

Editorial: Faith, culture & critical thinking

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Do we go too easy on each other in Sunday school—or Bible study, or Bible fellowship, or whatever your church calls it?

This question played in my mind as I read a fascinating article in the latest edition of [The Atlantic Monthly, "The Coddling of the American Mind."](#)

☒ Editor Marv KnoxThe article focuses on “something strange ... happening at America’s colleges and universities.” Authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt describe “a movement ... to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”

For example, Harvard University law students asked professors not to teach rape law or use the word “violate,” as in “that violates the law.” Students elsewhere have insisted professors issue “trigger warnings” in advance of dealing with emotional subjects, such as the fact *The Great Gatsby* portrays misogyny and physical abuse. And faculty at the University of California system’s 10 schools were taught to avoid “microaggressions” such as, “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

“The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into ‘safe spaces’ where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable,” Lukianoff and Haidt note.

Failure to prepare

The trend harms students because it fails to prepare them for life in the off-campus world, where vastly varied ideas compete for credibility and where

tact and politeness are not enforced.

Here is Lukianoff's and Haidt's pivotal insight:

There's a saying common in education circles: Don't teach students what to think; teach them how to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. ...

Their observation provides a springboard for contemplating how we conduct Bible study in our churches, particularly among teenagers and adults.

Fear of in-depth Bible study

If you've been around church even a short while, you've no doubt encountered people who could not tolerate dissent, "wrong thinking" or disagreement in Bible study classes. They're deathly afraid of (a) contemplating Bible passages or themes that might be challenged by contemporary culture, (b) dealing with faith in light of science, (c) applying Jesus' teachings to political decision-making, (d) facing apparent biblical contradictions, controversial doctrines or "hard sayings" of Jesus, (e) deviating from the church's or denomination's party line or (f) all the above.

Unfortunately, a fearful approach to Bible study poorly prepares Christians

for relating to people outside church, just as surely as academic coddling fails to prepare students for life after graduation. The paucity of critical thinking is a modern challenge—inside the church and out.

Embrace the challenge

The most balanced, healthy Christians embrace the challenge of synthesizing their faith, Scripture, science, history, literature, politics and all the other “stuff” of the world. They’re more effective and winsome witnesses. They’re less likely to falter when life gets challenging. They’re more able to help others integrate faith and life.

They don’t panic when they encounter culture or stumble when they interact with people who disagree with them. That’s because authentic faith has set them free. And experience has taught them how to think critically.