“Are the Ideas of the Jesus Seminar Now Catholic Doctrine?”

I am a philosophy major at Oregon State University where Marcus Borg is a professor. Many of the churches in our community ascribe to his teaching.

Here is my question…I have a dear friend that grew up in an evangelical Catholic home and knows Christ as her personal savior. She has been attending the local Catholic church here in Corvallis and recently has been strongly confronted by one of the deacons on issues surrounding the literalism of the Bible (i.e. the ideas of the Jesus Seminar, taught by Borg). The deacon has been telling her that Biblical non-literalism as Borg teaches is part of Catholic doctrine and part of the Catechism. Is this accurate? Is this indeed an international Catholic teaching or does it depend on the individual parish or person?

I would appreciate any wisdom you might have on this topic. Honestly, it’s been really heated here lately, as Borg’s new book has just been released. We would love it if either of you (or other speakers from Probe) could come out and do a presentation for all of the confused Christians. There is a strong evangelical movement in Corvallis, but unfortunately, it tends to be strongly anti-intellectual and isn’t well respected in the university community. As a student, I want to be able to better understand the critical issues at hand and be able to represent Christ in grace, truth, and love.

Send me whatever thoughts you have…I read article on the Jesus Seminar through Leadership University and that helped, but I really would love even more detailed information if you have any.

Thank you so much for serving as a resource for students of the Word!

Thank you for your recent e-mail concerning the Jesus Seminar. I can empathize with your "dilemma" under the shadow of Marcus Borg at your university.

I don't know if you have checked the Probe Website (www.probe.org) or not, but I would direct you to at least two essays: one that I wrote is called The Jesus Seminar, and a second was written by my colleague, Rick Wade, entitled The Historical Christ. You will find good bibliographical info for further study.

I would rather doubt that the tenets of the Jesus Seminar are now officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. I would recommend that your friend ask for official, written documentation from this priest for his assertion that this is true. I am 99% positive that no such position has been taken by the Catholic church and its biblical scholars. There is too much at stake for the church to take such a radical stand which undermines much of what they have held to be true about Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to come and debate Borg, I would suggest that you contact my good friend Dr. J. P. Moreland and/or Michael J. Wilkins at Talbot Seminary in southern California. They edited a book entitled *Jesus Under Fire* which was published by Zondervan in 1995. Each chapter is written by a evangelical scholar, each of which develops and refutes the major arguments of the Jesus Seminar position.

I have been studying this topic for several years, and following the literature, but these men, as New Testament Scholars, are current on this issue and have devoted the kind of study and depth necessary to give good account of themselves with a fine scholar like Borg.

I can appreciate your frustration with the general Christian

community. Most are not “armed” for the battle of ideas which we face. That is why I left Campus Crusade in 1973 and began Probe Ministries. At the time I gave oversight to the Campuses in the Southwest U.S. The worldview America has come to embrace generally now once existed only on a few campuses: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, U. of Wisconsin (Madison), Columbia U., and U. of Colorado.

I found myself hard pressed to respond to the questions of these students. So I decided the Lord was calling upon me not to “curse the darkness”, but rather “light some lamps!” The early Christians, it is said, were effective because they OUT-THOUGHT and OUT-LOVED the ancient world! In fact, for 250 years after the apostles died off, the church did nothing but try to survive and answer/refute/respond to all the doctrinal challenges which came from the Jewish and Pagan communities without, and from sects and heresies within. They were so busy doing this, that it was not until 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea) that the addressed/clarified the doctrine of the Trinity! The FIRST theology of the early church was APOLOGETICAL theology, and we find ourselves facing the same kind of circumstances and challenges today.

So you hang in there! And tell your friend to do the same. Challenge the priest and don’t be bullied by him. If it IS an official position, tell her that I requested that it be documented so I will be able to confirm to others who ask that this is truly official. If I were a betting man (and I am ::::SMILE!::::), your friend will find that no such affirmation of this policy will be forthcoming.

With Warm Regards in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Where’s the Glory?

School is out. Frenetic shoppers jam stores and freeways. Lines are long and tempers short. Freshly cut trees from Home Depot are hustled into dens, as ornament boxes reappear from the attic. Families gather again for the annual ritual of tree trimming as the scent of cider fills the air.

Telephone circuits and AOL are loaded with users greeting loved ones, discussing gifts and travel plans. Beachwear and ski outfits are purchased; muscles are limbered up for the physical ordeals ahead. Giving and receiving fits, having fun, eating, drinking, sporting events, parties, being together with family and friends . . . these contemporary “sugar plums” dance in our heads.

But, . . .**“Where’s the glory?”** It is glory that makes the difference, and unless God somehow appears in our midst, something is missing in our celebration of Christmas. Biblical history reveals to us a chain of events through time when God has done just that—He has showed up—and when He did, somehow things were different, as His creatures sensed a measure of the **presence** of the **glory of God**. Consider this:

Glory in the Mount. Moses encountered it at Sinai in the burning bush and on the Holy Mount. The Israelites followed it out of bondage, manifesting itself as bright cloud (by day) and pillar of fire (by night). Levites and Prophets observed its awesome presence within both Tabernacle and Temple until national disobedience and spiritual decadence forced its withdrawal for four hundred years. During that time the glory of Sinai was replaced by pagan, Gentile rule: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Syria, and finally the crushing boot of Rome.

Glory in the Manger. Amidst this darkness, the glory returned

once more . . . first glimpsed upon the innocent, lovely face of a newborn named, **"Immanuel,"** which means, *"God with us."* The countenance of this Child was like no other—irresistibly inviting and warm, yet mustering forth from those who beheld Him an urge to worship, to remove one's shoes as if on Holy ground. Never had the divine Presence been stronger, and those who had eyes to see, beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Glory in the Messenger. This glory of the Only Begotten from the bosom of the Father was never intended in the divine plan for just a handful of first century devotees. It was meant to radiate out from the heart and soul of every follower of the Way—from *then* until *now*. Through the promise of a Comforter, each of the faithful would possess Treasure inside an earthen vessel: Christ within, the hope of glory—for time AND eternity. That glory means little unless someone is there to notice it, to behold it, to ponder it. And today there is no holy mountain, no temple, no Messiah in the flesh to manifest God's glory.

Where then *is* the Glory? Where can it be noticed and pondered today? An early Christian of the second century tells us: *"In my brother's face I behold the Lord."*

May it be so for you and me . . . this year.

The Muses

Picture yourself back at the university in a graduate comparative literature class.

Your humanities professor enters the room and announces, "You

know, as we begin this course unit on ‘ritual,’ I believe we would do well to invoke the gods.” He continues, “You may not be aware of this, but when we call upon the Muses, they really answer . . . *they come to us*.”

“All of our human rituals can be traced back to our evolutionary heritage and the mating dances of birds and mammals. It is part of nature’s survival machinery. For example, the male bird who best performed the mating dance was obviously more likely to attract a mate to assure its own survival and pass on its genes to its progeny.”

The professor elaborates, “All of what we call our aesthetic and religious aspirations can actually be traced to, and are deeply imbedded in, these biological imperatives of our ancestors. Through evolution they are part of the deep lexicon which we inherited from our first parents.”

“And so,” says the professor, “I would like first to invoke the goat-footed god named Pan, who assures us of fertility and thus, the perpetuation of our species, *homo–sapiens*.”

“Secondly, I would like to invoke the Islamic-Judaic-Christian God of Silence, who reminds us that He cannot be touched, but by invoking Him we confirm the reality of our own existence in the universe *as compared to His silence*” (italics mine).

“Let us read this poetry in a spirit of prayer,” says the prof. He then reads the invocations, and the majority of the students smile their approval, seeming to enjoy the exercise.

In a later session of the same class, one of the students chose as a project the reenactment of a pagan Greek sacrificial rite, with the class participating on a voluntary basis. With a processional, songs, imaginary bull and meal offerings, the student “priest” clothed in some strange garments was able to create an atmosphere in that class that literally sent chills up and down my back!

Yes, these things actually occurred in one of my own graduate classes at a university right here in Dallas some time ago!

We call this “Higher Education.”

These mystical, new age ideas that espouse the reality of some transcendent “something,” like “The Force” in Star Wars, are capturing the hearts and minds of our children and grandchildren as we speak.

University student minds are increasingly inclined to believe that “Something” does exist out there beyond their own physical existence; and they also in increasing numbers believe it is personally beneficial to *make contact* with that “Something”:

> *to give them strength;*
> *to show them right and wrong;*
> *to help them solve their problems and make decisions.*

Those of us who are Christians know better. Some indefinable force is not what they need, but rather the Lord Jesus Christ, who claimed to be the Truth and gave us His Word so that we might understand and live that truth. He is the only God who can help these young men and women choose the right path as they stand at the threshold of their adult lives.

That is why I have now given forty years of my life to find ways to impact university students, to give them biblical perspectives on life and to strengthen their discernment in evaluating ideas. The corridors of “higher learning” are filled with many gullible, media-brainwashed youngsters who stand for nothing and fall for anything that sounds good to them.

Frankly, there are easier places to minister. We often are met with hostility and contempt when we go to the campus to represent a reasoned, Christian point of view.

But we at Probe Ministries are compelled to persevere. And we continue to go there, because we know that the university world is as much a fountainhead for error as it is for truth. And it is definitely strategic as we look to the future. Abraham Lincoln perhaps captured this best when he said, "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will become the philosophy of the government in the next."

Rights and Wrongs

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, discusses the true source of ethics.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

During a recent meeting of college educators at Harvard University, Cornell President Frank Rhodes rose to address the issue of reforms, suggesting that it was time for universities to pay "real and sustained attention to students' intellectual and moral well-being." Immediately there were gasps, even catcalls. One indignant student stood to demand of Rhodes, "Who is going to do the instructing? Whose morality are we going to follow?" The audience applauded thunderously, believing that the young man had settled the issue by posing an unanswerable question. Rhodes sat down, unable or unwilling to respond.

This interchange between university president and college student hits at the most basic question in formulating any and every system of ethics, namely that of identifying the *basis* for determining the standards we humans designate as "right" or "wrong."

What is ethics?

Ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning, “what ought to be,” or, “a place of refuge,” such as a cave, solid and absolute. The dictionary defines ethics as

(1) the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment, or

(2) the system or code of morals of a particular philosopher, religion, group, etc.
Dr. Albert Schweitzer defined ethics as “the name we give for our concern for good behavior.”

Human Ethical Universality

No human lives without the ethical dimension. Statements like, “That’s not fair,” or “You promised,” reveal the common ethical assumptions humans have come to expect of one another. This is not to say that each human always acts responsibly toward his fellows. In every culture we find individuals who choose to ignore the commonly held standards; they choose to rape, to steal, to kill. Breaking established standards is therefore a *relative* issue; that is, some do, and some don’t. But an *absolute* is also involved: no one likes to be raped, robbed, or murdered.

OPTIONS FOR VALUES

One can say that every ethical value involves some standard of behavior, and every standard is defined in a *prescriptive* manner. Ethical standards are expressed in terms of “ought” and “should,” or “ought not” and “should not.” They transcend the language of *description*, speaking not only of “what is,” but rather “what should be.” Where do we find such standards? What kinds of foundational possibilities are available to us upon which to build an ethical system? The options are as follows:

The Natural Ethic (Nature)

> "All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
> All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
> All discord, harmony not understood;
> All partial evil, universal good;
> And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
> One truth is clear, *whatever is, is right.*"

Alexander Pope
Definition: "Oughts" are derived from what "is."

Mortimer Adler called this an attempt "to get conclusions in the imperative mood from premises entirely in the indicative mood." This view presupposes the origination of value is found in the facts, the observation of nature.

"What is ethically right is related *in some way* to what is materially true" (G. G. Simpson). Example: A man runs a red light. He cannot draw a conclusion of whether or not to run the red light without having an earlier presupposition or standard in place concerning that ethical choice: "One shouldn't run red lights."

Implications:

To have true moral values, people must get them from somewhere other than the actual world of description.

This view destroys the very concepts of good and evil, because "what is" contains both. To speak of good and evil becomes nonsensical. Charles Manson said, "If God is one, what is bad?" Baudelaire lamented, "If God exists he is the Devil."

This view does not answer the question of predatorial/survival life in nature. All that we call "human" would be destroyed if people practiced this natural ethic consistently and universally.

Not many hold this view seriously. T. H. Huxley admitted that though evolution is "true," it leads to bad ethics. Even evolutionists choose not to live in such a world. Instead, they philosophically smuggle Christian ethics arbitrarily into their system and hold it *romantically* upon their naturalistic base.

If we are to have ethics, we must find them outside the natural realm.

The Consensus Ethic (Majority Rule)

Definition: Whatever a cultural group approves of is deemed right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong. In America, we find the most popular expression of cultural relativism demonstrated in the opinion poll (e.g., the Clinton Scandal).

Implications:

The grand result of the Kinsey Report on American sexual ethics in the 1950's was that people bought the idea that if a *majority* of citizens accepted something as right or wrong, it was.

Cultural relativism claims to be based on a scientific view of morals. Admittedly, statistical analysis of human behavior is the true and proper task of sociologists. But within the discipline, unfortunately, there is, by design, or by inference, a strong tendency to make value judgments about the results of research. Sociology exists *only* to tell us *what* people are doing, not what they *should* be doing. True values must be found somewhere else.

Ethics by majority may actually have little to do with morality. A society can become corrupt. In New Guinea, for example, the tribe of Papuans have a 100 per cent majority in their view on the virtue of cannibalism. Does their unanimous consent on this issue make it moral? By such reasoning, if 51% of the German people assented to the extermination of Jewry by

Hitler and his henchmen, then their actions were “right,” and other cultures should have withheld any criticism of German sovereignty in their own internal affairs.

Cultural relativism is really “status-quoism,” providing no strong motive for social change. It is also capricious over time. For example, in 1859, slavery in the United States was socially acceptable and abortion was illegal. Today, the reverse is true.

Those who prefer this ethical foundation must face one very dangerous fact: **If there is no standard by which society can be judged and held accountable, then society becomes the judge.** When that happens, no one is safe—minorities, the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, and perhaps even the blond-headed or the left-handed!

The Arbitrary Ethic (Power)

A teenager complains to her mother, “Why can’t I go out tonight?” Mom replies, “Because I say so!” No reason is given, other than that of the mother imposing her will on her daughter. This is the arbitrary, *de facto* use of power: “Might makes right.”

Definition: An individual or elitist group sets itself up as arbiter of values and uses the necessary force to maintain these values. Democratic consensus rules from below; arbitrary absolutists rule from above.

Critique:

The arbiter can be a dictator, a parliament, a supreme court, a political party, or any elite configuration which has the wherewithal to impose its will upon the populace.

What is enforced is based solely upon what the arbiter decides will be enforced. Emperor worship of the Roman Caesars brought persecution to Jews and Christians who refused to practice it.

Plato’s Republic would be governed by its philosopher kings. The Catholic Inquisitors summarily tortured and executed unrepentant heretics. B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* utopia would be carefully managed by beneficent planners through total environmental control and behavior modification. Soviet Russia was ruthlessly governed by an all-powerful Central Committee and its KGB enforcers.

It is important to remember that such arbiters can make something *legal* but not *moral.* The 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion is the most pertinent contemporary example. The judges, choosing to ignore medical, legal, and religious precedents on the true humanity of the unborn, made an arbitrary, pragmatic decision. This ruling was legal, but not necessarily moral.

The great flaw in this approach is that it presupposes great trust in those who govern. History has not confirmed the wisdom of placing such confidence in those who wield absolute power. The balancing of power in the U.S. Constitution between the various branches of government reflects the wariness of its Framers to give undue authority to any sole federal entity.

“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It leads to despotism, tyranny, and bondage.

The True Absolute (Transcendence)

> “There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea . . . if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first

> place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another's way; and secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. "But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to. . . . And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.
>
> "Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonizing the thing inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for? What course the whole fleet ought to be on? . . ." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Definition: C. S. Lewis has here identified the "three parts of morality," the first two of which humans are well acquainted with: internal moral deficiencies and conflict with others through ethical choices. It is the *third* part for which all humans desperately need and long, namely, some *objective* standard to which all humans must adhere. Such a standard necessarily *transcends* the world of description. It presupposes that God exists and has spoken, or *revealed* such standards. The true absolute contends that the Creator of man AND nature has given such values that are commensurate with the way He made us and appropriate to people's problems and aspirations.

Example: The Ten Commandments provide the boundaries for the definition of humanness; any act contrary to this true absolute is a violation of our humanity. Further, these standards are not merely *external* principles, but rather the

very essence of the nature and character of God.

Implications:

Some things are **right**; some are **wrong**, and objectively so. This ethical system is based on *normative* principles rather than subjective, *utilitarian* ones.

It also provides a basis for conviction: what was right yesterday will be right today. The individual is protected against the *whole* of society—wicked kings, pragmatic judges, corrupt politicians, and decadent populace.

There is also a true and legitimate motive for fighting evil, an objective basis for social change.

ETHICAL SYSTEMS BUILT ON THE ABOVE

Natural Ethic

1. Behaviorism

All of our actions are the result of either our genetic make-up (see Probe articles "Human Nature" and "Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality") or our environment.

Premises:

This system presupposes that nothing exists beyond the material realm.

What is called **mind** is reduced to physical and chemical reactions.

We cannot act upon the world; rather, the world acts upon us.

Critique:

There can be no human responsibility for actions.

And yet, behaviorists themselves appeal to a standard of justice when wronged.

Contrary to the contention of the behaviorists, there *are* both philosophical reasons and scientific evidence to support the belief that we do possess an immaterial substance.

2. Darwinism

3. Marxism

Humanistic Systems

1. Cultural Relativism, consensus (See above)

2. Arbitrary Absolute (See Above)

3. Situation Ethics

This system seeks to use the rules whenever they are useful, but it discards them if they happen to conflict with *love.* Joseph Fletcher is the chief proponent.

Premises:

The sole arbiter of morality in any situation is love; it is the *only* absolute, according to Fletcher.

Love should be defined in utilitarian terms. William James said, “What works is right.” Actions should be judged by whether or not they contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number (lifeboat ethics).

The end justifies the means.

Critique:

Everyone may have a different opinion of what is loving or unloving in a given situation. If “love” is an absolute, humanity has a very difficult time in applying it to real life. Thus, morality is reduced to a matter of personal

preference: “It all depends upon your point of view.”

If morality is based on the consequences, we have to be able to predict with accuracy these consequences if we want to know whether or not we are acting morally. In short, one would have to BE God in order to always do the loving thing ahead of time.

4. Emotive Ethics

In this view nothing is literally right or wrong; these terms are simply expressions of personal emotion and as such are neither true nor false.

Premises:

When we speak of good or evil, these remain simply expressions of our own subjective feelings about what we have encountered or experienced.

We can **des**cribe, but we cannot **pre**scribe.

Thus, all actions are morally neutral.

Critique:

The most an emotivist can say is, “I don’t *like* other ethical theories. I *like* my own opinion on this issue.”

Emotivists cannot verify their assumption that the only meaningful utterances are statements of factual or personal observation and preference. Some other meaningful system for true moral acts may exist beyond their experience and myopic world view.

5. Hedonism

Hedonists, like emotivists, are individually directed along the lines of their personal choices and desires. The hedonist (or Epicurean), however has a goal in mind: the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) believed that there were two

primary choices in life—to experience either pain or pleasure. His philosophy is based on avoiding the former at all costs and relentlessly pursuing the latter with no consideration given to the consequences upon others. This, "If it feels good, do it," mentality fits well today in a society which stresses that the individual (me) is most important.

6. Pantheism

The ethical system which flows out of pantheism and new age thinking is similar to both emotivism and hedonism, and is really more *humanistic* than *theistic.* While Christian theism is God-centered, and naturalism is man-centered, pantheism is world-centered. But the focus is still upon man, and the world becomes god. In pantheism, man and nature become one, and together become the only "god" which exists. Man thus becomes his own god; he *is* god, or at least a part of god. Ethics becomes, then, those choices which keep one in harmony with the "cosmic oneness," and salvation comes from looking *within* to maintain that harmony. This process, like all Eastern Mysticism, tends to blur reality and the ethical distinctions of "right" and "wrong."

Inadequate Absolutes: The Moral Dilemma

In summary, there are two reasons why man, acting autonomously, cannot establish a valid and satisfying moral theory on either naturalistic or humanistic moral theory.

The scientific method is limited.

Science can collect facts, but these pieces of information cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. It ignores the very real possibility that something real exists beyond the natural world, and it is thus doomed to look *within* its own self-defined "closed system" for an adequate ethical base. Unfortunately, none honestly exists, philosophically, except the natural law of nature, "red in tooth and claw."

Relativism is always self-contradictory.

Although relativism disclaims the existence of absolutes, it must assume the existence of an absolute by which other theories can be judged. The problem today is that society has abandoned belief in a transcendent, absolute truth, a morally binding source of authority that is above our rights as individuals. To modern man, then, there is no absolute other than perhaps the belief that "there are no absolutes," which is itself a contradiction.

It assumes there are no intrinsic values, yet it must assume that intrinsic values exist whenever it gives guidance in making moral decisions.

If ends and means are relative, regardless of the ethical system preferred, ones own point of reference must also be in flux.

FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL ABSOLUTES

1. It is based on an authority higher than man (Creator God) and *revelation*, rather than human experience, both individually or collectively.

2. The absolute standard for morality is God Himself, and every moral action must be judged in the light of His nature.

3. Man is not simply an animal, but a unique, moral being created in the image of God.

4. God's moral revelation has intrinsic value; it is *normative* rather than *utilitarian*. If the above is true, a homeless person possesses the same God-given worth as the president of the United States.

5. Scripture is accepted as morally authoritative, the Word of

God, being derived from God.

6. In the Scriptures, law and love are harmonized, and obedience to God's laws is not legalism.

7. God's moral revelation was given for the benefit of humankind.

8. These moral principles are timeless, having historical continuity, and humans—individually or collectively—experience the common grace of God whenever and wherever they are adhered to.

9. True Christian morality deals with intentions, as well as actions, seeks the glory of God instead of pleasure and self-gratification, and encourages service to others, rather than serving self.

God alone knows all the goals, determines all morality, and allows us to "play the game." But he does not allow us to make the rules. Modern and postmodern man, seemingly loosed from such transcendent restrictions, has chosen to make up his own. The folly of such a reference point for life is everywhere apparent.

The Stable

As the Christmas season again draws near, our hearts and minds reflect once more upon that unusual, but wondrous night in tiny Bethlehem where God joined Himself to the stream of a struggling humanity. He had come on a solemn mission: to lay a pathway of life and freedom for the fallen ones whom He called His brothers. And on that humble bed of straw a tiny heart

beat strong and sure in the breast of a perfect human being: *Yeshua* the *Messiah.*

All recorded about this Incarnation event has symbolic or prophetic meaning. Consider the straw filled manger itself. A crude, but appropriate cradle for this baby King of Kings. In John 6:58 Jesus said, "This is the **Bread** which came down out of heaven—he who eats this bread shall live forever."

The *stable* was a **place of life**; a source of nourishment for hungry ones. And so it is with our Lord. No matter how long we have been Christians, nor how much we know about the Bible, we are still continually dependent upon Christ alone who can fill the hungry, thirsty places in our lives. He said, "Let him **keep on coming** and let him **keep on drinking** (John 7:37)."

The *swaddling cloth* wrapped around our tiny Lord suggests the stable was also a **place of death.** Jesus' battered corpse would one day be wrapped again in cloth like this and placed in a rich man's tomb. And thus the shadow of the Cross was always there, even at the beginning of His life in the midst of this humble and happy scene. One day the death, only here suggested, would come with agonizing force upon this man who took our place and became the Author and Protector of our faith. He is the one "who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2)."

This brings us to the visits of the *shepherds* and the *wise men.* These were men of extremely different lifestyles, representing all humanity—from simple, country folk to sophisticated knowledge seekers. They all came and bowed down, because the stable was also a **place of worship.** The affluent and able wise men laid their lavish gifts before the Holy Babe. The poor shepherds could place only themselves before Him. But God received them all, for *all* were *truly* wise. Anyone who kneels to honor, worship, and serve this unique Person demonstrates true wisdom.

As we enjoy this Christmas Season with family and friends, let us remember that the **Gift** *on* the Tree is what gives significant to the gifts *under* the tree.

The Most Important Decision of Your Life

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, shares how to know God and go to heaven when you die.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

I have come to share a message that changed my life. I was not a bad boy—but not a good boy either. I went to church with my parents and was baptized when I was 12.

If you had asked me if I were a Christian, I would have said yes. But for twenty-one years God was just a formal idea to me rather than a personal friend. I professed Christianity, but I lived my life as a practical atheist.

At the University, I studied music. I loved to sing, especially the tenor arias from the great operas. As I neared my final year, I was having success with my career goals, but my heart was empty. I felt that something was missing from my life. I did not know at the time that, as the empty stomach calls for food, I was suffering from spiritual hunger.

Pascal, the great French physicist eloquently expressed this hunger when he said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus

Christ."

Augustine, the great theologian and bishop speaks of the same hunger: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

I thought I had many unsolvable problems then, but I soon discovered that solving my spiritual hunger helped many of my other problems to vanish.

I met a fellow student, an athlete, who had the radiance of a Christian on his face. A simple conversation with him changed the entire direction of my life that day in September, 1959.

He told me that just as there are physical laws in the universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern our relationship with God. They are called "laws" because they are universally true. For example, we do not break the law of gravity. . . it breaks us. Jump off a high building and we discover the truth about the law of gravity.

So what are these spiritual laws? I will share with you the four my friend related to me that day. And like the law of gravity, they are true, whether we believe them or not.

I. God loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly." That is one of the reasons He came to make our lives rich and full of purpose.

Everything in this room has a purpose—the microphone, the piano, the stage, the chairs, the sound system, the lectern. What is man's purpose? What is your purpose? This is an important question.

Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant

life Jesus promised? The second law tells us:

II. Man is sinful and separated from God; thus, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.

The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." God has given us standards to live by in such things as the Ten Commandments. And James tells us that "if a man keeps the whole law (the Ten Commandments) but offends in **one** place, he is guilty of all."

I am not saying that every person is as bad as he/she could be; I am saying that every person has fallen short of the mark, has failed to meet what God has required. And what God requires of us in our personal standard of behavior and righteousness is as unattainable as throwing a rock and trying to hit the North Pole.

Humans have tried to address this problem of personal, moral failure in various ways. Some, in the face of some 4000 years of documented history which records horrific, bloody, and unending incidents of man's inhumanity to man, some have actually persisted in the belief that man is basically **good**.

Others, more realistic and honest about man's tendency toward selfishness and evil, have attempted to explain the reason man displays such destructive behavior. Here are three explanations widely held across the world:

(1) Some suggest that man's moral failure is **biological;** that it is simply the vestigial remains of aggression from our primitive, animal, evolutionary past.

(2) Others argue that mans moral flaw is basically **sociological**, that man lacks the proper environment necessary for upright behavior.

(3) Still others insist that the human problem is essentially **intellectual**, and if people knew more, they would understand what was right, and they would do it. Curiously, in the United States, over 35,000 laws and statutes exist simply to try and enforce the Ten Commandments! We *do* know what is right, but we choose often not to do it!

These three theories have one thing in common: each one approaches the human moral condition from the standpoint of what man lacks.

The **biologist** tells us that more time is needed for man to work out and eliminate the remnants of his primitive aggression. Tennyson optimistically hopes for this in his poem, *In Memoriam*: "Moving ever upward, outward, let the ape and tiger die."

The **sociologist** tells us that what humans basically need is aproper or better environment, and if they had it, human behavior would improve. Modern America is a vivid and tragic example that abundance will not make people good.

Others suggest that man's lack is **information**, and therefore education is the answer. We lack sufficient time; we lack a proper environment; we lack the necessary information.

But our real dilemma is not what is *lacking,* but what is *present!* And every academic discipline has to allow for and explain what it is:

> Biology calls it primitive instinct;
> Philosophy calls it irrational thinking;
> Psychology calls it emotional weakness;
> Sociology calls it cultural lag;
> History calls it class struggle;
> Humanities calls it the human flaw, or *hubris;*
> The Bible calls it sin.

Jesus speaks of this presence in Mark 7:15-23 as something

which comes from within man, something which issues forth from his inner life:

> *"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. . . .Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? . . .That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from* ***within****, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."*

Albert Einstein echoes this when he said, "It is not the explosive power of the atom which I fear: but rather the explosive power for evil in the heart of man which I greatly fear."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23).

And if this sinful condition were not bad enough, we learn from the Bible that there are consequences for our sin: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

What is the meaning of death? Death always means separation. *Physical death* is a separation of the soul/spirit from the body. People who are present when someone dies can actually observe the moment when this takes place.

Spiritual death is also a separation, from God Himself. Man's sin keeps him separated from the one he seeks to know. Mahatma Ghandi, the great Hindu teacher, speaks of this separation

when he says in his autobiography, “O wretched man that I am! It is a constant source of torture to me that I am separated from the One I know to be my very life and being, and I know it is my sin that hides Him from me!”

T.S. Eliot expresses this same despair when he says:

> “We are the hollow men,
> We are the stuffed men,
> Head piece filled with straw.
> No head—No heart.
> Life does not end with a bang,
> But with a whimper.”

Feelings of this separation, this alienation, have prompted men through the ages to try and find a way to bridge this gap, this estrangement, from God. And historically, all of these attempts originate with man, and reflect his own efforts to reach God by trying to be good, trying to keep the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, or by observing some religious practice.

The problem with these approaches is that one never knows when he or she has been good enough or done enough! Karl Marx said that “Religion is the opiate of the people,” meaning that it appeared to be something necessary and helpful for humans, whether true or not. And many people console themselves by attending church, trying to be basically good and decent, and drugging themselves into believing God will accept them for making such efforts. Marx believed these naïve human inclinations should be eliminated.

Actually, the teachings of Jesus agree with Marx on this point. Jesus taught that religion is the enemy of Christianity, because religion represents man’s best attempts to reach up and find God. And it is interesting to note that in Jesus’ day He was most critical of the self-righteous, religious people He encountered: the “good” ones.

He said, “Those who are well do not need a physician.” (Matthew 9:12) When does someone go to the doctor? When well, or sick? What Jesus was implying is that the notion that one’s good deeds or relatively good life were already sufficient to bridge the gap between himself and his God, then what Christ came to accomplish through His sacrificial death on the cross is totally negated and unnecessary. In other words, He was saying, If you have drugged yourself into believing that your own good works have secured your salvation, then He, the Great Physician, can do nothing for you.

This is what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 2, 8-9 when he said: “For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”

The Ten Commandments were never given by God with the expectation that man would keep them flawlessly. They were given as a guide, a teaching tool. Or, in medical terminology, the commandments parallel the purpose of an X-ray machine, which can only *reveal* the condition of the broken bone within a human body. It identifies the problem but can provide no solution for knitting the bone back together.

This is what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees, to recognize the true spiritual condition of their lives, in that as good and righteous as they tried to be, they were still hopelessly short of the mark which God required. A gospel preacher once pointed out that it was not difficult to get people saved, but it was extremely difficult to get them *lost!* We must first honestly face our true spiritual condition.

Once we have come to grips with this fact of our own personal sin and failure before God and accept it as true of ourselves, we are ready to consider the third spiritual law:

III. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin; through Him we can know and experience God's love and purpose for our lives.

The second spiritual law reveals to us the bad news about man's condition. This third law now gives us the *euaggelion,* the gospel, the good news from God:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We have established that "religion" is defined as man's best efforts to reach up and find God. Christianity is unique and exactly the opposite and is defined as God's only effort to reach down and find man. Religion is spelled "**Do.**" Christianity is spelled "**Done!"**

Jesus stated the purpose of His divine mission in John 6:38-40:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. . . And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. . .For this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life: and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

John the disciple, an eyewitness, recounts to us the last words Christ uttered on the cross: "When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (9:30). "Mission accomplished!" "Done!"

It is for this reason that Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6) He claimed to be the One who, by

His Incarnation and death, had come from heaven to build a bridge made of Himself, which could alone completely span the spiritual chasm between sinful human beings and a holy God.

The exclusiveness of this statement by Christ offends many. It is too narrow, they say. But honestly, some things in life *are* narrow. I have always appreciated a narrow-minded pilot, for example, who insists in landing his plane on the runway!

One of most beautiful cities in America is San Francisco, California. You may know that at the opening into the vast San Francisco Bay there stands a gigantic, rust-red suspension bridge called the Golden Gate Bridge. It allows people and cars to get back and forth from the city on the South to the picturesque little seaside village, Sausalito, and the Napa Valley on the North. People have a choice if they want to get to Sausalito: they can take the bridge, or they can swim in the cold Pacific with its treacherous currents flowing in and out of the Bay. Everyone decides to trust the Bridge.

This bridge is also narrow. And since it was built in the 1930s, no one has ever petitioned the city of San Francisco to put up another bridge alongside the Golden Gate so people can get to Sausalito. It is not necessary, not needed. Now the real question is whether Jesus' claim to be the bridge, the only bridge, which gives access to God, is true.

There is a story recounted about a certain man who operated a drawbridge over a large river which he raised and lowered, allowing the boats to pass through. One day he brought his small son with him to the drawbridge. Late in the morning a large boat approached filled with people. As he was raising the drawbridge to let the big ship pass, his little son fell directly on to the great gear wheel. Horror-stricken, the man was faced with the decision of imperiling the many lives of those on the swift, oncoming craft, or saving his son. Moments later, the crushing of the little son's body in the machinery was accompanied by the tears and the crushed heart of a father

who sacrificed his beloved child for the lives of the strangers on the boat.

That is the significance of the Cross. Jesus' life for ours. He is our substitute, our bridge, and access to God. He died so we might live. He was separated from God the Father ("My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?") so we might not have to be. . . for an eternity.

> "All we like sheep have gone astray,
> Each of us has turned to his own way;
> But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.
> He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
> Yet He did not open his mouth.
> Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
> And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
> So He did not open His mouth. . . .
> He was cut off out of the land of the living,
> For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due. . .
> Although He had done no violence
> Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
> But it pleased the Lord
> To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
> If His soul would render Himself as a guilt offering. . .
> By His knowledge the Righteous One,
> My Servant, will justify the many,
> As He will bear their iniquities."
> —Isaiah 53

What this means to you and to me is that if we were the only two people who ever lived on planet earth, Christ would still have come and do what He did just for the two of us. That is how much He loves us. He had you and me specifically in mind as He carried that cross up the *Via Dolorosa* on that day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. And on that Cross He took your place and mine and bore our Hell so that we might have

the chance at Heaven.

Now it is most important to make something crystal clear. I want to pose a question. If the above things are really true, how many people did Jesus die for? We find the answer in John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

We learn from this that Christ died for the world. His death is sufficient for every human being who ever lived on the planet.

But we must ask a second question: Does that fact that Christ died for *all* mean that everyone is a Christian? Obviously not. His death is *sufficient* for everyone, but it is only *efficient* for certain ones. Which ones? The fourth and final spiritual law tells us:

IV. We must personally receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into our lives in order to become a Christian.

John 1:12 and 13 tell us that “As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe on His name. . who were born not of blood (through inheritance), nor of the will of the flesh (human will power), nor of the will of man (priestly pronouncement), but of God (the new birth).”

The Bible speaks of receiving Christ as similar to receiving a gift. We have seen this mentioned in Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8,9 above. This “gift” concept marks out an approach to God that is diametrically opposed to any and all religious systems based on human effort we have already discussed.

The “spirit” of gift-giving is one of **grace.** How does one accept a gift? The appropriate response is “Thank you.” If you

were to try to give money in exchange for a gift given you, the other person would be highly insulted and offended. The graciousness of the gift-giver would be spoiled by such a response. Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved favor.

We cannot earn this gift.

We do not deserve this gift.

We can only say "Thank you."

What God has so graciously provided for our salvation is so unlike the way humans think about such things, that no human would ever have thought up such a solution to the fallen, human condition.

And so we humans have a choice with respect to our personal salvation. We can continue our own religious efforts with the uncertain hope of being acceptable to God when we die, or we can accept the free gift of God, His Son's death on our behalf. And when you come to think about it, if God intended for man to achieve his own salvation through self-effort, then He made a terrible mistake: He let His own Son die on the Cross, which was evidently (along this line of reasoning) not really necessary! Salvation through self-effort negates the very significance of the Cross and Christ's death on our behalf.

Now how do we receive this gift? We do it by exercising faith through the exercise of our will. It is a personal faith decision one makes on the basis of the facts stated above.

The experience goes by many names: conversion, being saved, being born again. Let's look at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the group Jesus was so often critical of because of their self-righteousness. But Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus and comes to see Him. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these miracles that you do

unless God is with Him." Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus took Him literally: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can He?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of . . . the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Here Jesus contrasts physical birth with spiritual birth. Physical birth is an event. It happens at a moment in time and, we each celebrate the occasion once a year on our birthdays. Likewise, spiritual birth is an event, one that can occur at any time and any place when a person understands what Christ did and reaches out to personally receive the Gift He offers: "But as many as received Him, to those He gave the authority to become the children of God, to those who believe *on* His name (John 1:12)." Observe the verbs in this verse. It is our part to believe that what Christ did for us is true, then to receive Him into our lives as our Savior, and become a child of God. This is done by an exercise of our will, which actively decides to abandon all self effort to reach and attain a righteousness acceptable to God, but rather to reach out to Him in faith and receive the Gift which He offers us. And notices the verse states that we are to believe *ON*, not *IN*. Believing in something does not necessarily call for trust. Believing on something does. This is the true nature of faith. To "believe *on*" means to "*count on*."

The story is told of a great trapeze artist at the circus. Up on the high wire, he would ride back and forth across on a bicycle with a long pole. Then he would do it again with his attendant sitting on his shoulders. After that He asked the audience if they believed he could carry one of them across. The entire audience loudly exclaimed they believed he could. He looked at a particular man on the front row and asked if he

believed, and he said “yes.” Then the trapeze artist said, “Climb up the ladder, get on my shoulders, and Ill take you across.” If the man responds and *entrusts himself* to the man on the bicycle, he is demonstrating the equivalent of the biblical faith called for by one who desires to become a Christian and to be born into the family of God.

It is important to understand the nature of faith in our lives. Faith is something that we employ all the time. Faith that a chair will hold us up; faith the on-coming driver will stay in his lane; faith the plane will land safely. Everyone has faith—atheist, agnostic, Christian. The real issue is not having faith, in large or small quantities, but rather to have a *worthy object* for our faith. If you walked out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a little faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a lot of faith in an inch of ice? Faith is important, but the *object* of our faith is all-important.

To believe on Christ is to trust Him and Him alone to make us presentable and acceptable to God. We decide that He is the most reliable object of our faith and we are saying that when we stand before God, we are not trusting in our own merits to attain eternal life, but rather in the merits of our Substitute, the spotless Lamb of God who stands there with us, our Savior and our Redeemer.

Revelation 3:20 gives us a picture of how this spiritual birth occurs: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine (fellowship) with him, and he with Me.”

Picture Jesus standing at the door of your life, your will, seeking entrance. He is a gentleman. He will never force His way into our lives. But we learn here that if we open the door of our life to Him and receive Him as our Savior, He will respond.

If I were to come to your home and knock on the door, you

would have essentially three responses: (1) you could tell me to go away, (2) you could ignore me and play like you were not at home, (3) or you could invite me in.

The same is true of Jesus. He waits to be invited. He treats each person with integrity and will not come where He is not invited or wanted. It is our choice. But if we *do* open the door (that's our part), He *will* come in (thats His part). And Jesus doesn't lie. If we open, He will come.

We do this through prayer. The specific words we use are not important, but rather the attitude of the heart. Here is a short prayer which contains the major elements of receiving Christ:

"Lord Jesus, I reach out to you at this time in my life to claim the gift you have offered me. I confess I have sinned and fallen short of what you require of me. I thank you for dying on the Cross for my sins, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I open the door of my heart and life and invite you to come into me, and make me the kind of person you want me to be. I trust you now as my personal Savior and from this day forward I *trust in you alone* to make me presentable and acceptable before God when I must give account of myself and my life. Thank you for coming into my life, and I know you are there now, because you promised that if I opened the door, you would come in. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer right now, and it expressed the desire of your heart, then where is Christ? He is now inside you. Before, He was on the outside looking in. Now, He is on the inside looking out. The word "Christian" means "Christ *in* one." That is why the body is called the temple of God. A temple is a place where God dwells.

How do you know he is there? We are back to the question of faith. Above, we spoke of exercising faith and trust that Christ's death on the Cross for us is true and that we are

called upon to respond by believing *on* it. To answer this question, we must exercise faith again.

Let's say I came to your home and knocked. You opened the door, invited me in, and we went into the living room and sat down to chat. And let's say after a time, you got up, went to the door, opened it and said to me, "Come on in, Jim!" You did this several times, while I remained on the sofa in the living room! This would not only be silly; it would be clear evidence that you did not *really* believe I was already in your home!

So it is with Christ. Faith is when you stop saying "please" to God and you start saying "thank you." Unless you trust in faith that, regardless of how you *feel*, Christ was true to His Word and actually entered when you invited Him, you can never get on with you new life in Christ, because you keep "going to the door" in uncertainty, not truly believing He did what He said He would do. And so once you have invited Him into your life, *believe that He is there,* and begin to trust that by saying, "Lord, thank you for coming into my life and making me a child of God and a member of your family."

Perhaps this train illustration will help to understand the difference between fact, faith, and feeling. The *engine* of the train represents the facts . . .the truths about Christ's death and its implications to us. The *coal car* represents faith. . .the energy needed to make these facts a reality to us. The *caboose* represents our feelings . . .which may vary every day and every moment depending on our circumstances, emotions, and state of mind.

The train will run with or without the caboose, and one would never think of trying to pull a train with the caboose! So it is with our life in Christ. This decision we have made concerning our salvation has nothing to do with how we *feel* at any particular time.

If someone were to ask me if I were married, I wouldn't

respond by saying, “Well, I feel married today,” or “I’m working at being married,” or “I think I’m married,” or “I hope I am.” And yet these are the very kinds of statements we often hear when we ask someone if they are Christians. In fact, these responses are a strong indication that the person does not really understand what Christ did for them, and He is probably still “standing outside” knocking at their door. This may be the case for many just simply because they lack the proper information and no one has ever clearly explained how they can become Christians.

Let’s ask another question: Is it presumptuous to assume that when I die I will go to heaven?

“And the witness is that that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know (not “hope”) that you have (present tense; not “*will* have”) eternal life.” (I John 5:11-13).

What we learn here is that a Christian receives eternal life not at death, but at the Second Birth. To receive Christ and “have the Son” is also to have eternal life as a **present possession.** No Christ, no eternal life. Possess Christ and also possess eternal life. We can see why this would be so. At our physical birth, our parents gave us the only kind of life they possessed—human life. When we place our faith in Christ and are born spiritually into the family of God, He gives us the only kind of life *He* possesses—eternal life.

That is why the apostle Paul could say with confidence, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). And that is why Jesus could say to the believing thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, *today* you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

As a non-Christian, it always made me angry if someone said with confidence, that they knew they would go to heaven when they died. That is because I had assumed that what they implied is that they had done enough "good things" already to merit heaven. But that wasn't their reasoning at all. They were simply giving testimony to the fact that they had received the gift of eternal life promised them when they recognized the futility of their own religious efforts and turned to Christ and received Him into their lives as the Bible instructed them to do.

To not have this certainty in the Christian life is to live out one's days motivated by fear. God does not intend this for His children, and plainly states it over and over again, that our lives are to be lived out with a motivation of love and gratitude for what God has done for us. We want to live for Christ. Our good works become, not a means of gaining our salvation, but the results of having been forgiven and a desire to please our Heavenly Father out of grateful hearts which have received mercy.

Where does one go and what does one do after he/she is born again?

Newborn babies need a lot of care. Birth is followed by a process of growth and development and time. When this natural development in a little baby fails to proceed as intended, we consider it sad, a tragedy. In the spiritual realm, the new birth goes through a similar process. New Christians need a proper environment so they can begin to grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith. Here are several suggestions to speed your growth along:

• **Begin to read the Bible.** Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is saying here that if we want to obtain a word from God, we must go where He has revealed Himself. He has done so in the Scriptures, not Shakespeare or

the morning paper. Peter says, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, so that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

The Bible is a big book. In fact it’s 66 books! Many people get bogged down by starting in Genesis. They quickly get bogged down in the “begats” and abandon Bible reading in despair. What kind of nourishment do little babies begin with? Milk. Then pablum. Then baby food. Then finally meat.

Start with the Gospel of John. It is the baby food section. Get a Bible that you feel free to mark up so you can underline things which are meaningful to you. Read the Bible like you eat fish. When you come upon a bone, something indigestible, don’t choke on it. If you don’t understand it, say “Father, I don’t understand this, but I trust that as I grow, I will come to understand it. It’s probably meat I can’t digest yet.” Mark Twain observed, “It’s not the things about the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me; it’s the things about the Bible that I *do* understand that bother me.” There is plenty that we do understand even as young Christians to feed our souls. It is through the Bible that you let God talk to you.

• **Make prayer a habit.** This is how we talk to God. Prayer can happen at any time and any place, not just on Sunday. It can be long or short, eloquent or plain, important or trivial, and with or without “thee” and “thou.” It can be done with eyes open or shut, standing, kneeling, or lying down. It is talking to a Person, your Heavenly Father. He promises never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore is accessible to you 24 hours a day everyday. Prayer can involve:
(1) *confession of sin*, as it occurs, with assurance that “If we confess (agree with God concerning) our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
(2) *praise and thanksgiving,*
(3) *intercession* (asking for others), and
(4) *petitions* of any kind which may burden one’s heart. Paul

says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7).

• **Fellowship with other Christians**. Seek out the encouragement that comes from being and sharing with other Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” A hot coal removed from the fire and placed apart from the others quickly dies out, but left in proximity to other coals it burns brighter and longer. Christianity was never intended to be a solo affair. It is best served by a community of believers who mutually strengthen, support and challenge one another to “run a good race” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

• **Baptism.** Our Lord left us only two ordinances to faithfully observe: baptism and communion. Therefore, in obedience to the Lord’s command, every new believer should soon arrange to express his/her faith commitment to Christ—in His death, burial, and resurrection—by a personal, visual rite of public baptism. (“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” [Matthew 28:19].)

• **Share Christ with others.** Jesus told the first disciples, “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). If you know of a good bargain somewhere, you tend to want to tell your friends. One sign of being a Christian, is that you have a strong desire that others might know what you have discovered yourself. . .that God loves them and wants them to know Him. But notice this is a *process.* No one is a “natural” born fisherman. It takes time and skill to catch fish. Learning how to share effectively with others is a learned experience as well. Study the life of our Lord and see how He dealt with people. Read the book of Acts and observe

how Paul and others were effective in helping others clarified their own spiritual experience and joined the family of God.

The Great Light

“A myriad of men are born; they labor and struggle and sweat for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for mean little advantages over each other. Age creeps upon them and infirmities follow; shame and humiliation bring down their pride and vanities.

“Those they love are taken from them, and the job of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care, misery, grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead; longing for relief is in its place.

“It comes at last . . . the only unpoisoned gift earth has for them . . . and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence, where they achieved nothing, where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they left no sign that they had ever existed—a world that will lament them a day and forget them forever.”

Mark Twain, who penned these words in his autobiography, reveals a pessimistic heart about the value and meaning of human life. For Twain, people do not live; they merely exist. And to no good purpose. Life is drudgery, and increasingly so, as the years fly past.

But two thousand years ago a bright star arose over tiny Bethlehem to protest such a despairing view of life. As it sparkled in the desert night, some took notice, pondering its significance. By following it to an obscure manger, they found

their own. They drew near to warm themselves at the radiant glory which enveloped the little newborn on the straw. This **Great Light** had come at last to dispel the darkness and meaninglessness of human life.

The special glow experienced at Christmas Season transcends all gift giving and family festivity. It is something more, a cosmic celebration which unites us in spirit and praise with that first tiny band of worshippers who discovered on that ancient night that people have significance *only* if God gives it to them. The presence of the Christ Child is the tangible evidence—for them and for us—that God has actually **done so**! The "unreachable" God has reached us.

The shimmering, Bethlehem Star over that ancient stable dramatizes God's act of penetrating the darkness of human existence. "He loved the world. . . . He gave his Son." And if human life is without significance and value, as Mark Twain suggests, God would hardly have bothered. But He did. He "bothered" to the point of total identification with humanity as a real flesh and blood man.

The heart of the Christmas message is one of affirming human worth and the exquisite price God paid to prove it—the death of His dear Son. Every day, every Sunday, every Christmas, with bread and cup, millions of believers . . . remember and remember. "Lament them a day and forget them forever?" Impossible! His life and death give meaning to our own. We remember . . . and rejoice . . . and our lives are filled with meaning as we continue to warm ourselves at the hearth of His cheerful and abiding presence.

God bless you as we celebrate His birth this year!

The First Christmas Wreath

A sure sign of the approaching Christmas Season is the appearance of brightly colored wreaths which adorn the front doors of countless dwellings around the world. These gaily decorated reminders get us ready to commemorate again the wondrous birth of Christ our Savior.

Christmas is a time of warmth and celebration. A blazing fireplace, the smell of pine, a brightly lit tree with gifts spilling out in every direction, the sense of families drawing closer, shining smiles of eager youngsters—these and a myriad of other personal touches and traditions make this a most special time of the year.

But ironically, this joyous season becomes also a time of stress and dread for many. Stress and dread caused by endless traffic and irritating crowds, financial tensions, anxiety in the choice and cost of gifts for others, fractured families who shuttle children back and forth and spend more time awkwardly carving up a schedule than they do the turkey, Rolaids and ruined toys, traffic deaths and body counts, loneliness, alienation, depression, and fatigue.

Such is the bitter/sweet nature of Christmas. And yet these very feelings of lostness and despair are what Christmas is really all about. Because its celebration flows out of divine consolation. Little Immanuel has come to identify Himself with a fallen humanity. To share our pain and give us hope.

He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. . . . As a teenager He experienced the death of Joseph, His human father. As eldest son He knew backbreaking labor and the weight of the responsibility to provide for His household. His ministry and mission were misunderstood by His loved ones. He faced the

humiliating accusation of illegitimacy all of His life. And accepted His betrayal by a friend. He patiently bore the hostility and the taunts of His enemies, and also the injustice of being wrongly accused. He humbly submitted to arrest, torture, and the cruelest of deaths. He died of a broken heart.

"Sure He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," says the Prophet Isaiah. "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tested in all ways as we are," notes the writer of the book of Hebrews. He understands. He lived as we live. He died and rose again that we might *really* live. Christmas, then, is a celebration of life for God's people, a time of triumphant rejoicing and praise. We can wholeheartedly do so because *our Savior has come.* His suffering has brought freedom and hope to us all.

Why can we celebrate each year with the Christmas wreath? Because He *wore* the **first** one—**a crown of thorns.**

Jonah in the Whale – An Actual Event Pointed to by Jesus Christ

Probe founder Jimmy Williams considers the question: was Jonah a real man experiencing real events or is it an allegorical story? Upon examining Jesus' use of the book, the testimony of first century commentators, and the characteristics of modern day whales and fish, he concludes that Jonah is a record of actual events.

The book of Jonah—is it history, allegory, or romance? Was he really swallowed by a great fish as Scripture records? Or was he even a real person? Did he really go to Nineveh and preach so effectively that an entire city repented and escaped divine judgment? These are important questions that not only involve the integrity of Scripture, but that of our Lord Jesus Christ, who referred to Jonah as a real person.

Like the Sadducees of Jesus' day who rejected all things "miraculous" (Remember their question posed to Jesus about the woman who married seven brothers one after the other and their concern about whose wife she would be in the resurrection in Luke 20:33?), modern scholars have had a field day with this book. Here is an example:

> *The Book of Jonah is unlike any of the other prophetic books in that it is not primarily a record of the utterances of the prophet. Rather it is a short story, clearly fictional. The hallmarks of fiction rest in its anachronisms and its elements of fantasy. . . . Since the book is fiction, it would be best to consider the "great fish" an element of fantasy, a mythological monster, and let it go at that. . . .Popularly, Jonah's fish is considered to have been a whale. . . . If it was a whale that swallowed Jonah, then we are left with the fact that the only type of whale with a throat large enough to swallow a man is the sperm whale. . . . Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean and, in the course of nature, it is completely unlikely that a man should be swallowed by one there, or still further, survive three days and nights of incarceration. . . . All difficulties disappear, however, if it is remembered that the Book of Jonah is a fantasy.{1}*

Always keep in mind that a large proportion of all modern criticism of the Bible comes from one philosophical presupposition: **miracles do not occur.** Locked into this naturalistic view of reality, it is not surprising that

skeptical theologians encounter difficulties throughout the Bible. Given their premise, every miracle in Scripture must be explained away by either tacit rejection, in in the previous quotation, or by giving the "miracle" some feasible, naturalistic explanation. Their attempts to accomplish this throughout the Bible are often so ludicrous, varied, and contradictory, that we turn with relief back to the Bible, preferring the miraculous to the ridiculous!

This always reminds me of the illustration Dr. Norman Geisler alludes to in his many debates: A man visited a psychiatrist to share a problem which greatly concerned him.
"Doctor, I have a terrible problem."
"Please tell me about it," said the doctor.
"Well, I believe that I am dead."
"Hmmmm, that is a heavy concern. May I ask you a question?"
"Of course," replied the man.
"Do you believe that dead men bleed?"
"Of course not. That's preposterous," said the patient.
The psychiatrist reached over and picked up a long hat pin, took the man's hand, and pricked his finger with it. As the blood began to flow, the man stared at his finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

The real question is not, "Are miracles possible?" but rather, "**Does God Exist**?"

The Bible declares that "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Those who prefer this presupposition (and there is good reason to prefer it) acknowledge that God has, and can activate, for His Sovereign purposes, the prerogative to intervene, to override the natural laws of the universe created by His Hand.

Historical Considerations

Jonah 1:1 declares, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai."

Is there any other biblical evidence that Jonah was a real person? Yes. In 2 Kings 14:25 we read, “He (king Jeroboam II of Israel) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet which was by (from) Gath-hepher.”

Here we discover that Jonah gave a prophetic word concerning this king, Jeroboam, the greatest and longest-reigning monarch of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Substantial archeological data has been recovered concerning Jeroboam (II) from the city of Samaria (the royal Capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Megiddo, including a jasper seal by Schumacher and inscribed, “Shema, servant of Jeroboam.”{2}

The reference in 2 Kings also informs us as to the time Jonah lived and ministered. It is thought by some that Jonah may have been numbered among the “schools of the prophets” and was a contemporary of Elisha the Prophet (eighth century B.C.)

With respect to the narrative itself, there is no indication within it, nor among any of the early Judaic traditions that would suggest that it is not historical. Interestingly enough, during the third century B.C., the time which most modern critics assert the book of Jonah was composed, we discover one of the fourteen books of the Apocrypha, the Book of Tobit, makes mention of Jonah. The Apocryphal books are those included in the Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant Bible. They were early considered “suspect” for one reason or another and were not regarded by the Jews as canonical. However, they do have historical and literary merit for biblical studies. Tobit, addressing death-bed comments to his son, Tobias, says: “Go into Media, my child; for I surely believe all the things which **Jonah the prophet spake of Nineveh**, that it shall be overthrown.”{3}

Two Jewish writers of the first century A.D., Philo, the

philosopher, and Josephus, the historian, also consider Jonah to be an historical book. And one of the most prominent biblical scenes found in the Catacombs of Rome is of Jonah and his Fish . . . no doubt for the hope of resurrection symbolized by the book, and confirmed by Christ.

Jesus

In Matthew 12:39-40 Jesus says, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonas; for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whales’s belly, so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Here Jesus refers to Jonah and his experience as historical. Critics have offered the explanation, based on their “no miracles” presupposition, that Jesus (actually aware that it was really a myth) merely *accommodated* Himself to the naïve perspective of His first century, unsophisticated hearers, as someone might refer to King Lear or Don Quixote.

But this is not the *only* mention of Jonah by our Lord. He goes on to say in Matthew 12 about Nineveh: “The men of Nineveh shall stand up with *this* generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (v. 41).

Here Jesus is comparing and linking the real people listening to His words (“this generation”) with the generation of Jonah’s day and foresees the Day when both groups will be evaluated and *judged* on the basis of how they responded to the divine light given them in their day! The *context* does not allow an inference that one generation is parabolic and the other historical. It does not allow for the “accommodation” theory of the modern critics. With these words in Matthew 12, Christ clearly confirms the historicity of the book of Jonah.

Whale or Fish?

The Bible doesn't say that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Only the King James Version of 1611 does that. Jonah 1:17 says "God prepared a great fish (*dag gadol*)," not a great whale. And the Matthew passage (12:40) in Greek refers to the animal as a "sea monster" (*ketos*), not a whale. It may or may not have been a whale. Let's explore the possibilities, beginning with the question of "*Could* it happen?" Are there marine creatures capable of swallowing a human being?

Whales

There are two basic types of whales if differentiated by their mouth and throat structures: *baleen*, and *non-baleen* (toothed whales).

Baleen whales are by far the most numerous species in the oceans and include the Blue, Gray, Humpback, and Right (Bowhead). All of these whales are distinguished by the presence of a baleen "curtain" or "strainer" in their mouths. They have a very small throat (like a funnel) and feed by straining krill, plankton, and small crustaceans as they swim through the water with their mouths open. It would be impossible for any of these whales to swallow a human, so they can be ruled out.

The "toothed" whales can be given some consideration. These include the dolphin, porpoise, Beluga, Narwhal, Orca (Killer whale), none of which is large enough to swallow a whole human being, and the Sperm whale, which definitely *is.*

The Sperm whale is the largest of the toothed whales, adult males measuring over sixty feet in length (walk into your garage and multiply the length by four!). They are most prominent in the Pacific Ocean, but not unknown in the Atlantic and a favorite of Norwegian whalers. This whale's diet consists of giant squid, large sea-bottom and mid-water

sharks, skates, and fishes.{4}

The Sperm whale has a *huge* capacity in its gullet to store food. In his book, *Sixty-three Years of Engineering,* Sir Francis Fox tells of a manager of a whaling station who indicates that the whale can "swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter, and that in one of these whales they actually found 'the skeleton of a shark sixteen feet in length.'{5}

In the *Daily Mail* of December 14th, 1928, Mr. G. H. Henn, a resident of Birmingham, England recounted the following story:

> *My own experience . . . about twenty-five years ago, when the carcass of a whale was displayed for a week on vacant land in Navigation Street, outside New Street station . . . I was one of twelve men, who went into its mouth, passed through its throat, and moved about in what was equivalent to a fair-sized room. It's throat was large enough to serve as a door. Obviously it would be quite easy for a whale of this kind to swallow a man."{6}*

This could only have been a sperm whale. On the coast of England, Mr. Frank Bullen in his book, *The Cruise of the Cachalot* (another name for the Sperm whale), notes that the *sperm whale always ejects the contents of its stomach when dying*. He himself witnessed such an incident and described the huge masses of regurgitated contents, estimating their size as about "eight feet by six feet into six feet, the total equal to the bodies of six stout men compressed into one!"{7}

It is argued that Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean. But who is to say that was the case 2800 years ago? There are a lot of marine creatures not found today due to the intense, world-wide fishing pressure of the past 300 years. If a Sperm whale beached itself on the west coast of England in this century, who's to say a Sperm whale might not have found its way into the Mediterranean? We know all whales migrate toward warm water to bear their young. One would also

suspect that if a Sperm whale did find itself east of Gibraltar, it probably would not fare well in the shallower depths and could well be very hungry! [One story has circulated for years about the whale ship *Star of the East*, which lost a sailor named James Bartley. The story is that he was swallowed by a large sperm whale, and found alive inside the whale's stomach when it was killed and brought aboard. Mr. Bartley was found unconscious and with his skin bleached by the whale's gastric acid, but alive nonetheless. We have just discovered that this is, regrettably, an urban legend, and therefore cannot be used to support our argument. Here is a link to the debunking of this urban legend: http://www.ship-of-fools.com/Myths/04Myth.html]

Other Prospects

Baxter also notes a more recent incident:

We have come across the following news-item in the Madras (India) *Mail* of November 28th, 1946:

> *Bombay, November 26. — A twelve-foot tiger shark, weighing 700 lbs., was dragged ashore last evening at the Sasson Docks. When the shark was cut open a skeleton and a man's clothes were found. It is thought that the victim may have been one of those lost at sea during the recent cyclone. The shark was caught by fishermen thirty miles from Bombay.*

The Tiger is a medium-size shark. The Great White is much larger, over thirty feet in length and weighing four tons. This shark has attacked swimmers all along the Atlantic seaboard on both sides of the ocean.

Which bring us to another important point: It *is* possible that Jonah actually *did* die. There are several indications in chapter 2 (vs. 2, 5, 6). There are also several miracles recorded in this book: God preparing the great fish, the hearts of the people of Nineveh, the gourd plant, the east

wind. If Jonah did die in chapter 2, another miracle involving his resuscitation after the watery sojourn would not be anymore difficult for God to perform than the other miracles in the book. God chides Abraham when he doubts a child could come forth from the deadness of Sarah's womb and says, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). In Genesis or Jonah the answer is the same: "No."

If Jonah actually did die, this simply records one more person among the several in Scripture who were resuscitated for God's intended purpose, and it makes Jonah a still more remarkable type of Christ and His resurrection . . . which is without a doubt the *main* reason this little book is included in the Sacred Canon!

The main *personal* application of the Book of Jonah is simply this: **Before God can *use* the prophet, He must first *break* the prophet!**

"And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm strengthen, and establish you. . . . Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time." (1 Pet. 5:10, 6).

Education: The Three-Legged Stool

In the late 80's when the Communist walls were coming down in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, columnist Jack Anderson commented: "I don't mean to minimize the Soviet danger, but

while spending trillions of dollars on the military, we've completely neglected our economic defenses, while the Japanese have been assaulting our economic citadel . . . Japan is a nation of engineers and producers. We're a nation of lawyers and consumers. Japan sacrifices today for tomorrow. And we sacrifice tomorrow for today."

After the Revolutions, the possibility of armed aggression (time will tell) upon the U. S. seems at present even more remote than Anderson noted. But the second part of his comment focuses upon the present concerns of the Clinton Administration and others with respect to America's flagging educational endeavors. That is, we are told we must upgrade learning at all levels so we might again compete economically with Japan and the European Community and reclaim our "rightful" place as "Number 1" in the world.

Competition is a healthy thing to a point. But I submit that whatever Herculean measures undertaken by educational agencies might actually produce the mathematicians, engineers, and scientists needed to bring us back up to global "par," we would still be woefully short of proper educational goals for the nation. The educational crisis of the 90's has shown to be a supreme failure, as it is driven mostly by economic concerns, ignoring Jesus' reminder that man simply cannot live by bread alone. We must therefore insist that the educational establishment do something beyond cranking out human "hardware"—graduates who perform acceptably in the market place in the production of competitive goods and services, but have chests with no hearts.

It is one thing to teach young Americans how to make a living; it is quite another to teach them how to live. This is the "software" part of the educational process. The tension between intellectual and moral development in educating the young is as old as civilization. Aristotle spoke keenly to this point in the fourth century B.C. when he said,

> *"Intellectual virtue is for the most part produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit . . . . The virtues we acquire by first having practiced them, just as we do the arts. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits, or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance."*

The real question educationists must answer was posed by Jack Fraenkel: "It appears important to consider, therefore, whether we want values to develop in students accidentally or whether we intend to deliberately influence their value development in directions we consider desirable." It goes without saying that the "values clarification" approach of today never intends to accomplish the latter, and there is no guarantee that even the former is being achieved among today's young!

Our Founding Fathers faced clearly the necessity of providing an educational experience that encompassed both the cognitive and moral spheres. As early as 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, setting aside land for educational purposes with these words: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

This three-legged stool upon which children could learn and a vibrant, strong society could be built encompassed the inter-relatedness and necessary cooperation of the church, the home, and the school. Sadly, today the "stool" is largely missing a couple of legs. And the third (public education) has assigned to itself (with our increasing encouragement) the task of providing all three! This is neither possible, nor is it desirable. By its very nature, pluralistic public education dictates a methodological approach that of necessity dilutes

religious and moral teaching to abstract speculation with no direction or call for personal commitment to a point of view. Rather, the goal is simply that everyone should *have* a point of view! The paralysis of this approach with respect to religion and moral values spills over to the knowledge "leg" as well. Deprived of metaphysical and moral certitude, information proliferates and expands like so much pizza dough; it is swung wildly around classrooms, but it won't stick to anything!

No wonder learning is such a chore, such uninteresting, laborious work for our sons and daughters. Bombarded with information, many youngsters face life on "perpetual overload," stunted and numbed in the process because they lack the intellectual, skeletal framework upon which they can separate and arrange the truly important from the trivial.

We who have children must increasingly look to ourselves to remedy this situation. And we are in good company. Most of the best education throughout history has not occurred in public educational arenas. Its has emerged from the hearts of caring parents who refuse to sacrifice their children upon the altars of popular educational notions and experiments. Dr. Ronald Nash's penetrating analysis of this struggle in *The Closing of the American Heart* charts a path that you and I can follow in identifying the real roots of the American educational crisis and what to do about it.

> *"And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:6-9*