



Marvin Olasky

**REFORMING
JOURNALISM**

Foreword by
Lynn Vincent

“With hundreds of examples from the United States and China, Marvin Olasky shows how a new world of twenty-first-century journalism is arising from Christian journalists practicing what he calls *biblical objectivity*. Included as a bonus is June Cheng’s terrific short survey of Chinese journalism.”

—**Tony Carnes**, Editor and publisher, *A Journey through NYC Religions*

“Marvin Olasky is a man of many talents, like Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was an outstanding pastor, author, philosopher, missionary, and college president. Olasky has already written a groundbreaking history of modern journalism, exploring angles missed by other historians. He’s the editor of *World* magazine. He rediscovered the historical roots of Christian ministry to the poor in *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. He’s the historian of the pro-life movement. He also is like Mickey Mantle and other switch hitters in baseball. He can write for popular or academic audiences. In this new book he draws on all these skills and experiences to show a way forward for news coverage with wisdom and understanding to readers. His timing is good. Old media companies are running out of money. New media ventures are struggling. His proposed recovery is needed now more than ever.”

—**Russ Pulliam**, Columnist, *The Indianapolis Star*; director, Pulliam Fellowship; member, WORLD News Group board of directors

“The mainstream media have suffered a catastrophic loss of credibility and revenue in recent years. But disruption brings opportunity to build new and influential media organizations, and no one is better able to help Christians make sense of our confused media environment or train young believers to tell true stories than Marvin Olasky. *Reforming Journalism* offers both thoughtful analysis and page-turning readability. Olasky provides a wise mix of practical advice for reporting and writing, historical background, and biblical worldview training. I have seen these principles profoundly influence my students, and they shape all we do at *World*. Our culture desperately needs true stories, so if you want to understand why the news media are

collapsing and how to tell stories that help people see the world clearly, buy this book.”

—**Les Sillars**, Professor of Journalism, Patrick Henry College;
staff member since 1999, *World* magazine

“Marvin Olasky makes a compelling case for a journalism that tells the truth by embracing the principle of absolute truth and pursuing a clear-eyed view of human nature. Provocative, deeply researched, and engagingly written, Olasky’s book is both a master class in how-to journalism and a road map to a more accurate media guided by biblical principles. Every journalist should read this. And every Christian journalist should see it as a clarion call to be the moral conscience of a wider culture.”

—**Wayne Slater**, Former senior political writer, *The Dallas Morning News*; co-author, *Bush’s Brain*

**REFORMING
JOURNALISM**

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REFORMING JOURNALISM

Marvin Olasky



P U B L I S H I N G

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For courageous Chinese Christian journalists,
and for my grandchildren.
I hope they will also be bold for Christ

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Foreword

I WAS WORKING as a reporter for Marvin Olasky when a Baptist preacher threatened to cut off my hands.

That Saturday, I had interviewed the pastor about allegations that he had sexually abused women who came to him for counseling. I cited witnesses and court documents, but the pastor denied it all. The following morning, I sat in on his Sunday sermon. His subject was spiritual warfare, and he had titled his message “Let’s Pick a Fight.” With the gathering momentum of a locomotive, amid a congregational soundtrack of hallelujahs and amens, the preacher was thundering about principalities and powers and demonic attacks when he slipped in his threat.

“Anybody wanna write something bad about me?” he cried. “They got children? They got a family? Anybody wanna write something bad about me? They must not like having hands!”

“Amen!” the congregation said.

The pastor then let it be known that he had posted several men around the sanctuary, all of whom were carrying guns. When a preacher starts talking guns and dismemberment, it’s a good bet that you’re getting too close to the truth.

Telling the truth has been Marvin Olasky’s professional calling for the twenty years I’ve known him as editor, wise mentor, and friend. Yet he has not, as is the habit of some Christian editors, shied away

from ugly stories like the one above, stories that would seem to cast the Christian church in a negative light. Marvin taught me that telling the truth as Christian journalists means hard-nosed reporting, not producing thumb-sucking PR for God.

What does that mean? How should Christian writers approach journalism in a fundamentally different way from our secular colleagues? Marvin advocates *biblical objectivity*, a view of people, places, and events as seen through a biblical lens. It does not pretend omniscience, but shows that some things are right, others are wrong, and Scripture is the measure we use to determine which is which. Mainstream reporters also make judgments—they just use different scriptures. Some have faith in scientism, others secular humanism. Still others surf the zeitgeist, buffeted along in the cultural winds. The problem they all face is that those “truth” paradigms change as reliably as weather.

An example: When Marvin released in 1996 a previous book about journalism, *Telling the Truth*, an overwhelmingly bipartisan majority of Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which recognized marriage as an institution reserved to one man and one woman. Gender dysphoria was a known pathology, but women were generally understood to possess twin chromosomes—XX—while men were understood to have the DNA imprint XY. Abortion had been legal for more than two decades, but based on advances in ultrasound technology, a growing number of people had become pro-life, and overall abortion numbers were in decline.

That was just over twenty years ago, barely a generation. Today, people who hold a traditional view of marriage are fired, sued, decried as bigots, and barred from government contracting—with their businesses and reputations destroyed. Biologically determined sex now gives way to gender, a construct of the mind. And abortion? New York state legislators literally danced in the aisles after legalizing abortion through all nine months of pregnancy, shrinking the margin between life and death for a full-term infant to the length of a birth canal.

It is into this churning river of changing “truth” that Marvin has heaved the immovable rock called Scripture. His concept of biblical objectivity acknowledges that in order for truth to be true a priori, it

cannot, by definition, change. Biblical objectivity acknowledges that God has established a moral universe with unchanging principles, and that by those lights we must report if we and our readers are to apprehend and understand the world.

I was introduced to biblical objectivity in 1998 when I became a reporter for *World* magazine, where Marvin is still editor-in-chief. From him, I learned much that you will find in this book: the big picture on news-gathering, the rewarding grind of street-level reporting, the virtues of specific detail over bland generalities, the balancing of tough-minded analysis and compassion.

I learned that God is not surprised by the failings of either believers or unbelievers, and is in fact glorified when we drag evil and injustice into the light—even when doing so offends readers. And I learned that biblically directed reporting is not the application of dogma to interpreting world events. Rather, it is a way of contextualizing events according to a moral framework that has served humanity well for millennia, forming the foundation of Western law and government, which have produced the most good for the most people in the history of the world.

Contrast that with the shape-shifting moral framework now fashionable in newsrooms. Everywhere that we see progressives unraveling biblical principles such as hard work, self-sufficiency, the role of fathers, the value of traditional marriage, the sanctity of human life, and the rule of law, we see alarming pathologies tearing the fabric of American culture. Rising rates of poverty, divorce, sexual abuse, addiction, incarceration, and suicide have occurred in lockstep with the rise of progressivism and the American abandonment of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Critics will object: How dare Marvin Olasky suggest that journalists heed a dusty, outmoded book when gathering and analyzing the news? How dare he conflate reporting with *religion*? What is he, some kind of bumpkin?

Actually, he's a revolutionary. And his views, once establishment, are now courageously countercultural.

A capital-C, card-carrying Communist in the early 1970s, Marvin was once steeped in the very worldview that governs today's

mainstream reporting. In this view, journalists should frame people and events in terms of political and class warfare. Marvin did that as a *Boston Globe* correspondent, but in 1974 Marvin was reading the New Testament in Russian—he had studied that language to improve his communication with Soviet big brothers—when the words of Christ ripped the veil off his eyes.

For that, I am grateful. Had God not intervened, I, too, might have fallen under the spell of what I'll call today's *zeitgeist objectivity*, in which editors designate victims according to the whims of culture, and reporters crusade against the evil du jour.

The hard truth is that there will always be evil until Christ returns—not because of an oppressive bourgeoisie, but because of the fallen nature of man. And as Marvin observes, journalists are not saviors. We are only watchmen on the wall. As such, we would do well to examine in these pages his well-reasoned framework for discerning truth—a framework that has stood the test of time.

Lynn Vincent
June 2019
San Diego, California

Acknowledgments

This book exists through grace times three.

First comes the grace of Christ. He turned around my life, and—the Heidelberg Catechism says it better than I could— “with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins. He delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head.”

Second is the grace of my wife, Susan. Some novelists turn marital misery into pressure-filled plots, but nonfiction writing comes easiest in a nonfriction household. That's one of the benefits Susan has provided during forty-three years of marriage. Her love shows me how to live.

Third is the grace of my mentor, Joel Belz. He founded *World* and altered my career by inviting me onto the *World* board thirty years ago, and then into the *World* editorship. His Christlike combination of fortitude and gentleness continues to inform, educate, and inspire me.

I am also indebted to all the Worldlings who have put up with me for so long. I've made it hard for our advertising, marketing, and fundraising folks by insisting on a wall of separation between our editorial and business sides: Given financial pressures, that's increasingly rare in journalism. I've made it hard on our reporters by aggressively editing their stories at times.

Particular thanks to Nick Eicher, Mindy Belz, and Tim Lamer, fellow editors since the twentieth century, and to CEO Kevin Martin,

who has repeatedly protected my blind side. I've learned from the hundreds of World Journalism Institute mid-career and college students who have studied in my living room and in Asheville, New York City, Iowa, and Shanghai classrooms.

Finally, I appreciate the work of John Hughes and others at P&R who regularly publish good books and are a bit like the Holy Spirit, that shy member of the Trinity. Authors, like reporters, enjoy spotlights only because of off-stage labors. Thank you.

Introduction

IN 1987 AND 1994, I wrote *Prodigal Press* and *Telling the Truth*, two mostly theoretical books about journalism. Since then, I've spent more time doing journalism as chief editor of *World*, a biweekly American news magazine from a Christian perspective. I've had the pleasure of seeing theory turn into successful practice.

Reforming Journalism incorporates material from *Telling the Truth* and from my editing experience over the years. It consists of three parts with ten chapters each and includes stories about China, plus an appendix by *World's* China bureau chief on the history and current challenges of Chinese journalism. That's because the courage of Chinese Christian journalists impresses me, so I've written this book in a way that I hope will be helpful in both America and China. Christians have translated it into Chinese and are passing it around.

Part 1 of *Reforming Journalism* is about foundational principles, such as biblical objectivity, directed reporting, biblical sensationalism, storytelling, and staying low on the ladder of abstraction by practicing street-level rather than suite-level journalism. It also discusses how reporters should act in countries where Christians are a minority, explains why journalists should not think and act like either the younger or the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, and proposes humble sowing.

Part 2 offers how-tos and why-tos: how to conduct interviews and write profiles; how and why to investigate Christian groups and

government bodies; how to structure chronological, circular, linear, parallel, and multigrain stories; and how to construct leads, nut grafs, and endings. It also includes tips for better writing, careful word use, and responding to complaints. While American and Chinese cultures are vastly different, the fundamentals of asking questions and telling stories are universal.

Part 3, largely on the history of American journalism, exists because of a surprise. I thought Chinese Christian journalists would not be interested in doings from a long time ago on the other side of the world from them. I was wrong; they now face some of the same issues regarding government control that subjects of the British Empire faced centuries ago. They want to understand how Americans gained press liberty, how they might gain it as well, and how they might avoid some of the trends that now threaten American journalism.

Guess whether the following regulations emanated from British colonial authorities three hundred years ago or from current Beijing authorities:

No one may establish an entity whose primary purpose is to transmit news information and engage in other news publishing activities without permission from the press and publication administration agency. The nation implements a licensing system for the printing industry. Units or individuals may not engage in printing activities unless they have obtained a Printer Operating License. . . . Enterprises engaging in publication printing activities may not print publications that the government has ordered censored.

News activities shall conform to national regulations and policies, and shall make social benefit their priority. Non-news publishing organs may not engage in news activities without permission from the State agency administering news and publishing. . . . Rumormongering or defamation or other means to incite subversion of the national regime or the overthrow of the socialist system shall be punished. . . .

The reference to “socialist system” gives away the answer, of course, but those statements show why it’s worthwhile for Chinese

Christians to learn a little about Western journalism. In the sixteenth century, Britain's structure of government was in some ways similar to China's today. The state, with its official church, was at the center. It gave orders to other social institutions, as do China's government and its Communist Party today.

Protestant Reformation leaders, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, though, did not equate the kingdom of God with state interests. They believed that God reigns everywhere, and that people can serve God directly in every area of life—government, journalism, education, business, wherever. They placed God's laws above those of the state or any other institution.

Reformers did not advocate extremist intransigence or overturning of governmental authority. Scotland's John Knox, for instance, appealed for moderation and compromise whenever truly fundamental issues were not at stake. Reformers read and believed what the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome long ago: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1).

But an emphasis on God's sovereignty also gave journalists an independent authority. They had printing presses and the talent to write because God had given them those material and intellectual advantages. They had a calling to tell the truth and apply biblical principles when officials tried to shackle them. They had the life of Christ to imitate, the Bible to read, and the hope that more and more people would stand firm against religious and governmental tyranny.

Gaining freedom of religion and freedom of the press was not easy. Part 3 describes the last minutes in this life of Pastor John Hooper, tied to a stake and praying. Executioners lit a fire under him, but the green wood was slow to burn. An official handed Hooper a box and told him it contained his pardon—if only he would give in. "Away with it!" Hooper cried. As the fire reached Hooper's legs a gust of wind blew it out. A second fire then slowly burned up Hooper's legs, as he said repeatedly, "Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Fear of the flames pushed Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury, to write a recantation and apology in return for a pardon,

only to hear that he would have to burn anyway. Cranmer then resolved to go out boldly. He declared in one final statement that his recantation was “written with my hand contrary to the truth. . . . Therefore my hand shall first be punished; for when I come to the fire, it shall be first burned.” Cranmer made good on that promise. Sent to the stake, he placed his right hand firmly in the fire crawling up his legs and held it steadily there until it appeared like a coal to observers.

The last words of another Protestant, Hugh Latimer, were, “We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” Other protesters also left brave legacies. When John Stubbes wrote a pamphlet in 1579 criticizing Queen Elizabeth, officials cut off his right hand. A contemporary account described his amazing response: “John Stubbes, so soon as his right hand was off, put off his hat with the left, and cried aloud, ‘God save the Queen.’” Stubbes, under such duress, set the pattern of respecting those in authority over us, while exposing their unbiblical actions.

For two centuries, the battle went on in England and then America. The breakthrough did not come until 1735, after editor John Peter Zenger, in jail for exposing the corruption of New York royal governor William Cosby, faced a trail for seditious libel. Zenger said he was following the Bible by telling the truth. Judges in red robes and white wigs were ready to convict him, but the jury included Christians who risked imprisonment themselves by declaring Zenger not guilty. Cosby, not wanting to have a revolt on his hands, let Zenger go free, with cheers resounding in his ears.

There’s more about this in part 3—and more in China’s future, by God’s grace. But first, let’s discuss the basic principles that should underlie Christian journalism.

PART 1

JOURNALISTIC FOUNDATIONS

I

Two Countries, One Hope

THE TWO COUNTRIES with the largest Christian populations are the United States and China. They are also the two countries that can work together for a peaceful world or plunge us into World War III several decades from now. In both countries, journalism has become part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

In the United States, a Pew Foundation survey found eight out of ten Americans believe journalists are not independent and are “often influenced by powerful people and organizations.” Seven out of ten say “stories are often inaccurate” and journalists “try to cover up their mistakes.” Six out of ten say journalists “don’t care about the people they report on.” Other surveys show nine out of ten Americans distrust reporters.

China has not had similar polling on attitudes toward journalists, but it seems Central Television reporter/producer Wang Qinglei spoke for many in December 2013, when he resigned, saying journalists had become “manipulated clowns” and had lost “credibility and influence.” Chinese reporters have a partial excuse: if they do not satisfy officials, prison terms await them. American reporters very rarely go to jail, but if they don’t satisfy those with political power, unemployment might be around the corner.

How did we get to this point? The United States and China have very different journalistic traditions, but in both countries reporters

often do public relations for those who say they are fighting oppression, but in practice oppress those without political power. The deeper question is why. Certainly, individual journalists seek influence, but what are the justifications for doing so?

Materialist journalists in both the United States and China have no belief in absolute truth. They believe man is mammal or machine, but certainly not made in God's image. The logical end of such thinking in the United States is the belief that (within minimal legal structures) we should be free to do whatever we feel like doing at the moment—whether or not that creates long-term happiness for us or misery for others. The logical end of such thinking within communism is that all truth is class truth, and we should obey the vanguard of the working class to achieve economic progress and social cohesion.

Most reporters do not argue for those propositions; they assume them. That's the nature of a worldview: we wear glasses with lenses that help us to see in particular ways that then seem natural and even unquestionable. Academics use the word *metanarrative* to describe these big understandings that form the basis for framing individual stories. I've called them macro-stories, since they provide a grounding for smaller stories.

We'll look first at the United States. Through most of the eighteenth century, newspapers in America—then ruled by the king of England—usually printed the macro-story I've called "the official story." The job of a journalist was to trust the king and his royal governors, print what officials wanted printed, and not print anything that would hurt the officials' reputation. The big idea was that if people lose confidence in officials, anarchy will result and everyone will be hurt.

Late in the century, most of the founders of the new United States and most of the editors were Christians. They believed the Bible's teaching about creation, fall, and redemption. They understood from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans that all people "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." They also knew Christ redeems many and allows us to live better lives and build a better society.

American journalists favored a system of checks and balances. They did not like monarchy, because it could lead to tyranny. They

did not like aristocracy, because it could result in feudalism. They also didn't want democracy by itself, because it could lead to "mobocracy," rule by crowd psychology and the passions of the moment. They criticized those who would make idols out of any person or institution.

American political leaders and journalists created a mixed government, featuring a separation of powers. They made the president an executive with only a four-year term. They created a Senate they hoped would be an aristocracy of experience and wisdom. They created the House of Representatives as the voice of democracy. They foresaw a time when the executive and the legislative branches might join forces to expand their own power, at the expense of liberty, so they created a Supreme Court that would prevent or at least curtail such power grabbing.

Political leaders also supported one more check on corruption: journalism. As Thomas Jefferson, author of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776, said a decade later, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Journalists were the last line of defense against tyranny.

During much of the nineteenth century, many American journalists proceeded boldly because they embraced the Bible's news story of God saving sinners through Christ's sacrifice. They saw themselves as representatives of the people generally. They gained their education at street level, rather than in classrooms or at suite level. They listened skeptically to the words of the powerful and often produced stories about corruption, based on their understanding of universal sin affecting the ruled and rulers alike.

In twentieth-century America, though, more journalists started to disbelieve in the good news of Christ redeeming us. They saw man as naturally good, not corrupt. They asked: if we're good, what makes us bad? Many started writing about "oppression." The villains were external influences, such as corporations or churches or schools or guns or meat or something. Within the oppression macro-story, liberal and radical heroes led the way in overturning barriers, such as tradition or property or bourgeois consciousness. They fought "reactionaries" who

opposed change. They idolized “progressive” elements and demonized others.

In the twenty-first century, a strange phenomenon has emerged: the official and oppression stories have merged. The original impetus for O&O (official and oppression) late in the twentieth century was the civil rights movement, in which the federal government (prodded by journalists) overturned centuries of oppression and helped to bring about equal rights for African-Americans. That was good, but many journalists went from that triumph to seeing officials such as President Barack Obama as the great helmsmen who would create a radically new and wonderful America.

O&O journalists praised officials who fought a war on poverty by giving people money, whether they worked or not. They praised officials who expanded secular and often atheistic schools and colleges. They praised officials who promoted abortion. O&O journalists attacked those who got in the way of “progress.” They placed most Christians in that category.

Many American journalists are now “establishment revolutionaries”—enjoying affluence, but feeling radical as they criticize American traditions. Some others, including those at *World*, challenge them, but Christian journalists are very much a minority.

That’s certainly the case in China as well. China’s journalistic history is much longer than America’s. China had news written on bones or rocks more than two thousand years ago. Chinese reporters recorded King Xuan’s death in 782 B.C. and the political successes of Qin Shi Huang in 219 B.C.

The earliest newspaper in world history, the *Kaiyuan Gazette*, appeared in China between A.D. 713 and 742. Others, during the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279), also presented good news from the imperial standpoint: nothing about mutinies and peasant uprisings. Floods, droughts, and locust plagues also went unreported because these signs of heaven’s disappointment could weaken the emperor.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), every Chinese province had a provincial courier officer whose task was to transmit military news and distribute imperial gazettes and notices that contained

edicts, news of appointments, imperial examination results, punishments and imprisonments, and attempts to fight corruption—such as the “Ban on Acceptance of Advantages,” the “Ban on Fixed Rice Price,” and the “Ban on Revenge.”

Freedom of the press? No. Penalties were severe for “giving inappropriate comments on current affairs, writing misleading books, spreading fallacies,” and passing along any information the emperor deemed secret. The emperor’s office could publish notices on big sheets of yellow paper, but all others had to use a lesser size of white paper. Peasants who rebelled could not afford to produce newspapers, but they reported war news and political declarations on wooden boards and pieces of bamboo.

During China’s last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), a literary inquisition sometimes sentenced to death those who referred negatively to rulers. Toward the end of that era, Christian journalism appeared in China. British Protestant missionary Robert Morrison started China’s first modern periodical, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine*, in 1815. Articles on Christianity made up about 85 percent of the magazine, with the rest covering technology, history, poetry, and current events. Although the publication lasted only six years, other missionaries also started Chinese-language magazines and newspapers, which slowly shifted toward a stronger focus on news.

The most influential Christian publication was *A Review of the Times*, by American missionary Young John Allen. It ran from 1868 to 1907 and sold up to fifty thousand copies each week. With a focus on Western ideas of economics, politics, international relations, and religious freedom, the publication had a big impact on leading reformers in the late Qing dynasty. Missionaries also contributed to printing press technologies, and after the Chinese empire fell in 1911, more Chinese started their own publications.

Early in the twentieth century, though, Vladimir Lenin wrote vigorous critiques of capitalist publications. He believed under capitalism only the wealthy could publish newspapers, and they would report and analyze the news in ways that furthered their class interests. Along with other Marxists, he said the economic base of a society determines its superstructure, including its social, political, and

religious understandings. He saw mass media as devoted to disseminating bourgeois worldviews and defusing alternative understandings.

Lenin hoped to overthrow bourgeois press freedoms and in so doing kill capitalism's key ideological weapon. When the Communist Party (CP) succeeded in leading a revolution, it would make sure mass media disseminate only proletarian worldviews. The autocrats whom Lenin fought and defeated in Russia had not allowed press freedom. He thought it foolhardy for victorious Communists to allow opposition publications that would threaten revolutionary gains.

China followed Lenin's prescriptions. In 1981, China's CP, in its "Current Propaganda Regulations for Print and Broadcast Media," declared "professionals in publishing, news, radio and television must uphold the spirit of the Communist Party." Deng Xiaoping said, "Party newspapers and periodicals must be sure to publicize the opinions of the Party." President Xi Jinping says reporters should be "disseminators of the Party's policies and propositions, recorders of the time, promoters of social advancement and watchers of equality and justice."

Xi has called the management of journalism "crucial for the Party's path, the implementation of Party theories and policies, the development of various Party and state causes, the unity of the Party, the country and people of all ethnic groups, as well as the future and fate of the Party and the country." Christians favor social advancement and the furthering of equality before God, but also seek press freedom.

Over the centuries, many Christians have fought slavery, ethnic discrimination, and the oppression of women. Many have promoted literacy and social advance, particularly for the poor. Christians have also been loyal citizens under all kinds of political systems. We do not make politics our god, and we follow the prophet Jeremiah's instructions to pray for the peace of the cities in which God has placed us.

American Christians a century ago popularized "The Journalist's Creed," written by Walter Williams, dean from 1908 to 1931 of the first journalism school in the United States and probably the world, at the University of Missouri. Williams in 1921 lectured in Beijing and Shanghai, and created a department of journalism at China's

Yenching University in 1928. His creed emphasized placing the public good above private satisfaction, and noted that “the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public.” Williams called for reporting that “fears God and honors man . . . self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers.”

All Chinese journalists are now supposed to pass a multiple-choice test that includes questions like this one: “What is the most important difference between our news ethics and that of Western developed countries?” The correct answer: “The most basic principle of our news ethics is wholeheartedly serve the people; the most basic principle of news ethics of Western developed countries is freedom of the press.” Williams would have embraced both principles, in the belief that freedom of the press, understood not as personal glorification but as a search for truth, does serve the people.

Americans sometimes lecture Chinese about press freedom, but we are really in no position to do so. Journalism in both countries falls short of the Christian ideal.

Sadly, in the United States at least, so do many evangelical publications. Many are content to print public relations releases. Too often they fall from a proper seriousness of purpose into solemnity, so readers who page through them do so out of duty rather than pleasure—and many who want hard-hitting news do not bother to read Christian publications.

The rarity of strong Christian journalism represents both a crisis of entrepreneurship and a faltering of applied faith. Many aspiring Christian journalists know the Bible, but do not know how to apply biblical wisdom to problems of writing and editing. Many editors fill their pages with warmed-over sermons, rather than realistic reporting. Some that do speak up often communicate in a tone so screeching as to be useless in building coalitions.

Is the struggle for strong Christian journalism worth it? I still remember a conference held at Wheaton College thirty years ago, in part because the scheduling of concurrent sessions bothered me. The great theologian J. I. Packer was scheduled to speak in one room. Conference organizers placed me in the next room. I knew Packer’s

words would be more valuable than mine. I wondered whether attendees would—or should—come to a session on ephemeral journalism, when they could hear a fine lecture on eternal verities.

Providentially, I was staying in a dorm room that shared a bathroom with another dorm room. As I brushed my teeth, who should come in to brush his teeth but Packer himself! He kindly showed God's grace. When I apologetically stammered that I was, in comparison to him, talking trivia, he said in his resonant British accent,

Nonsense. Think of what revitalizing journalism would do for the cause of Christ in America! It is the most needed sort of pre-evangelism. It is training in Christian worldview. It is an aid to sanctification, and you need to teach people how to do it.

For my nearly three decades with *World*, I've tried to keep his pep talk in mind. Pre-evangelism. Aid to sanctification. I've also remembered Packer's succinct definition of biblical faith: "God saves sinners." Our holy God saves. Man cannot save himself. Neither government nor any other institution can save us. Our righteous God saves through his sovereign grace, not because of anything we do, but out of love for those he calls and covers over with Christ's blood. Our compassionate God saves sinners. We are not essentially good and brought down by a flawed social environment; rather, we are sinners.

Christian journalists vary on some doctrinal matters, but all who wish to be Bible-based editors or reporters must understand that sinful people—that's all of us—need Christ as Savior and also as Lord. Christian publications lose their punch when journalists forget the Bible is useful not only for salvation, but also for application to all aspects of current events. Bible-based magazines and newspapers, like individual Christians, witness to God's saving power, but also to ways in which transformed sinners can exercise Christ-centered dominion over parts of God's creation.

Some people and publications, however, praise Christ as Savior, but trust in worldly rather than biblical wisdom to live their lives and cover the news. They emphasize moments of justification, but pay less attention to years of perseverance. Others emphasize the Lord's rules

but not his saving grace, and thus practice a disciplined but joyless Christianity that rapidly becomes legalistic.

This book is addressed to those who want to trust fully in Christ and no one else.

Some hard-edged reporters might contend that ideas do not have practical consequences. They do: biblical commitment or lack of it radically affects a publication's posture in every area. Some evangelicals have tended to become otherworldly. Many in recent years have compromised with secular and atheistic ideas. Courageous Christian journalists, however, need a biblical understanding of this world. Only then can their analysis go far beyond the conventional wisdom.

An understanding of sin should leave journalists skeptical about sweeping claims we can rapidly achieve the "Great Society" that some American politicians once advocated or the "Great Leap Forward" that some Chinese leaders pushed. Many limitations on human progress come out of human nature, not from external forces. People who emphasize unbounded human potential see problems and solutions differently from those who understand the limitations of sinful man. Those who rely on the Bible have views different from those who rely on man's wisdom.

To understand the full need for Christ's sacrifice, we must grasp the depth of sin's ravages. If man is essentially good, then Jesus did not have to die—but an understanding that God saves sinners pushes us toward biblical compassion, which means suffering with those in need and offering a Christ-based challenge to sinful practices. (True compassion is very different from the variety that assumes natural goodness and thus offers merely a pat on the back and coins in the pocket.) A stress on biblical compassion also separates Christians from those secular conservatives who twist the biblical understanding of man's limitations into scorn for tender mercies.

I hope Christians both in the United States and in China can develop and support Bible-based publications that couple an understanding of man's limitations with a concern for others based on God's holy compassion. Our goal should not be the creation of a new Israel or the winning of total victory, for we know God has placed us in Babylon and Christian triumph will come only when Christ returns.

Our goal should be faithful perseverance in the containment of evil. We cannot destroy sin—Christ will take care of that when he comes again—but through God’s grace we can contain it, and regain lost ground when possible.

Nearly two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul told oppressed Christians they should still respect rulers. In God’s timing, regimes will change as more persons become Christians, but government wields the sword, and those who wield swords against it are likely to perish. Eighteenth-century Americans understood that and did not pick up the sword until local government clashed with the imperial government: then they had to choose. Twenty-first-century Chinese Christians also practice patience, so they give patriotic respect to the Beijing government and the Communist Party, while pushing for greater religious freedom.

Journalists in our two countries can strive for one goal: to tell the truth by providing salt, not sugar, as we report good news without making it sticky sweet, and bad news that shows us our desperate need for Christ. In the United States, China, and other countries, powerful forces push reporters to issue propaganda rather than the honest truth. Some of those pressures are internal, but if we do not lie to support a political faction, we also should not lie because someone thinks it will help God’s cause. We believe in a God who tells the truth and wants us to do the same.

KEY TERMS

macro-story
official story
corruption story
oppression story
O&O

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How have worldviews affected journalism in the United States and China over the centuries?

2. To what extent does O&O journalism embody a false gospel?
3. By better applying their faith to their work, how could Christian journalists help those in other vocations?
4. What examples of journalism have you read/heard/seen that served as pre-evangelism, training in a Christian worldview, and an aid to sanctification?
5. What should be the goals of a Christian journalist, whether in the United States, China, or any other country?
6. Given the distrust that most Americans and Chinese feel toward journalists, how can Christian journalists win back their trust?

FOR FURTHER READING

Ronald T. Farrar, *A Creed for My Profession* (University of Missouri Press, 2013).

Yutang Lin, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (University of Chicago Press, 1936).

John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?* (Evangelical Press, 2000).