothered. Life, as seen through the news media, seems but “a walking shadow, a poor player.” A news story is here today and then “heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.”

But a Christian reporter who understands that life does have meaning is no idiot. Humans, made in the image of God, have eternal significance. It is our privilege and honor to tell accurately the stories of human accomplishment and failure. To help audiences understand the world God has made and our place in it is a deeply Christian thing to do.

Consider the Gospels. They are theological but also journalistic accounts of the most important event in human history; their purpose is to help readers see what God has done in the world so that men might properly understand their relationship to God and others. Journalism, of course, seldom rises to the level of history, let alone Scripture, but in helping people see the world more clearly you are contributing to the same effort; you are helping them become the people God intends for them to be.

Seen in that light, journalism does matter, very much. You have an opportunity to participate in God’s purposes for this world. So grab your pen, your pad, and your camera. The stories are waiting.