

## Lesson 13 Writing for Secular Publications

By Les Sillars

In chapter 9 we discussed WORLD's approach to biblical objectivity -- but not every Christian journalist can or should work for a Christian publication such as WORLD. God calls some people to work in secular or mainstream newsrooms, and that raises a question: Is it possible to apply a biblical worldview to this task? Is it possible to apply traditional approaches to objectivity in the newsroom without compromising biblical truth?

On many issues, the answer is yes. Free and democratic societies need public forums in which people of differing perspectives can discuss important issues. As long as news organizations with widespread credibility exist (which may not be forever, given the editorial habits and revenue trends of many major news organizations) and have significant cultural influence, Christians should have a role in them. But a Christian who enters a mainstream newsroom must think carefully about what he does. A Christian cannot be objective in a non-Christian newsroom in the same way as he is objective in a Christian newsroom.

Consider the cluster of concepts that are central to the mainstream news industry's traditional approach to objectivity. Many secular journalists will regard a news story as "objective" if they see it as

Accurate

Fair

Balanced

Not screeching

Non-partisan

Impartial (not overlooking accuracy so as to favor particular individuals or organizations)

Unbiased (not allowing a personal agenda to override a commitment to the truth)

Which of these conflicts with biblical teaching? Maybe "balanced" on class one or two issues: 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 even on clear-cut issues Christian journalists should be fair, impartial, and unbiased.

The Bible demands strict adherence to accuracy. As Indianapolis Star columnist Russ Pulliam notes, the biblical principle that judges be "impartial" applies equally well to reporters, who certainly make judgments. In Exodus 18 Moses selected judges who were to "fear God" and be "men of truth." They were to give true reports, avoid a bias toward rich or poor, and not succumb to bribery (Exodus 23). In Deuteronomy 1:17 Moses instructed judges to "hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God."

Many journalists, even within mainstream news organizations, no longer call themselves "objective," and often see "objectivity" as an outdated and even damaging concept. Complete objectivity is impossible, they say, in that every journalist brings his worldview, experience, education, background values, and loyalties to the tasks of recording, interpreting, and communicating news. He cannot simply abandon these when he picks up a notebook or camera. Worse, using balance or a neutral tone to give a veneer of objectivity to stories that are clearly not impartial or unbiased is plainly deceitful. A "balanced" story is misleading if the facts indicate that the truth is nowhere near the middle of two opposing sides. Stories can have a neutral tone even while distorting facts. Many reporters settle for offering opposing quotes instead of a determined search for the truth, resulting in what Olasky calls a "balancing of subjectivities."

But many journalists still adhere in theory to ideals of traditional objectivity, despite the common abuses. It is possible, say defenders of traditional objectivity, for a professional who is aware of the pitfalls not to permit his personal loyalties and preferences to override his commitment to the truth.

### **Objectivity in secular newsrooms: Principles for Christians**

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 it is possible to find "Truth" in a philosophical or ultimate sense. For most, the highest possible goal is a practical version of truth. Accurate information in context may be as good as it gets.

Christians can agree that providing accurate information in context is a valuable service to society. In addition, Christians understand that, although our fallen condition prevent any of us from knowing all Truth, it is certainly possible to know some Truth -- and with biblical guidance we can know even more Truth. No journalist can be fully objective, seeing the world completely as God sees it, but the Scriptures provide much guidance in sorting through what is good and evil, right and wrong, trivial and important, and communicating that to readers.

Believers working for a secular newsroom should still commit personally to the authority of Scripture and the foundational theological truths of the faith, but applying worldviews and values to the practice of journalism is no longer quite so direct. They have to work within the bounds of the genre of newswriting and the conventions of the industry. They must also respect the fact that many if not most in the audience, as well as the majority of their colleagues, will probably not share a commitment to the authority of the Bible. This brings up the next principle.

2. Embrace what is good and biblical about the traditional journalistic approach to "objectivity" and accept what is acceptable

Journalists adopted the notion of objectivity early in the twentieth century first as a method, not a philosophical ideal, as Kovach and Rosenstiel explain in their fine book, *The Elements of Journalism*. For a Christian some of the methods of objectivity are not merely acceptable, they are required. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" is the ninth commandment. Accuracy and fairness are non-negotiable.

This demands that a Christian working as a journalist 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 calling of a journalist is to offer a snapshot of the world the way it really is, not the way he believes it should be or the picture that will best help his political friends.

Other aspects of objectivity are not biblically required but are certainly appropriate for a Christian working for a secular news organization. Using a non-partisan tone and being non-partisan, for example, prevents a publication from needlessly offending readers. Why have Democrats "bark" or "whine" while Republicans "say" if that subjective interpretation offends half the city's readership? Let their arguments speak for themselves.

One of the most difficult concepts is "balance," which means giving roughly equal space, time or emphasis to both or "all" sides of a controversy. Let's discuss this in more detail.

Believers should have no trouble reporting and writing about the variety of reasonable 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 tends to make either societal or journalistic consensus his standard.

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 so journalists need not “balance” race-related stories with quotes from the Ku Klux Klan. Same-sex marriage is hotly contested (for now, anyway) among the populace broadly, but on the secular campuses from which most journalists emerge a pro-gay consensus is strong, and most carry that into newsrooms, which means it’s difficult in many newsrooms to write a balanced story on this issue.

Sometimes the biblical standard and the social consensus on an issue will agree and sometimes they will not; these days, the biblical standard and the journalistic consensus are often at odds. Some aspiring Christian journalists presume that, in the latter case, they must make news decisions based on a biblical standard stipulating, for example, that they cannot in good conscience quote a spokesman for a pro-abortion organization because that would be promoting evil.

This approach is mistaken, for three reasons. First, it is a public service to report on the positions, strategies and intentions of organizations, good or evil, that have a major impact on society. Pro-life people need 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. (We should scrutinize the organizations we favor as thoroughly as those with which we disagree—perhaps even more so.)

Second, a journalist working for a mainstream news outlet is agreeing to work within the standards of his employer and serve it as faithfully as possible. This does not mean the standards are set in stone or can never be challenged; it does mean that those who play the game (and take the paycheck) have to respect the rules of engagement. One of those rules is accurately reflecting the range of significant perspectives on a given issue. Daily newspapers traditionally want to reach the broadest possible audience; their employees have an obligation to help them do so. Finally, respecting the balance standard (where appropriate) will provide Christians with an opportunity to report biblical perspectives that might otherwise not have entered the public square. 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 deserve a place in 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.

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. This applies equally to all Christians in journalism, whether they work for *WORLD* or the *New York Times*.

3. Seek to understand the worldviews and values of everyone involved in a story—those of your sources, your audience, and your colleagues. Being truly fair and impartial on divisive issues can require the wisdom of Solomon, and cutting your story in two probably won’t help.

What will help is a firm grasp of the importance of worldviews. 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 worldviews are or how they affect a given story.

But the journalist who determines to figure out the values and worldviews that drive people and events has a major advantage over his competitors and colleagues. 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?”

Christians with some exposure to theological and philosophical questions should be better able to identify when such questions are relevant. They help explain why people do things, providing a deeper understanding of the issue and the event, and ultimately lead to stories that are more accurate, fair, balanced, and genuinely unbiased. These questions help journalists avoid unnecessarily alienating audiences by not respecting widely-held perspectives.

A reporter need not inquire about the investigating officer’s beliefs regarding God and sin when writing 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.

Finally, understanding the worldviews of colleagues is essential. This is more than simply fitting in. To earn respect, offer respect for their perspectives on controversial issues. This should not require compromising personal commitment to biblical truth; a biblical worldview will lead to disagreement with colleagues on many important issues—that’s fine. Know when to offer balance and when to appeal to the concept to argue for a more complete and truthful perspective. This is no guarantee of a cordial and respectful newsroom atmosphere. Colleagues may profess balance and objectivity and professionalism but, in practice, be hostile to biblical perspectives. Discussing an issue such as the need for balance that includes conservative perspectives in frank but civil terms may help. If the violation of professional standards is flagrant, it may be necessary 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 has a stake worth dying for; sometimes it may be appropriate to withdraw graciously, at least until next time.

### **Be Humble. Pick Your Battles**

Although Christians tend to focus on those stories and publications in the mainstream media with which they disagree, there is consensus in society on many things: greed and waste in government is bad; self-sacrifice for another’s sake is admirable; innocent people should not suffer at the hands of the powerful. This is not to downplay the very sharp and real differences between a biblical view of a just society and the many other perspectives that exist. But there is room—no, a desperate need—in mainstream journalism for voices that serve society while reflecting biblical truth.

Be professional. Be humble. Pick your battles.

### Exercise

Write a 500-700 word report of a public meeting of your local or state government. The vast majority have websites on which they post notices of upcoming meetings. You may also attend some other sort of public, government related event, such as a speech, press conference, or fundraiser. Try to pick a meeting or event likely to be attended by other reporters so that you can compare your story to theirs. However, write your story before reading or viewing other coverage.

Use “basic news story structure.” Remember to attribute all your information.

Try to conduct at least two interviews while you are there. We realize that we have not yet discussed how to conduct interviews. Don’t worry; here’s what you need to know for now: take notes as carefully as you can;

remember to verify the correct spellings of names and places;

obtain any handouts provided by event organizers;

introduce yourself as a journalism student taking a class through WORLD Magazine;

have at least a few questions prepared before you ask for the interview;

interviews with spectators or other event-goers are fine—this is your first story assignment so we won’t expect you to be able to interview important people like the mayor unless it’s a really small town.

Try to write your story within 24 hours of the event. When it is finished, in 3-4 paragraphs compare and contrast your story with one story from another media outlet, taking into account what you have learned in this lesson about objectivity. In what ways was your story similar to those in other publications, and how did it differ? How did your Christian worldview affect your lead and which aspects of the event to emphasize?