Martial Arts – A Christian View

Dr. Zukeran looks at the popular activity of marital arts from a biblical worldview perspective. He determines that Christians may safely participate in martial arts as long as they distance themselves from the Eastern philosophical ideas associated with most forms of martial arts.

The Origins and Popularity of the Martial Arts

Gliding across the Pacific, the Asian martial arts have become part of the mainstream of American culture. Today there are an estimated two to three million practitioners in the United States, 40 percent of which are children between the ages of 7 and 14.{1} The martial arts industry generates annual revenue topping the $1 billion mark.

Why this rise in popularity? For one thing, people today are interested in and more willing to accept Eastern ideas. What was once considered "foreign" is now embraced as old, and thus "tried and true." Advocates extol the physical benefits and self- discipline that result from its practices. Movies further popularize martial arts with films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Rush Hour,* and the Oscar winning *Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon*. The rise in crime also has people seeking to learn ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

There are few written records regarding the origin of martial arts. These are interwoven with myths or verbal traditions that make it difficult to accurately trace the record. Archaeological evidence indicates that the martial arts may have begun as early as 2000 BC in the Fertile Crescent.{2} From there it traveled eastward to India and China.

The father of the Asian martial arts according to the most popular tradition is an Indian Buddhist Monk named Bodhidharma who arrived in China in the late fifth century A.D. Settling in a monastery in the Songshan Mountains located in the Kingdom of Wei, he developed a series of mind-body exercises designed to improve the health of the monks and assist them in meditation. Based on the movements of different real and mythological animals and incorporating concepts from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma taught a style of combat known as Shao-lin gung fu. Gradually, Shao-lin gung fu migrated from the temples to the Chinese populace. It was adapted and refined as it spread across the country and eventually, to the world.

Martial arts have been very popular among Christians. Scot Conway, founder of the Christian Martial Arts Foundation, estimates between 50 and 70 percent of American martial artists – and roughly 20 percent of all instructors – consider themselves Christians.{3} But other Christians argue that the philosophy of Asian martial arts is wholly incompatible with biblical teaching. They point to the origin of Eastern mysticism as reason for Christians to avoid any level of participation. Still others say Jesus' exhortation to "turn the other cheek" shows that using force is wrong.

How should a discerning Christian respond? Can we participate in the martial arts and be consistent with our biblical convictions?

Differences in the Martial Arts

Should Christians participate in the martial arts? In order to make an informed decision, it is helpful to recognize that there are two basic categories for martial arts. It is important to note that the division is not rigid; in some cases, values from one type may be blended or subtly integrated into the other. But for simplicity and clarity, we will use the two main groups.

One type, called “internal” or “soft” martial art, focuses on inner spiritual development, balance, form, and mental awareness. This soft art emphasizes two principles – that the mind dictates action and that the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her.{4} Students are taught Taoist and Buddhist philosophical principles such as the “chi” force and the “yin and yang” concept. Through breath control, soft art practitioners seek to “collect, cultivate, and store” this chi force which is located in the body. Some believe they can use the chi force to strike down opponents from a distance. Examples of internal or soft martial arts include the Chinese Tai-chi Chuan and the Japanese Aikido.

The second category of martial arts is called the “external” or “hard” art. This type teaches that physical reactions precede mental reaction. It also promotes the idea that an opponent’s force should be met with an equal but opposite force. While the hard martial art system also uses breath control like the soft arts, the emphasis is on developing strength and quickness through the use of straight and linear body motions.{5} The hard arts include certain forms of Chinese kung fu, and Shao Lin boxing. The Japanese arts were adapted from Chinese kung fu. The hard arts include Ju-jitsu, Judo, Karate, Ninjitsu, and Kendo. The Korean martial arts include Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do.

While there are religious concepts in the martial arts, few schools would qualify as religious movements, and few seek to meet the religious needs of the student. However, a little exposure to Eastern mysticism may lead to greater involvement in the future. So as a general rule, Christians should avoid the internal or soft martial arts because of the concentration on the teachings of Eastern religions and philosophies. Several schools even utilize the occult techniques of meditation and altering consciousness. External or hard martial arts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on physical training. These physical lessons usually do not

conflict with our biblical convictions.

Before joining a dojo or martial arts gym, one needs to know the worldview of the instructor. Even some hard martial arts teachers incorporate Eastern ideas and occult practices into their styles. Look for instructors who teach the physical movements but exclude the Eastern ideas.

Eastern Concepts in the Martial Arts

Since martial arts are traditionally based on the Eastern philosophies of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, several key concepts can be prominent in the classes. Let’s look at three of them.

The concept of “chi” or “ki” is central in some martial arts. Chi is believed to be the impersonal life energy that flows throughout the universe and pulses through the human body. By harnessing the chi in individuals, martial artists believe they can perform at higher levels of ability or can release chi power resulting in devastating effects. Chi is controlled through specialized breathing techniques, gymnastics, and meditation.

Another common martial arts teaching is the Taoist (pronounced “dow-ist”) concept of yin and yang, that nature consists of conflicting elements which function in perfect balance to one another. As mankind should live in harmony with the Tao, so the martial artist must strike hard with firmness at times, but at other times accept the energy of the opponent, then reroute the energy, causing the opponent to defeat himself. This redirection allows a relatively gentle resolution, and brings one into harmony with the opponent and the flow of nature.

A Christian must also avoid the practice of Eastern meditation. The goal of this type of meditation is to empty one’s mind, alter one’s consciousness, or unite with the impersonal divine. Scott Shaw writes, “Meditation is a sacred

process. It is the method used by the spiritual warrior to calm the mind and to connect the body and mind with the infinite."{6} This greater awareness supposedly enables the martial artist to increase his or her performance. In many schools, the combined use of Eastern meditation and the chi are essential to mastering the art. (Not all martial arts use meditation for this purpose. Some use it to focus on the lesson or task at hand such as picturing the action in your mind before physically carrying it out.)

But the mysticism of Taoism and Buddhism is not compatible with Christianity; neither is Eastern meditation the same as biblical meditation. The Bible does not teach altering our consciousness or emptying our minds. Instead, the goal of Scriptural meditation is to *fill* our minds with God's Word. (Psalm 1:2) Another danger of Eastern meditation is that it can open our minds to the occult, a practice the Bible prohibits. The Bible does not teach the Eastern idea of chi, that there is an impersonal life energy of the universe within us. Rather, the Bible says that each individual has an eternal soul that will either go to heaven or to hell based on whether or not they have a relationship with Christ.

Self Defense or Turn the Other Cheek?

Besides concerns about the role of Eastern religion in the martial arts, some people think martial arts encourages violence. Martial arts teach fighting, and so are contrary to the Bible's instructions about pacifism. Is there ever a time when Christians can use force?

Christian pacifists believe it is always wrong to injure another person. Many interpret Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-48, where he states, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . .", to mean never use violence. This is exemplified in the life of Christ who suffered silently and did not retaliate while enduring torture even unto death.

Despite these arguments, the proper interpretation of the Matthew 5 passage does not teach pacifism. In Jewish culture, to be struck or slapped on the cheek was an insult (2 Corinthians 11:20). Jesus was teaching that when a disciple is insulted for being a follower of Christ, the disciple should not retaliate with force. However, being insulted is a very different situation from being attacked by a mugger or your wife being attacked by a rapist.

In the Gospels, Christ did not resist violent attacks because of His unique mission to be the sacrifice for our sins. However, in the Old Testament, the preincarnate Christ judged wicked nations with the sword. (Judges 6:11-16). Not only did He smite His enemies, He aided Israel in being an instrument of judgment as well. Revelation predicts the glorified Christ coming to judge the nations with a sword. Also in the New Testament, Jesus and His disciples did not teach military leaders to withdraw from the military (e.g., Matthew 8:8-13, Luke 3:14). In Romans 13, Paul writes that the government has the right to "bear the sword." In other words, a righteous government can use capital punishment when an offender is worthy of death.

Therefore, complete pacifism is not the spirit of Christian teaching. In fact, the most loving thing to do when a friend or family member is attacked by a harmful foe is to risk one's life and use force to restrain the enemy. If a man is attacking a child, or a woman is being raped, it would be morally wrong not to sacrifice your life and restrain the assailant even with deadly force if necessary.

The Bible allows a Christian to use self-defense and force when confronted with a criminal act. Force may not be used for revenge or out of unjust anger. Christians who engage in the martial arts should have a clear understanding of this. The use of martial arts must be for self-defense and protecting loved ones from acts of evil. One should never use their fighting system to instigate combat or seek revenge.

Should Christians Participate in the Martial Arts?

To summarize what I have covered so far, I believe that the physical aspect of martial arts can be separated from the Eastern religious and philosophical teachings. Also, I believe the Bible teaches us that there is a time when we are called to use force, even deadly force to halt acts of evil.

Here are some practical guidelines if one is deciding to participate in the martial arts or if one is selecting a school. First, a person should check his or her motives. One should not engage in martial arts if one's motives include becoming a tough guy, showing off, or gaining revenge. Parents should make it clear to their children that the martial arts are never to be used for affectation or for instigating conflicts. Unworthy motives are detrimental to one's walk with the Lord and witness to others. Positive reasons include physical conditioning, discipline, and self-defense. Develop parameters for limiting the use of force. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Force is used in defensive purposes only.

Generally speaking, Christians should avoid the soft or internal form of martial arts because they tend to emphasize Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. External or hard martial arts emphasize the physical training. However, it would be wise to be on guard because many instructors of external martial arts may incorporate Eastern mysticism in to their system. Also, one should be careful to avoid the possibility of being enticed to learn about Eastern spirituality as they advance.

Find out the worldview of the instructor. The role of religion in the martial arts depends mostly on the instructor, so choosing a proper instructor is the most important factor. Some instructors claim to teach the physical aspect only.

However, as students advance, instructors begin to incorporate Eastern religious ideas to help students attain a higher level of performance. Observe advanced classes to see if they incorporate Eastern practices. There is also helpful information through Christian organizations such as Karate for Christ and the Christian Martial Arts Foundation.

The Christian life involves caring for the nurture and growth of our mind, spirit, and our body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have benefited greatly from my time in the martial arts. It has provided me great exercise, discipline, and opportunities to witness for Christ. There were times in my life when I had to use force to restrain hostile persons or protect loved ones. I believe that the martial arts can be beneficial to Christians who are informed and mature.

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5. Ibid., 61 & 227.

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See Also:
"Martial Arts and Just War Theory"

“What About the Apocrypha?”

The Catholic institution claims the apocrypha is inspired. Protestants don’t. Therefore, within the Body, there are two different lists of supposedly God-inspired authoritative Scripture.

So… How can we claim the Bible is authoritative when there are two differing lists of supposed Scriptures within Christianity…Two different Bibles? My next question is akin to the first: How do we know with certainty which list is THE list?” Both of these questions center on authority. Who do we trust as our God approved authority able to testify for us on behalf of Scriptures?

It is no wonder that the other religions of the world do not take true Christianity seriously when such fundamental divisions exist within the Body.

The Apocrypha is not included as part of the inspired text because it does not meet the criteria of the inspired canon. Here are just a few examples.

The Apocrypha contains historical errors. In Judith 1:1 Nebuchadnezzar is reigning in Ninevah instead of Babylon.

The Apocrypha contains unbiblical teaching. 2 Maccabees 12 teaches to pray for the dead. Tobit 12:9 teaches faith by works, a clear contradiction to the Bible (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus and the Apostles do not quote the Apocrypha. We do not see it directly quoted in the New Testament.

Finally Jesus tells us where the inspired canon ends in Luke 11:51. He says the prophets extend from Abel (Genesis 4) to Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-21). So the line of prophets

ends with the Jewish Old Testament, the Masoretic text that Jesus used as authoritative.

The history of the Apocrypha is interesting. It was not part of the Catholic Church's inspired canon until 1545 AD. No council recognized it in the first four centuries. The historical evidence goes against the Apocrypha. It was incorporated by the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant challenge to several unbiblical teachings such as praying for the dead and penance. Hope this helps.

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Alternative Medicine – A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran applies a biblical worldview perspective as he assesses the rise of alternative medicine in the mainstream of American culture. He points out the types that a purely fraud and those which may be useful for some people.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Rise of Alternative Medicine

Alternative medicine has blazed its way into the mainstream of American culture while also making significant gains in the medical community. Nearly half of all U.S. adults now participate in some kind of alternative therapy.{1} A recent study showed that Americans spend almost $30 billion a year on

alternative treatments.{2}

Alternative medicine remains a controversial issue. Do these medicines actually work? Do these alternative therapies embrace an Eastern religious system? Should Christians be involved with alternative treatments? How do we evaluate a particular practice that is unconventional?

The sudden rise of alternative medicine can be attributed to a growing dissatisfaction with conventional medical practices. Modern methods have mainly focused on the physical symptoms. However, we are spiritual, social and emotional creatures as well. Healing improves when all of these components are addressed. Conventional medicine has also been criticized for its impersonal approach. Overworked doctors may spend only a few minutes diagnosing the problem without much follow-up.

The main reason people may be flocking to alternative medicine is that it offers hope when conventional medicine has failed. The frightened and discouraged look there as a last resort. Many therapists profess to heal cancer or know the secret to prolonged youth. For example, Hollywood guru Deepak Chopra writes that his therapies can take us to ". . . a place where the rules of everyday existence do not apply." Through his methods we can ". . . become pioneers in a land where youthful vigor, renewal, creativity, joy, fulfillment, and timelessness are the common experience of everyday life, where old age, senility, infirmity and death do not exist and are not even entertained as a philosophy."{3} These are attractive temptations to those without hope.

As discerning individuals, we must not be enticed by such claims. The Bible teaches that we live in a fallen world. Despite our best efforts people get sick, and sometimes they die. When faced with a serious illness, we first must accept the consequences of the Fall. God can heal any time He chooses using whatever method He wills. However, He does not work contrary to His nature or revealed truth. If an apparent

healing leads someone to embrace teachings contrary to Scripture, we should question whether that healing came from God.

So when the test results are bad, we should not panic in fear, but trust God's sovereignty and control over our lives. We should seek wise counsel from doctors and our pastors. Then, if an alternative medicine is recommended, we should make sure it has been medically tested and does not promote a false teaching or false hope. In dealing with illness, we can honor God or we can blemish our testimony. In the following sections, let us consider how to wisely evaluate alternative medicines.

Getting a Handle on Alternative Medicines

Today there are hundreds of therapies labeled "alternative medicine," but what exactly does that mean? A broad definition would be any therapy that is not accepted by the dominant medical establishment of our culture. There are several characteristics of alternative medicine. For example, these therapies are not practiced in hospitals or physicians' offices. They focus on natural methods of healing with an emphasis on preventing disease. They are also more likely to treat chronic ailments after conventional medicine has failed.

Alternative medicine originates from the traditions of ancient cultures, particularly China and India. For instance, 370 different healing drugs were used in Mesopotamia while 600 were common in India. The Chinese had 2000 herbs, metals, and minerals as ingredients in 16,000 different preparations.{4} Despite the variety, many historians agree that these ancient medical practices had little success in actually curing disease. The real effects are still under scrutiny today including comparisons with the strides made by modern medicine. Despite the shortfalls of conventional medicine, we live longer and are healthier than people of long ago.

Ancient alternative medicine was greatly influenced by Eastern religions. That is why today's users of so-called "rediscovered" alternative medicines can still see those religious concepts interwoven with the treatments. Many alternative medicine proponents approach holistic health from a pantheistic worldview. Central to pantheism is the idea of monism—the idea that everything in the universe is one ultimate reality. If all is one, then man is divine. Since we are divine, we are without sin. Sin is merely an illusion that creates false guilt. This guilt is what leads to illness.

Deepak Chopra writes, ". . . the seeds of God are inside us. . . . When we make the journey of the spirit, we water these divine seeds. . . . In the eyes of the spirit, everyone is innocent, in all senses of the word. Because you are innocent, you have not done anything that merits punishment or divine wrath."{5}

Some advocates of alternative medicine would point out that the biblical view of health is also considered holistic. Indeed, God made man a complex being with physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions, and He cares about every aspect of our personhood. (You can see these aspects in Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23.) Contrary to pantheism, the Bible teaches God is a personal being and we are His created beings. We were meant for a personal relationship with Him, but we are separated from this by sin. Biblical health begins with a right relationship with a personal God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Rather than ignoring sin, it must be dealt with through repentance and restoration. Finally, a Christian must acknowledge that God may have a purpose for suffering, and that there is value to yielding to His plan.

Should a Christian Use Alternative Medicine?

When it comes to selecting an alternative therapy, there is a

smorgasbord of choices. How can a Christian discern an acceptable alternative medicine from one that is unacceptable? In making a decision, it is helpful to identify the different alternative medicines. The authors of *Basic Questions on Alternative Medicine: What Is Good and What Is Not?*{6} give five categories of alternative therapies.

The first category is *complementary* therapies. These deal with lifestyle issues such as diet, exercise and stress. The next category is *scientifically unproven* therapies. These have undergone scientific research, but with little evidence for their effectiveness. Herbal remedies would be an example of scientifically unproven therapies.

A third category is *scientifically questionable* therapies. These are therapies which contradict basic scientific principles or that cannot be easily verified. An example is Chinese acupuncture that teaches a contradictory understanding to what is known about human physiology. A fourth category is *life energy* therapies. These assume life energy called "Chi" or "Prana" that can be manipulated using a variety of techniques. Maybe you have heard of "Reiki" and therapeutic touch. The final category of therapies is *quackery* and *fraud*. These are therapies that have been shown to have no reasonable benefit.

Before deciding to use an alternative medicine, a Christian should consider first under which category the particular therapy falls. Generally speaking, complementary therapies provide important insights into maintaining good health. Scientifically unproven and questionable therapy must be studied and decisions made on a case-by-case basis. Many of the proofs for alternative medicine are based on controversial interpretations of scientific theories or testimonies of users.{7} The wisest approach is to only use cures endorsed by sound medical research and controlled testing. Christians should avoid therapies that fall under the life energy and fraud categories.

Consult your physician and pharmacist. Too often individuals will engage in alternative treatments without informing their physician. Proponents of alternative medicine try to discourage their clients from using conventional medical methods, claiming their way to be the best. This can be a dangerous concept. An alternative therapist may prescribe approaches contrary to your doctor's recommendation, or give you medicines that may react negatively with your prescribed medications.

Finally, be a wise steward. Don't spend your resources on therapies that have been proved ineffective or questionable. Watch out for practitioners of a false religious system. In my pastoral experience, I have witnessed Christians turn to shamans and Chinese folk medicine when diagnosed with a serious illness. In all cases the alternative therapy did not help the situation and cost the family monetarily. More importantly, it impaired their witness for Christ. Make your lifestyle, especially the way you handle illness, a testimony for Christ.

Life Energy Therapies

As mentioned earlier, there are five categories of alternative medicines. Christians should avoid *life energy* and *quackery* and *fraud* therapies.

Let us take a careful look at life energy therapies. Although there are over 60 different names for these therapies, they are all based on six fundamental principles.{8} Practitioners believe that life energy flows throughout the universe. There are numerous names for this impersonal energy. Traditional Chinese medicine calls this energy "Chi" while Indian Ayurvedic medicine titles it "Prana." Some Christians mistakenly equate this with the Holy Spirit. The two are not the same.

Life energy therapists believe that humans are composed of

energy surrounded by a material body. Life energy therapy directs this energy so that it flows throughout the body unhindered. Disease is believed to be the result of an imbalance or blockage in the energy flow. Traditional Chinese medicine describes an elaborate system of channels within the body called meridians. To cure an illness, the body must be manipulated to restore the flow of energy through the meridians.

Traditional Chinese and Indian practitioners believe they can determine one's energy flow by looking at the skin color, symptoms, tongue, and pulse. Therapeutic touch practitioners say they can sense the energy flow by moving their hands above the skin. Supposedly there are now high tech machines that can measure this energy flow. Many of these machines, for example the Vegatest and its spin-offs, have been deemed fraudulent and are illegal.{9}

It is said that life energy can be re-directed to treat an offending illness. Life energy therapists believe they can adjust the flow of energy through physical manipulation or invisible transfer from healer to patient. In traditional Chinese medicine, needles are used to unplug holes or stimulate the flow of this energy. Massage, exercise, and herbs are also believed to restore Chi as are breathing and meditation techniques.

Miracles are believed to occur by altering the life energy. This is the message presented in *Star Wars*. In the movie, the Jedi masters could control the life energy, or Force, to perform miraculous feats. The concept of God and energy are used interchangeably. From this we can conclude that life energy is, in essence, God. Since we are energy, we are divine because we are of the same essence as the Divine.

Christians should avoid therapists who expound life energy therapy. Many ideas are built on a pantheistic worldview, causing these therapies to embrace or at least acknowledge

Eastern mysticism. Also, their teachings have drifted far from objective knowledge of the human body. Finally, God is not an impersonal force, and He cannot be manipulated by formulas or healing rituals. God will not heal through any practice that is contrary to His Word.

Herbal Treatments

Wherever you look, it seems like there is an infomercial or ad for herbal products. According to a 1998 study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, between 1990 and 1997, there was a 380 percent rise in herbal remedies and a 130 percent increase in high dose vitamin use in the US.{10} Current estimates say 60-72 million Americans use herbal supplements.{11} Many herbal treatments make remarkable claims of healing cancer, arthritis, depression, and other illnesses. What are we to make of the herbal craze?

Be discerning if you choose to use herbs. *Natural* does not guarantee *safe*. There are many natural herbs that can produce dangerous, and even deadly, side effects. Be wary of the marketing hype. Despite the ads, the truth of the matter is that research has concluded that the effectiveness of herbal use is questionable at best. You also need to consider quality control. Unlike prescription and non-prescription drugs that are tightly regulated by the FDA, no organization is directly responsible for monitoring the quality or concentrations of herbal products. Be skeptical of "a pill for every ill" mentality. Finally, be sure to avoid anyone who claims to have a secret formula, especially if he reports to have been persecuted by the American Medical Association or Federal Drug Administration. Avoid any retailer, radio ad, or person who is bent on selling his product as a cure-all.

Some herbal treatments are costly and provide no enhancement. However, some herbal supplements *have* shown some promising benefits. Herbal treatments may prove to be helpful additions to conventional treatments. Herbs like ginseng have shown to

be beneficial for Type 2 diabetes, for example. Herbal preparations are sometimes less potent in dosage than prescriptions drugs and may be less toxic.

It is important to thoroughly research the product you are considering using. Inform your doctor and pharmacist. They know your medical history and can alert you to any potentially dangerous interactions between herbs and pharmaceutical drugs. Be leery of thinking that if taking a little is good, a heavier dose must be even better. Find out whether the herbs are for long or short term. Check the quality of the product and be aware of the possible side effects. Don't assume that if the product has been used for a while, even for centuries, it must be better.

There is no biblical admonition forbidding the use of herbal products. However, Christians should approach the herbal market from an informed perspective. Some excellent books on the subject are *The American Pharmaceutical Association Practical Guide to Natural Medicines* and *Alternative Medicine: A Christian Handbook*. Excellent Web sites include herbalgram.com and naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com/.

In times of health and especially in dealing with illness, our goal is always to honor the Lord.

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Character of the Cults: A Christian Perspective

Written by Patrick Zukeran

Dr. Zukeran compares the beliefs of several modern cults against a conservative biblical worldview. This analysis makes it readily apparent that cults are not representing a scriptural view of true Christianity.

Challenge of the Cults

This church is growing so rapidly, sociologist Rodney Stark predicts that by the year 2080, it will become the most important world religion to emerge since the rise of Islam.{1} What church is Dr. Stark describing? It is not a Christian church but the Mormon Church, an organization labeled as a cult. The rise of the Mormon Church represents the growing challenge facing the church, the kingdom of the cults.

What is a cult? The greatest authority on the cults, the late Dr. Walter Martin, described a cult as “A group of people gathered around a specific person’s misinterpretation of the Bible.”{2} Cults are groups that claim to be in harmony with Christianity but deny foundational Christian doctrines such as the Trinity or the unique deity of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 7:15-17, Jesus gives us a warning about the coming of the cults. He states, “Watch out for false prophets. They

come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them." What Jesus was warning was that cultists will look, act, and sound like Christians. However, that is only in external appearance. One can parade as a true believer for a time, but eventually one's words, actions, and especially one's beliefs—their "fruit"—will give one away as a counterfeit.

The growth of the cults can be attributed to several factors. First, it is a fulfillment of the warning given by Jesus and the apostles. In Matthew 24:23-26, Jesus warns us that as His return draws near, there will be an increase in false prophets who will ensnare many in their false teachings. In 2 Peter 2:1-3, Peter warns us that false teachers will arise from within the church.

The second factor in the growth of the cults is the breakdown of the family. Cults provide the family atmosphere many from broken homes long for; the cult leader often takes the place of a father figure.

Finally, we can attribute the growth of the cults to the failure of the church. As my mentor repeatedly stated, "The cults are the unpaid bills of the church." The cults thrive because Christians are lacking in biblical and theological understanding. Dr. Martin stated, "The rise of the cults is directly proportional to the fluctuating emphasis which the church has placed on the teachings of biblical doctrine to Christian laymen. To be sure, few pastors, teachers, and evangelists defend adequately their beliefs, but most of them – and most of the average Christian laymen – are hard put to confront and refute a well-trained cultist of almost any variety."{3} If the church engaged in solid and in-depth Bible teaching, the cults would not flourish as they do today.

Doctrinal Character of the Cults

How do you know if a religious group is a cult? Jesus said

that you will know false prophets by their fruits. In stating this he was not only speaking of their words and actions but of their doctrinal beliefs as well. Cults deviate from biblical Christianity in several key areas of doctrine.

Cults promote false teaching on the nature of God. The Bible teaches there is one God revealed in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The central feature that distinguishes cults from biblical Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity. All cults have a distorted view of this doctrine. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses condemn the doctrine of the Trinity, and Mormons teach tritheism, three gods who make up the godhead.

Second, cults teach a false view of Jesus. The Bible teaches that Christ is 100 percent man and 100 percent God. This has been called the *hypostatic union*. In 2 Corinthians 11:4, Paul warned about false teachers teaching another Jesus. A modern-day example of false teaching is Christian Science which teaches that Jesus was not God but a man who displayed the Christ idea. He neither died for sins, nor was He resurrected.

Third is a false teaching on salvation. All cults have a works-oriented Gospel. The death of Christ is believed to give followers the *potential* to be saved. So after believing in Christ, one must serve the organization to attain salvation. Salvation is found in the organization and one is never really sure if one has done enough to be worthy of salvation. In the International Church of Christ, for example, disciples are scrutinized by their discipler daily to determine if they performed as worthy disciples. Failure to meet the standards may result in discipline. Disciples can never be certain they have done enough for salvation.

Fourth, there is extra-biblical revelation and the denial of the sole authority of the Bible. Cults claim that extra revelation is given to the leader whose words are seen as inspired by God and equal to the Bible. If there is a conflict

between the Bible and the leader's words, the latter takes precedence. So in reality, the leader's writings take precedence over the Bible. When interacting with cultists, I often hear them claim their teachings are consistent with the Bible. However, when I point out where their teachings deviate from the Bible, they eventually claim the Bible to be in error. In most cases, cultists claim the Bible has somehow been corrupted by the church.

Sociological Structure of the Cults

Not only do cults deviate doctrinally from biblical Christianity, they have distinctive sociological characteristics. The first is authoritarianism. The leader or organization exercises complete control over a follower's life. The words of the leadership are ultimate and often considered divinely inspired. Going against the leadership is equivalent to going against the commands of God.

The second characteristic is an elitist mentality. Most cults believe they are the true church and the only ones who will be saved. This is because the group believes they have new revelation or understanding that gives them superior standing.

Third is isolationism. Due to their elitist mentality, cultists believe those who do not agree with them are deceived or under the influence of Satan. Therefore, many feel their members must be protected from the outside world, and physical or psychological barriers are created. Members are prohibited from communicating with those outside the organization who do not agree with the teachings of the group.

Fourth, there is closed-mindedness and the discouragement of individual thinking. Because of its authoritarian nature, leaders are the only ones thought to be able to properly interpret the Bible. All members are to turn to the organization for biblical interpretation and advice on life decisions. Therefore, individual thinking and questioning is

discouraged. There is an unwillingness to dialogue and consider other viewpoints.

Fifth is a legalistic lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, salvation is not based on grace; cults teach a works-oriented gospel. This leads to a lifestyle of legalism. Followers must live up to the group's standards in order to attain or maintain their membership and hope for eternal life. Followers are required to faithfully serve, and attend meetings, studies, and services. As a result, there is tremendous pressure to live up to the requirements of the organization.

Finally there is a difficult exit process. Since salvation is found in the organization, leaving the organization is considered by many to be leaving God. All former members who leave cults are shunned by members which often includes members of their own family. Many are warned that if they leave, they will be condemned to hell, or seduced by Satan. Many ex-members are harassed by the organization even after they leave. Exiting members often end up distrusting any religious organization and end up feeling isolated and alone.

Life in the cults is marked by fear of judgment, pressure, and legalism. This is a far cry from what we are taught in the Bible. Jesus and the apostles taught that the new life in Christ is one of grace, love, and freedom from the law. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." The peace and rest promised by Christ is seldom experienced by those in the cults.

Cultic Methodology

When you receive a knock on your door in the mornings, who do you assume it to be? A salesman? A Girl Scout selling cookies? For many of us, we assume it to be a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon missionary looking to tell us about his or her organization. One of the reasons cults have grown is their

methodology.

The methods cults use to win converts are moral deception, aggressive proselytizing, and Scripture twisting. By moral deception I mean cults use Christian terminology to win converts. For example, New Agers use the term *born again* to support reincarnation. Mormons use terms like the *Trinity* and *salvation by grace* but these terms have different meanings than what the Bible teaches. Therefore, many untrained Christians are deceived into believing these groups are actually Christian.

Aggressive proselytizing is another method of the cults. Although many Christian groups use aggressive evangelism, they do so out of a love for God and a desire to see others come to know Christ. Many cultists proselytize for much the same reasons but added to this is the desire to win God's approval. They work *for* grace rather than *from* grace. The cults require their members to evangelize. Many groups hold their members accountable for the number of hours they spend witnessing for the organization. Many members feel guilty if a day or so goes by without them proselytizing.

Scripture twisting is another method of the cults. Cultist quote verses in the Bible that support their position, but skip over the verses that do not. Often, there is gross misinterpretation of Scripture so that contradictory verses will better fall in line with their views.

For example, Jehovah's Witness and Mormons try to use verses to show Jesus is a created being. However, their position is easily shown to be incorrect when you explain the context and correct meaning of the terms. Also, when you show additional verses that contradict their position, they are often surprised and realize they have never seen those verse before or that the organization's explanations of those verses are unable to be supported.

To successfully engage in conversation and effectively witness to those in the cults, Christians must be prepared in the following ways. First Peter 3:15 states that we must always be "prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." We must be prepared by knowing the word of God through diligent study of it. Second, we must be prepared to overcome our fears and lovingly reach out to cult members, exercising the fruits of patience and gentleness as we share the truth.

Danger of the Cults

The rise of the cults pose a serious challenge to the church because they present several dangers to the church and families involved. First, there is a spiritual danger. First Timothy 4:1 states "…that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." Ultimately the spirit behind all lies and deception is the devil, so the ultimate force behind the cults is the evil one.

Galatians 1:8 states, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other that than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned." The false gospel of the cults cannot lead anyone to salvation. There are eternal consequences for false beliefs. For this reason Jesus and the apostles are very harsh on false teachers.

There is also a psychological danger. The mind controlling techniques used by the organizations can cause immense damage mentally and emotionally. Living under the pressure, guilt, and dependence on the organization has proven to have tremendous negative effects on individuals.

Third, there is domestic danger. Individuals are taught that loyalty to the organization is equivalent to allegiance with

God. Therefore, loyalty to the organization supercedes loyalty to family. Thus, if a family member begins conducting himself in a way the organization does not approve of, the cult will often separate the family from the individual member. Isolation can be emotional or physical. Numerous families have been separated as a result.

In some cases there is a physical danger. The teachings of David Koresh cost the Branch Davidians their lives. Hobart Freeman taught that believers did not need medicine for illnesses, and told his followers to throw all theirs away. As a result, he and fifty-two of his members died from curable conditions.

In light of this threat, what are Christians called to do? First, we are called to study and know the Word of God. Paul writes to Timothy and all saints saying, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Christians should master the Bible so that they will not be deceived by any false teaching. Second, Titus commands us to be able to confront and refute false teachers. Finally, in Acts 20, Paul exhorts the leaders of the church to protect their flock from the false teachers that will prey upon the sheep. Every Christian is called to know the truth so well they can confront false teaching, and protect their church and family from it.

Notes

1. Richard Ostling, *Mormon America* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper Collins Publishing Inc. 1999), p. XVI.

2. Walter Martin & Hank Hannegraph, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Mich.: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), p. 17.

3. Norman Geisler, *When Cultists Ask* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), p. 15.

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3. Martin, Walter & Hank Hannegraph. *Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.

4. Geisler, Norman and Rhodes, Ron. *When Cultists Ask*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1997.

5. Rhodes, Ron. *Challenge of the Cults.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 2001.

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2. Blomberg, Craig and Robinson, Stephen. *How Wide the Divide?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

3. Oslting, Richard & Joan. *Mormon America*. San Francisco, Cal.: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999.

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1. Bowman, Robert. *Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of John.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1989.

2. _____. *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1989.

3. Rhodes, Ron. *Reasoning From the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1993.

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“Jesus Was Only Representing Jehovah”

I read your letter concerning Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Trinity. Like you, I like to get my facts straight, that’s why I did a little research.

I found out something concerning the Alpha and the Omega. If you turn your bible to the first chapter of Revelations, you will see something that maybe the witnesses you’ve talked to haven’t. In my version it states, “A revelation by Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to show his slaves the things that must shortly take place.” So here you clearly see that when Jesus said he was the Alpha and the Omega, he was representing God, Jehovah God.

I am yet to do some more research concerning that other verse of yours, but please take into consideration that I’m not trying to be rude, and I am listening to what you are saying, what I’m trying to do is help another one in understanding the deep things of God.

I welcome your comments and discussions, and I might be writing to you again. My e-mail is enclosed.

And please don’t get the point that I’m some snobby religious person trying to get back at another. I’m 14 yrs old and I read and study the bible everyday so don’t think that I’m not coming from anywhere.

Anyway, Good Day!

Thank you for writing. I have read your response to my article and I am glad you are interested in searching for the truth. As you do, let me encourage you to seek answers from the Bible alone, not the Watchtower organization.

In regards to your response, it does not change the argument that Jesus is God the Son in any way. I agree that this message is given by God and mediated through Christ. In 1:8 God the Father is speaking. We know this because after He states, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” He states, “Who is, and who was, and is to come, the Almighty.” The phrase “who was, who is, and is to come” refers to God the Father.

When we look at Revelation 22:12-21, Jesus is speaking about himself, not on behalf of God the Father. How do we know this? 22:12 states, “Behold, I am coming soon and my reward is with me.” When scripture refers to the coming of the king to earth, it is referring to Jesus. Jesus is the one who is coming. God the Father is not referred to as the one who is coming soon. Jesus is the one coming soon in all occasions. (Matthew 16:27, 24:30-31) Revelation 1:7 makes it clear once again that Jesus is coming because it states that the one who is coming is “pierced.” So when Jesus says, in 22:7 and 12, “Behold I am coming soon,” He is not quoting God the Father, He is referring clearly to himself. He, Jesus, is coming soon. In 22:16 Jesus states again, “I Jesus have sent my angel…” It therefore does not fit if you look at the grammar of the discourse to say in verse 22:12 Jesus is referring to Himself, then in the same discourse He suddenly switches to quote God in verse 13 and then switches back to refer to Himself in verses 14-21. This is an attempt by the Watchtower organization to manipulate the text to fit their interpretation.

However, if you look at the grammatical context, in verse 22:12 Jesus refers to himself, for He is the one who is coming. And verses 13-21 refer to Jesus. To say verse 13 suddenly refers to God the Father and not Jesus is being dishonest to the grammar and context of the passage.

I would recommend you read through the entire book of Revelation, outline it and state what the theme of the entire book is. Do not simply accept what the Watchtower teaches you,

study the scriptures for yourself. The record of 100 years of false prophecy from the Watchtower clearly displays their record of false interpretation for over a century. God commands us to study His word, not the teachings of an organization. God says, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy," (Rev. 1:3) and He is not referring to the Watchtower magazines.

Thanks for writing. Keep studying God's word.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

"I Have Questions About the Trinity"

I still have questions about the Trinity from your article The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Trinity—here are some of them:

John 17:1-3 The Emphatic Diaglott reads this this way: "Jesus spoke these things, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the HOUR is come: glorify THY son, that the son may glorify thee as thou didst give him Authority over all flesh, so everything which thou hast given to him, he may give to them even aionian life. And this is the AIONIAN life, that they may know thee, the ONLY TRUE God, and him whom thou didst send, Jesus Christ."

If Jesus Christ is God Almighty, then who was he praying to?

When you quoted Rev. 1:16 and 17, you were taking them out of context, surely, because the first few verses show that God sent his angel (Jesus Christ) to John to give him the Revelation. I am assuming you are going to say that it was

Jesus Christ who gave the Rev. to John. If so, then Jesus was quoting the words of God, his Father.

Are you saying that Jesus is God—equal in every way to God—or that he a powerful spirit being as God is? In the page dealing with the Trinity you mentioned that Jesus is the same nature as God, that is why I ask?

I have never believed the Trinity, but if I am wrong in not doing so, I want to find out.

Hello and thank you for your question.

Who is Jesus praying to? He is praying to God the Father. Many people misunderstand the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible shows that there is one God who has revealed himself in three distinct and separate persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. What JW's and others misunderstand is that Jesus, the Father and Holy Spirit are all the same person. The Trinity does not teach Jesus is the Father or that the Father is the Holy Spirit or the Son is the Holy Spirit. The Trinity means there exists one God revealed in three distinct persons. As seen at the Baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, the Father spoke from heaven, the Son arose from the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.

So who was Jesus praying to in John 17:1-3? It was God the Son praying to God the Father. I hope you go on to read the rest of the verse. 17:5 states, "And now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." Jesus shared in the glory of the Father. What a significant statement in light of Isaiah 42:8, where God the Father states, "I am the Lord, that is my name. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols." The glory of God is His alone. It is evident that this is the glory that belongs to God alone. Why does Jesus have it? Because He is God.

Let us look at Revelation 1:16-17. We are sure this is Jesus

speaking because of the context. Verse 1:13 states, “And among the lampstands was someone like the son of Man.” Is God the Father ever called the son of man? No, this is the title of Jesus (Daniel 7:13, Matthew 12:8, 32, and 20:18.) Jesus is not quoting the Father in 1:17-18, He is stating what is true of Himself. Look at the context. Verses 1:17-18 go together. The quote begins at 1:17b, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.” Then it connects to verse 18, “I am the living one; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” Is this statement true of the Father or the son? Was the Father once dead and resurrected to life? No, that is clearly true only of God the Son, Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Jesus would not be quoting a statement from the Father that was not true of the Father. The Father was never dead and resurrected to life. Context shows verses 1:17-18 are one quote and it is Jesus speaking about what is true of Himself.

Thanks for your question. Keep studying the Bible and the Bible only.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

“I Don’t Believe the Holy Spirit is a Person”

Dear Mr. Zukeran,

I do not believe the holy spirit is a person, mainly because it does not have a name. The names you give all have the word “the” preceding it. This indicates that the following word is a title, not a name. (For example “the President,” obviously “President” is not a name.) Also, the words “holy spirit” are

at times in lower case. Of course you know names are never in lower case.

Thank you for your question. The Holy Spirit gives a command (Acts 13:2), He can be lied to (Acts 5), and He can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). This shows the Holy Spirit is an intelligent thinking person. One cannot lie to an inanimate force like electricity or fire. You cannot even lie to a cat or dog—it must be an intelligent cognitive thinking person. Also why does Jesus use personal pronoun "He" and "Him" in addressing the Holy Spirit (John 16)?

Regarding a name. Respectfully, that really is not much of an argument. The previous verses show the Holy Spirit has the qualiites of a person; this makes Him a person. You stated because He does not have a personal name you think He is not a person. Allow me to use an illustration. If I say, "the King of Jordan is coming" what do I mean? Do I mean an impersonal, non-living entity is coming, or do I mean a person who rules over Jordan is coming? Obviously I mean a person is coming. Even if I do not know his personal name, we all know I am talking about a person. Just because I do not know if his name is George, Fred, or John but know him as "The King of Jordan" does that mean he is not a person?

The Holy Spirit has all the attributes of a person. He speaks, He thinks, He can be grieved, He can be lied to, etc. . . . Just because we do not address Him as Fred or George but by His title "the Holy Spirit" does not mean He is not a person. I may never know the personal name of the King of Jordan, but whenever I speak of the King of Jordan, I am referring to a person.

Thanks for writing.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

Check out some articles and answers on the concept of the

Trinity below.

“You Don’t Really Understand Buddhism”

I read your article on Buddhism. Interesting.

I am always glad to see one of a specific faith take the time to look into the historical and mythical backgrounds of another faith. It is heartening that men and women of learning still lend their efforts to religion.

I have no specific faith, so I am not “countering” your arguments. However, you say that Buddhism and Christianity “…are so different, they cannot both be right at the same time, nor can the two be blended together. “

Truly? Or can they not be tied together on dogma? Dogma, the rules of law which “make” a religion what it is, that is, what is distinct and different from another, are often the chains which bind its followers to religious stagnation.

I have studied many religious faiths. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto, and a smattering of Judaism. Dogmas differ, the underlying quest for peace and self-knowledge are not.

You say, “When witnessing to a Buddhist, ask him this: ‘Do you have tangible proof of what occurs after death?'”

I will ask you a question, as in a way I am witnessing you: “If Buddha and Jesus had met, would they not have been the best and longest of friends?”

Religion has become another camp within which we hide. Go make a Buddhist friend. You might be greatly surprised what you will find there. Someone who looks much like you.

Thank you for your reply. I enjoy interacting with those who are honestly seeking to discover spiritual truths for their lives.

Allow me to address some of your challenges. You stated, “Go make a Buddhist friend. You might greatly be surprised what you will find there. Someone who looks much like you.” The Lotus Sutra states, “Whatever words are uttered should be chosen with care. The words we speak should always be words of sympathy and wisdom.” The Bible states in the book of Proverbs, “The one who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.” Let us therefore not have many words of false presumptions pass between us. I come from an island that is 80% Buddhist. My entire family clan has held to Buddhist teachings for hundreds of years. My parents and cousins remain in the Buddhist faith. I grew up under the teachings of the Buddhist temples near my house. I have been a member of the Young Buddhist Association. Therefore, I have many Buddhist friends including my own family members. I realize they look a lot like me, thank you very much. I am not driven to argue with them, only to share with them the greatest truth given by God to mankind.

I am not sure what Buddhist tradition you are familiar with. You are correct that Christianity and Buddhism differ on dogma. What exactly you mean and how you are using the term dogma I am not sure. If you look at the two theologies, they both cannot be right at the same time since they are contradictory on the very basics. Most schools of Theraveda Buddhism teach there is no God. Christianity is based totally on a relationship with God. According to Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction, two opposites cannot be true in a relationship with one another at the same time. You cannot have a God and not have a God and say both are true. That is

absurd. So the theologies go much farther than terms and definitions. In Mahayana Buddhism, there are hundreds of Buddha incarnations. The ultimate reality is impersonal, non-feeling, and non-being. In Christianity, the ultimate is a personal being. Once again applying Aristotle's law of non-contradiction, the two in a relationship cannot be true at the same time.

Yes, both religions claim peace as a product. However, even in this they are very different. In Buddhism peace is the ultimate goal. It comes as the result of eliminating all desires. In Christianity, peace is one of the fruits but not the ultimate goal. The Christian's goal is a relationship with the God of the universe who loves and cares for his creation and He has reached out to us to make this possible. The Buddhist quest for peace is self-focused. One attains peace through meditation, good works, and pure knowledge. In Buddhism we are driven to discipline ourselves to think correctly, behave correctly, etc… with the ultimate goal to rid ourselves of all desires. Although Buddhism teaches to not harm others and do good, salvation is found by the individual as he focuses on himself and one's attaining enlightenment and elimination of all desire. In Christianity, one focuses on Jesus Christ, being filled and empowered by His Spirit. Yes, we do work of self discipline, and becoming a godly person, but it comes as a result of a personal relationship with God and a desire to honor God. Christianity never seeks to eliminate all desire, the ultimate goal in Buddhism; Christianity seeks to build within each believer, pure desires that honor God. So even in our understanding of peace we differ in the definition and the quest for peace in significant ways.

Thank you for your response. I look forward to hearing from you.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

See Also Probe Answers Our E-mail:

- I Would Become A Christian Except that It's Based on Lies and Deception
- I Want to Know More About Buddhism, but Your Christianity is Garbage

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A Christian Student of Islam Responds to the Sept. 11 Attacks

The events of Sept. 11 have left the nation stunned, and horrified. We all can empathize with Mayor Giuliani when he said, "I can't believe they would do this to our city!" The events have also left us with many questions. Following is a brief response to a couple of the most obvious questions most of us are asking.

1) Do acts like those perpetrated on Sept. 11 find any justification in Muslim theology?

This is an important question, and one which would probably be answered in different ways by different muslim groups and leaders. First, there is no question that there are passages in the Qur'an and in the Hadith (sayings traditionally attributed to Muhammad) which endorse the concept of "jihad." I am not going to quote them here. But any reader can look up the following references in the Koran (2:244; 3:195; 4:95; 9:5; 47:4), or passages in the Hadith collected by Al-Bukhari. It is no secret that the early spread of Islam was due in

great measure to the carrying out of these injunctions by muslim forces. And today, extremist groups within the muslim world appeal to such passages as justification for their violent actions.

Jihad basically means “struggle” or “exertion,” and refers to efforts aimed at defending or advancing the cause of Islam in the world. Many muslims consider jihad to be a sixth basic obligation, in addition to the traditional five pillars of Islam. Jihad, however, is not limited to the popular concept of “holy war.” One muslim writer describes four types of jihad: that waged by the heart (the individual muslim’s internal spiritual and moral struggle against evil, often called the “greater jihad”), that waged by the tongue (speaking in behalf of Islam), by the hand (setting forth a good example for Islam), and by the sword (armed conflict with the enemies of Islam, the “lesser jihad”). (See the book entitled *Jihad: A Commitment to Universal Peace*, by Michael A. Boisard, p. 24.)

It must be noted, however, that the Koran itself places some limits on the practice of jihad: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors . . . . And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression” (2:190-193). Theoretically, then, “holy war” must be seen as justified by the “oppression” and “injustice” of the “enemies of Islam.” While many, perhaps most, muslims may condemn the actions carried out on Sept. 11, the extremists who do not can be expected to justify them on the grounds that in their eyes they were retribution for “injustice and oppression” against Islam.

2) What should our response be, as Christians, to these events?

This is not an easy or simple matter, for as Christians we find ourselves to be citizens of two kingdoms—one temporal and political, and the other spiritual and eternal. We must keep this in mind, as we prayerfully shape our response. Here are one Christian's thoughts.

First, we must pray. Pray for the more moderate leaders in the muslim world. Pray that they will see the folly of endorsing these acts of terror. Pray that their voice will be heard, and that they will find the courage to distance themselves from the extremist groups. We must pray also for those who are committed to violence, that God will frustrate their plans. "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan, that can succeed against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30).

We must pray for the leaders of our country, and of other countries that join with us (I Tim. 2:1-3). God has entrusted to government the responsibility of rewarding righteousness and punishing evil, and this includes the right to "bear the sword" or use military power in defense against evil (Rom. 13:1-5). We must pray for wisdom and courage on the part of our leaders, and that any military response will be shaped by the principles of the "just war" theory that has guided Christian thought since the time of St. Augustine. Any response must be "proportionate" and aimed at crippling the aggressor's ability to wage war, not at inflicting needless suffering on the innocent. As Christian citizens we should not only be prepared to pray for and support our government's response, but if called upon to serve in her defense.

Second, as Christian disciples, we must individually and personally turn to God at this time of great need. We must follow the example of the psalmist who said, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps. 56:3-4) It is only human to experience fear at a time such as this. But we must bring our fears to God, and rest on his almighty arm. Remember God's great and precious

promises: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10)! We must draw near to God in personal repentance and faith, turning away from trust in any false “gods,” for He alone is “our refuge and strength,” our “ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). We must be alert as well to opportunities to help others who are in search of a spiritual anchor in times of crisis. We can help by listening to people’s concerns, by offering to pray for them or help in some practical way. We should not pretend that we are unaffected by the events that are unfolding; but we can let it be known that we are finding hope and peace as we lean on our faithful God.

As followers of Christ, we must remember that at the level of our personal attitude and of our personal relationships, we are called not to hate but to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-28), not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17, 21). Many will allow these awful events to justify their own hatred and bigotry. We must not. While supporting the righteous actions of our government and of our military, we can at the same time ask God to lead us in showing love toward those in our personal circle of influence, whom others may be tempted to hate.

May God be gracious to us in protecting our land and our people. May He give wisdom and courage to our leaders, and to people of good will in every country. May He frustrate the plans of those who would spread terror. As He did in the days of Joseph, may He take that which is meant for evil and use it for good. May his goodness, justice, and faithfulness be magnified in all his works, and in us as his people. Amen.

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Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

Christ's last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today's church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible's insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . ."

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral

interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking "Christianese"—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, "[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation."{1}

Charles Colson writes, "We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the 'Culture war' is over and we (the church) have lost."{2}

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let's see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

> Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.{3}

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."{4} Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."{5} Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."{6}

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17

Jesus prays for His disciples saying, “Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth.” Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the “belt of truth.” Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God’s truth is the foundation on which the church’s message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, “This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . .”{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

> If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must

> be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer's conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.{10}

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.{11} 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.{12}

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."{13}

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."{14}

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are

contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, “Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true.”

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband’s funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn’t say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn’t matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.{15} 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.{16}

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with

foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.' But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, "set apart Christ as Lord." Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer's heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member's life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have." We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word "answer" in the Greek is *apologia,* which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they

believed.{17} We can't expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can't give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe's ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.

2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.

3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.

4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.

6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research

Group, 1999), 44.

7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.

8. Barna, *Boiling Point,* (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point,* 78.

11. Ibid., 80.

12. McDowell and Hostetller, 21.

13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.

14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.

15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online,* 19 April 2001, 2.

16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online,* 12 July 2000.

17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

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14. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

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