

Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite authors, probably top five. He's a brilliant storyteller, who, like Shakespeare, understands both the peasant and the prince and writes stories that all at once capture them both, stories that are magical yet earthy.

In *Telling the Truth*, a book about communicating the gospel of Christ, Buechner provides his readers several engaging (and true) stories to help illustrate what it means to tell the truth with our lives, including a very compelling story from the life of the famous (and infamous) 19th-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher. Later Buechner tells us the story of Jesus before Pilate, but as if it were happening in 1977. And it's real. What I mean is, it isn't cheesy. As I'm reading it I believe it could have happened in 1977 like I'm watching it happen on some old rerun. Buechner does this with several stories from the Scriptures, and I read these stories with fresh eyes and new perspective.

And this is part of telling the truth: making new metaphors and painting contemporary word pictures so that people who have ears to hear.... But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because the truth is silence before it is spoken, Buechner points out:

He [Pilate] says, "What is truth?" and by way of an answer, the man with the split lip doesn't say a blessed thing. Or else his not saying anything, that is the blessed thing. [...]

The one who hears the truth that is silence before it is a word is Pilate, and he hears it because he has asked to hear it, and he has asked to hear it—"What is truth?" he asks—because in a world of many truths and half-truths he is

hungry for truth itself or, failing that, at least for the truth that there is no truth. We are all of us Pilate in our asking after truth, and when we come to church to ask it, the preacher would do well to answer us also with silence because the truth and the Gospel are one, and before the Gospel is a word, it too like truth is silence—not an ordinary silence, silence as nothing to hear, but silence that makes itself heard if you listen to it the way Pilate listens to the silence of the man with the split lip. The Gospel that is truth is good news, but before it is good news, let us say that it is just news. Let us say that it is the evening news, the television news, but with the sound turned off.

Picture that then, the video without the audio, the news with, for the moment, no words to explain it or explain it away, no words to cushion or sharpen the shock of it, no definition given to dispose of it with... [{1}](#)

We are all of us the preacher too—we do call ourselves evangelicals, after all—and we would all do well to reacquaint ourselves with the silence that is, the silence that speaks into the silence that isn't, the silence of the rocks crying out Jesus' gospel truth. So how do we listen to the pregnant silence? How do we grab hold of the gift of truth Jesus is offering *us* as he offered to Pilate when Pilate asked after it? One way we do this, Buechner tells us, is by listening to our lives. All of it [{2}](#): the tragedy, the comedy, and the fairy tale. Your car that was stolen, your marital affair, your friend who betrayed you, the iPhone you own but can't afford, the self-righteousness you feel about someone else's affair, materialism, tax-collecting...that is the *tragedy*. And the *comedy* is that part which is both your wedding day and the day you fall in the toilet because he left the seat up, both "a kind of terrible funniness and of a happy end to all that is terrible". [{3}](#)

Finally, we must listen to our lives within the overarching

framework of *fairy tale*. Because the tragic and the comic isn't all that's there. The fairy tale is the spell lifted and the Beast becoming on the outside the handsome prince he had become on the inside; it's the beautiful step-sisters whose feet turned out to be too fat and ugly like the sisters were in their hearts; it is those moments in our lives when we give to the least of these in spite of ourselves because once upon a time we climbed up the tree a cold opportunist and climbed down a caring, and cared for, philanthropist.

This listening to life—our own lives and the lives of others, the darkness and joyousness and impossible possibility of transformation into newness that we all share—listening to all of it in the silence before we finally but restlessly fall asleep or start our car or pour our coffee; and then also listening to the rustling of our tossing and turning, the cranking of the engine, the brewing of our coffee...this listening enables us to tell the truth.

Coupled with this Buechner reminds us we must also listen to the artists of our time and the times before us:

There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of the poets, playwrights, novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God in the world, and about the storm of his absence, both without and within, which, because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm. [{4}](#)

We would of course add the film writer / director. Fiction is such an important informer of the gospel, I cannot image how shallow my theology would be without it. Likewise, if I didn't discipline myself to listen to others, my theology would be shallow. And I recognize that some are gifted with a propensity for listening to nature, some to microbiology, some

to art, some to numbers, some to everyday chores. But we each of us regardless of which comes more naturally can grow through the Holy Spirit in our spiritual ability to listen. More importantly, we all must learn to lean on one another: he who has ears for music learns from she who has ears for engineering, for example—and she learns from him, too.

Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale is a small book divided into four chapters that brings us a refreshing look at sharing the gospel. It's refreshing because it is the whole, honest truth, not only about the world, but about our own hearts. "So if preachers or lecturers are going to say anything that really matters to anyone including themselves," Buechner, the ordained, "part-time novelist, Christian, pig" [{5}](#) knowingly tells us,

they must say it not just to the public part of us that considers interesting thoughts about the gospel and how to preach it, but to the private, inner part too, to the part of us all where our dreams come from, both our good dreams and our bad dreams, the inner part where thoughts mean less than images, elucidation less than evocation, where our concern is less with how the gospel is to be preached than with what the gospel is and what it is to us. They must address themselves to the fullness of who we are and the emptiness too, the emptiness where grace and peace belong but mostly are not, because terrible as well as wonderful things have happened to us all. [{6}](#)

And so, Buechner being a gifted, contemplative listener to life and literature, uses everyday life to tell gospel history in fresh ways, and uses those stories together with the poetry of the prophets, the magic of familiar fairy tales, and the masterpieces of some of Buechner's favorite writers to tell the truth, which is the gospel, in hopes that his telling the truth will help us tell it too.

[1.](#) Buechner, Frederick, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (HarperCollins, NY, 1977), p. 14

[2.](#) Ibid, p. 34

[3.](#) Ibid. p. 6.

[4.](#) Ibid, p. 44.

[5.](#) Buechner, A film about writer and minister Frederick Buechner, directed by: Rob Collins (CustomFlix Studio, 2004) <http://amzn.to/pTUeeD>.

[6.](#) Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, p. 4.

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2010/01/26/telling-the-truth/

To Live Is Christ: On Singleness and Waiting

Apr. 9, 2010

We live in the tension between contentment and craving. Whether you are married or single or widowed or divorced; dating, not dating, wanting to date, not wanting to date—for now, forever. If you are wondering about your sexuality or your sex-appeal, your marriage, the strength of your love or your hope. . . And if you can empathize with the faith-struggle of doubt and dashed or delayed dreams (because without empathy we are nothing but the annoying, repetitive clanging of construction in the city streets) . . . Angela Severson has bravely opened a vein to unleash the power that

only life-blood has for the healing and cleansing of [telling the truth](#).

This poem is so very well done. I've never seen anything like it. It's holistic and honest and inspiring and right on the money. The single life and the married life illustrate and teach us about life with Christ and the character of God. The story of "This Life" is one that all too often gets marginalized and left untold, or told unwell—But, we're doing better. When both stories are told (and listened to), all lives (and theologies) are enriched.

This Life

We wait, we long for, we pine after, ... we desire, we yearn.
We wait.

I wait

I am thirteen

Puberty explodes like a rash, an epidemic.

My girlfriends hold hands with boys we only months ago snickered at, turned up our noses at, as though their very essence was a disease. Now the disease appears to be, that my girlfriends can't stop gawking over these same specimen. I decide to play along and choose my crushes. I crush my way through high school, waiting to be asked out. Waiting by locker stalls during break, waiting for a nudge in the hall, a simple "hey," a nod. I wait, standing pressed against the wall, through all the slow songs on Friday nights in the darkened gymnasiums. I wait for an invitation to senior prom. I wait.

Through this waiting, I feel like it is not working, meaning me.

Something is not working with me...my friends acquire boyfriends, hold hands, kiss, and I acquire journals, stashed by my bedside, full of wonderings and waiting.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To be ready and available}

It is July.

I'm twenty-two.

My days of being a serial "crushest" are about to end.

I am standing in a parking lot surrounded by pigeons pecking at croissant crumbs. The aroma of Newman's fish-n-chips deep fat fryers heating up engulfs me. In the slant of the morning sun my current crush tells me, that he has a crush on me.

.....finally! He likes me and I like him. So, this is what it's like to be loved, this is what I've been waiting for... this messy, dizzy, complicated, delicious, heart pounding love. We dance the dating dance for months and then on a quiet unexpected spring day he wants me to be his...asks me to be his, opens the door to the promise of forever and stamps soul-mate on my heart.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To stay in a place of expectation of}

I am twenty-six.

I am engaged to the same fellow.

I am still waiting.

I've waited through friends getting married, through showers and bridesmaids dresses, through banquets and bouquet tossing, through Martha Stewart Wedding Magazines and honeymoon trip photos. It is now my turn. I am next in line to run from the church doors dodging birdseed and blessings. However, love is delicate, as fragile as the blossoms of spring, opening in trust to the slanting sun and quick to close in the cool of the evening, so too was this promise, one that could not take hold, a love aborted, out of fear and wisdom, full of pain, and awe. Stunned with grief, the love in my heart shrinks, evaporates, dies and God becomes small, cruel and unkind.

Hope aborted.

For what do I wait?

Am I waiting for what I want, or what I need?

For that which I desire, or believe that I deserve?
Am I longing for wisdom? ...opening myself to the God, who
loves me into this deep-down empty sorrow...

{Romans Eight}

"In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

I am 30 or 32 or somewhere in between.

I have dates that last 10 minutes or 2 years. I avoid answering calls from some and linger hours by the phone waiting for others. In and out of love, infatuation, intrigue...sometimes going through the motions, other times knowing he is.

...I'm into men, I'm tired of men. One day I'm free as a bird and content in my singleness, the next I am desperately pining away for every male that crosses my path, searching his finger for a wedding ring. I seize the day, travel over seas, take classes, switch careers, indulging in the delights and rewards of being single and still I wait. I watch my married friends build homes, families and history.

It is summer wedding season again. My cousin is getting married. I congratulate myself that I am actually excited about being there, really o.k with my place in life, o.k. that I don't have a date for this wedding, feeling genuinely happy for the two tying the knot. At the reception, between sipping white wine and sampling stuffed mushrooms, she approaches me...that token distant relative, you know the one...she has known me since birth, and kept up on me through my parents Christmas cards...and she asks "So are you going to be next?" I politely answer that I am not currently dating anyone...and she replies, "Well, what is a pretty girl like you still doing single?" Deep in my heart I have to trust

that she means well, but the thoughts in my head and the words about to fly off my tongue feel like dragon fire. I want set blaze to her lovely over-sprayed doo. I smile and shrug, and pop another mushroom in my mouth to choke down my anger and my shame. "Yeah, what is wrong with me?" A moment ago I was confident in my singleness and now I feel other. I feel like a freak of nature, an alien, a misfit. I feel shaken.

{Hebrews 11/12}

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.....They are longing for a better country- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.....Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

I am thirty-six.

I am single.

Singleness seems to be the new "have it all" lifestyle.

I decide to take a break in my day, a little escape from work.

I brew my cup of tea, add a dash of cream and sit back on the sofa with a magazine for some creative inspiration. I flip open into the middle and look down on the page. It is an advice column. The first question I glance at reads {Capital Q, semicolon} "Help, Please! What should I say to people who ask "why are you single?" It's so rude, I can never think of a response. (yeah, I agree and can't wait to hear the answer) {Capital A, semicolon} Shake your head, frown and say, "I loathe giving up all the fabulous sex" The answer hits me in the gut. I feel sad, disgusted, disappointed and angry. I'm appalled at the culture in which

I live and yet not surprised. What do you expect, Angela...this world is not going to encourage you in your singleness, at least in a moral sense. I've read that singleness is on the rise...more people are single now than ever before. I want to think, great, I'm not so different, not so alone, but there is a huge chasm that defines this single lifestyle. The chasm is sexuality. It is one thing to be single and living with someone, single and sleeping with someone, single and sleeping with anyone and a very different state to be single and abstinent.

Abstinent not because it feels good or is pious, but because it honors God. Choosing abstinence out of obedience and respect for the vulnerability of the human body and spirit. I am ashamed to admit that I often hide the truth that I am nearly forty and a virgin. In this culture being a virgin makes me feel small, prude, asexual. Some nights I lay in bed at night aching to be held, longing for sexual intimacy. Gravity pulls my bones toward the earth, my body fills hollow....I lay one hand on my belly and the other over my breast, not with the intention of arousal, but to be held. It would be easy to deny my sexuality and I have. But tonight I want to acknowledge that my body was designed for sexual intimacy, and although that yearning is not being fulfilled, I am still a sensual creation.

{Psalms 139}

"You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."

{Martin Luther}

"This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness;

not health, but healing;

not being, but becoming;

not rest, but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.

The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.
This is not the end, but it is the road.
All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”

I am thirty-eight.

There are days when I feel content knowing that I am growing in wisdom, I am awaiting the Kingdom. That my singleness is just part of my journey here, it is the color of my life. Our stories all get colored in, mine just happens to be green at the moment.

Perhaps I'll meet someone and get married and then I'll get to add some purple and red, but today it's green. I feel blessed with my greenness, alive and grateful. I love my career. I have rich, beautiful friends, and family.... my daily needs are always met, and still there is this tension. I'm driving home from Eugene, marveling over the spring grass, the baby lambs, the sinking sun...the beauty is intoxicating and warm tears roll down my cheeks. I've just come from holding my new godson. His sweet newborn smell, his fragile breath, his parents (my beloved friends) and his sisters (my other two god children) all nestled in unison. This is a family. In this moment I am so grateful to be a part of it, but now I must travel north on I-5 towards home, alone. These tears are full of sorrow and joy, so bittersweet. In my heart I hold the hope that I may one day receive the blessing of a family like this earth but I know that this earth in all it's beauty, is broken, so that for which I was made, I may not receive. There are bigger promises, larger hopes...to that I must cling.

{Hebrews 11}

“none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To look forward expectantly, to hold back expectantly.

To remain neglected or to remain in readiness.}

Today, as I write this, it is hard to wait.

I squirm. I writhe.

My skin crawls. The discomfort is visceral. Anything would feel better than here. The loneliness penetrates and all I see around me is what I don't have. I hike through Forest Park and I see love and families. I see holding hands and holding hearts. I see couples with babies and couples with dogs and couples melting into one another, sharing food, laughter, words and breath. I cry out "God, spare me from this loneliness, this waiting. I want my feelings to change. I feel guilty for not being satisfied with what I have in this moment. My head knows the gospel's truth.

The God of the Universe cares for me, loves me to the core, is for me,...and he has promised me life.

Not this life, but the everlasting kind.

The one without pain and suffering, hungering and squirming. A promise that is more than I can conceive, contain, or deserve. His grace covers the reality that my heart, at this moment, does not feel any better with this knowledge. I feel small and fragile, achy, and tired. Right now I am marred then I shall be perfect, right now I am broken, then I shall be fixed. I cry out for redemption.

{Deuteronomy 31}

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

What is it that I wait for? For what do I long? Is it Connection? Wholeness? Safety? Love?

I wait with myself, with my family, my friends,

I wait with my neighbor, the clerk at the grocery store, the lady next to me on the bus.

I wait with those across the country, across the sea, across the world, in places I know nothing of, filled with people waiting....

They wait for things that I have. They wait for warm food in their bellies and water on their lips, they wait to see their sick child healed, or the miracle of their bodies

restored, they wait for a soft place to lay down at night, and the demon voices in their heads be stilled. The wait for the terror to stop and the monsters slain. We all wait.

We wait for hope, for freedom, for comfort

We wait for love.

Deep, deep love that will never fail. A love that will fill us.

We wait for Christ.

{Romans 8}

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angel nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Angela Severson

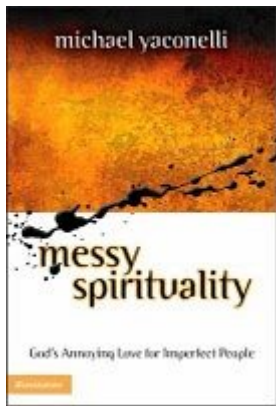
<http://www.imagodeiwomen.com/2010/03/this-life.html>

This blog post originally appeared at

<http://reneamac.com/2010/04/09/to-live-is-christ/>

Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People

Jun. 9, 2009



Messy Spirituality is about exactly that. It's a story of and a guide to rightly rejecting neat, sanitized spirituality, breaking out of the plastic shrinkwrap of systemitized religion, and embracing abundant life with all its messes, failures, complexities, questions, joys, triumphs, tensions, paradoxes... which requires us to embrace grace. It requires the sometimes desperate acknowledgment of our constant need of grace, which turns us into people of Grace—the people we're all supposed to be from Eden, people of God.

Romans 12:2 warns against allowing the world to squeeze us into a particular pattern, a box that doesn't let the Light in and keeps us from real living. Yaconelli recognizes that we're not only in danger of the world trying to make us into what the world wants us to be: well-meaning Christians and churches often squeeze everybody into one-size-fits-all patterns of spirituality. This small book says big things about what it means to be spiritual and to walk with God.

Messy Spirituality derives from Yaconelli's own journey from legalism to liberty and the years of experience he has as a pastor of a small fellowship full of misfits. Jesus calls us to live faith-full lives. But too often we live fear-full lives. We're called to be radically different (as opposed to merely civilly different). Yaconelli helps us think through these things, and he does so with patience and humility, humor, earthy-ness, wisdom, and love.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2009/06/09/messy-spirituality/

Into the Void: The Coming Transhuman Transformation

In the TV show *The Six Million Dollar Man*, Lee Majors played Steven Austin, a crippled astronaut who was rehabilitated through bionic technology that gave him superhuman strength and powers. The show, like so much science fiction, presents us with the dream that technology will enhance all our facilities from sight to memory, hearing to strength, and lengthen our life span to boot. The bionic man represents a fictional forerunner of the transhuman transformation. The Transhumanist school believes that technology will not only enhance the human condition, but eventually conquer death and grant us immortality. Human enhancement technology performs wonders in allowing the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear and the sick to be well, but even immortality is out of the reach of technology. In striving to enhance our physical existence we may lose our souls in the process.

In his famous book, *The Abolition of Man* published in the 1940s, C. S. Lewis wrote that modern society is one step away from “the void”^{1}—“post-humanity,”^{2} a state of existence from which there will be no return. Lewis argues that when we step outside of what he calls the Tao^{3}, we lose all sense of value for human life that has always governed civilization. What Lewis calls the Tao, we might call Natural Law or Traditional Morality—that internal moral understanding of right and wrong which God has written on the hearts of all people (Romans 2), the *Logos* by which all things were created (John 1, see especially verse 4).^{4}

In leaving traditional spiritual values behind, Lewis argues, modern technological civilization has reduced human value to only what is natural, and we have lost our spiritual quality. Modern society has striven to conquer nature and largely succeeded, but at a great cost—with each new conquest, more

losses in human dignity, more of the human spark extinguished. Lewis offers the example of eugenics from his time in the 1930's and 40's.[{5}](#) Eugenics is now a debunked science of racial manipulation and something we know was practiced with particular ferocity in Nazi Germany.[{6}](#) But the driving philosophy of manipulating nature and humanity into something new and final remains prominent. Lewis underestimated the truth of his own prophecy. He thought that maybe in 10,000 years the final leap will be taken when mankind will solidify itself into some kind of inert power structure dominated by science and technology.[{7}](#)

However, the 21st century may prove to be the era of posthumanity that Lewis foresaw in his time. The current movement of transhumanism, or human enhancement, asserts that humanity will eventually achieve a new form as a species through its adaptation to modern computer technology and genetic engineering in order to reach a higher evolutionary condition. Our present state is not final. Transhumanism derives from Darwinian doctrine regarding the evolution of our species. Evolutionary forces demand that a species adapt to its environment or become extinct. On this view, many species experience a pseudo-extinction in which their adaptation gives way to another kind of species leaving its old form behind. Many evolutionists believe this happened to the dinosaurs on their way to becoming modern birds and that humanity faces the same transformation on its way up a higher evolutionary path.[{8}](#) Primates evolved into humans so humans will eventually evolve into something higher (posthuman).

Metaman

Our present condition will give way to the cyborg (which is short for cybernetic organism) as we join our bodies and minds to technological progress. Transhumanists believe that because Artificial Intelligence (computing power) advances at such a rapid pace, it will eventually exceed human intelligence and

humanity will need to employ genetic engineering to modify our bodies to keep pace or become extinct. Therefore, the cyborg condition represents humanity's inevitable destiny.

The two predominant pillars in transhumanism revolve around Artificial Intelligence (AI) and genetic engineering. One represents a biological change through manipulating genes. The other presents the merging of human intelligence with AI. The biological position (through use of genetic engineering) claims that through transference of genes between species, we eradicate the differences and create a global superorganism that encompasses both kinds of life—the natural and the artificial. Biophysicist Gregory Stock states that once humanity begins to tamper with its genetic code, and the codes of all other plants and animal species, that “the definition of ‘human’ begins to drift.”[{9}](#) Through genetic engineering we will transform the human condition by merging humanity with the rest of nature, thereby creating a planetary superorganism. A superorganism operates like a bee hive or an anthill as a collection of individual organisms united as a living creature. Stock calls this Metaman, the joining of all biological creatures with machines, making one giant planetary life form. This superorganism encompasses the entire globe.

Transhumanism presupposes that no distinction exists between humanity, nature or machines. Metaman includes humanity, all it creates, and also the natural world. It acknowledges humanity's key role in the creation of farms and cities, but includes all natural elements, such as forests, jungles and weather. Metaman includes humanity and goes beyond it.[{10}](#) Stock envisions a greater role for genetic engineering in redefining biological life as different species are crossed. Humanity may now control the direction of its evolution and that of the entire planet.

Stock states that through “conscious design” humanity has replaced the evolutionary process.[{11}](#) This leads us to Post-Darwinism where people have supplanted the natural order

with their own technological modification of humanity and the entire ecological system. "Life, having evolved a being that internalizes the process of natural selection, has finally transcended that process."[{12}](#) Humanity may now, through the agency of technological progress, seize direction of its development and guide it to wherever it wants itself to go. No other species has ever controlled its own destiny as we do.

The Singularity

A second transhumanist belief argues for the arrival of an eventual technological threshold that will be reached through the advancement of Artificial Intelligence. The argument goes like this: because AI develops at a rapid pace it will achieve equality with the human brain and eventually surpass it. Estimates as to when this will happen range from the 2020's to 2045. The evolutionary process will reach a crescendo sometime in the 21st century in an event transhumanists call "the Singularity."[{13}](#) There will be a sudden transformation of consciousness and loss of all distinction, or Singularity, between humanity and its creations, or the absence of boundaries between the natural and artificial world. Singularity watchers expect that this event will mark the ultimate merging of humans and machines. Renowned inventor and AI prophet Ray Kurzweil states, "The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. . . . There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine. . . ."[{14}](#) As the fictional CEO and mastermind behind a cutting edge AI company in the year 2088 crowed, "My goal is for us to end death as we know it on earth within 50 years—for the essence of every person to live perpetually in an uploaded state. . . . The transhuman age has dawned."[{15}](#)

Both of these positions, one emanating from genetic engineering that seeks to enhance the body, the other from Artificial Intelligence that seeks to supersede and even

supplant the need for bodies, argue for the eventual replacement of humanity with biological-machine hybrids. Metaman and Singularity systems are direct heirs of the modern idea of progress. They present the dawning of a technological Millennium, but they also share a long history dating back into medieval Christendom. In the early Church, technology, or the “mechanical arts,” was never considered as a means to salvation or Edenic restoration. Historian David Noble argues that from Charlemagne to the early Early Modern period technology became associated with transcendence as the means of restoring the lost divine image or *imago dei*.[{16}](#)

Theologian Ernst Benz argues similarly that the Modern technological project was founded on a theological notion in which humanity believed itself to be the fellow worker with God in establishing His kingdom on earth through reversing the effects of the Fall.[{17}](#) We are fellow workers with God; however, this position overemphasized humanity’s role in restoration to the point of becoming a works-based salvation of creation.

Despite the apparent secularity of the super science behind all the technological wonders of our time, the notions of modern progress and transhumanism remain grounded in an aberrant form of Christian theology. Noble summarizes this well when he states, “For modern technology and modern faith are neither complements nor opposites, nor do they represent succeeding stages of human development. They are merged, and always have been, the technological enterprise being, at the same time, an essentially religious endeavor.”[{18}](#) The theology behind Modern technological progress remains rooted in Medieval and Early Modern notions of earthly redemption when the “useful arts,”[{19}](#) which ranged anywhere from improved agricultural methods to windmills, were invested with redemptive qualities and humanity began to assume an elevated status over nature. “In theological terms, this exalted stance vis-à-vis nature represented a forceful reassertion of an

early core Christian belief in the possibility of mankind's recovery of its original God-likeness, the 'image-likeness of man to God' from Genesis (1:26), which had been impaired by sin and forfeited with the Fall."[\[20\]](#) Technology becomes the means of restoring the original divine image. Technological development was expected to reverse the effects of the Fall and restore original perfection. This theology also serves as the impetus behind Millennial thought which believes technology helps humanity recover from the Fall and leads to an earthly paradise. Transhumanism extends this Millennial belief into the twenty-first century.

Redeeming Technology

We are faced with the problem of how to redeem all the advances of technology such as human enhancement without losing ourselves in the process. Idolatry preoccupies our central concern with technology. Biblically speaking, idolatry exalts the work of humanity, including individual human beings, over God; we commit idolatry when we serve the creature rather than the Creator. "Professing to be wise, [we] became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom. 1:22-23). Theologian Paul Tillich offers a keen and insightful definition of idolatry when he states, "Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite existence."[\[21\]](#) Transhumanism presents us with a spiritualization of technology believed to grant us immortality through shedding our bodies and adopting machine ones or through genetic engineering that will prolong bodily life indefinitely. Our Modern age defines technology as a source of material redemption by placing finite technical means into a divine position, thus committing idolatry.

In seeking to reconcile technology with a biblical theology we have three possible approaches. *Technophobia* represents the first position. This view contends that we should fear technological innovation and attempt to destroy it. The Unabomber Manifesto offers the most radical, pessimistic and violent expression of this position, arguing for a violent attack against the elites of technological civilization such as computer scientists in an effort to return society to primitive and natural conditions in hopes of escaping the kind of future transhumanists expect. [{22}](#) However, the entire tenor of our times moves in the opposite direction, that of *technophilism*, or the inordinate love for technology. Transhumanism optimistically believes that through technological innovation we will restore our God-like image. A third position asserts a mediating role between over-zealous optimism and radical morose pessimism. [{23}](#)

Technocriticism

Technocriticism offers the only viable theological position. By understanding technology as a modern form of idolatry we are able to place it in a proper perspective. Technocriticism does not accept the advances of innovation and all the benefits new technology offers without critical dialogue and reflection. Technocriticism warns us that with every new invention a price must be paid. Progress is not free. With the invention of the automobile came air pollution, traffic and accidents. Computers make data more accessible, but we also suffer from information overload and a free-flow of harmful material. Cell phones enhance communication, but also operate as an electric leash, making inaccessibility virtually impossible. Examples of the negative effects of any technology can be multiplied if we cared enough to think through all the implications of progress. Technocriticism does not allow us the luxury of remaining blissfully unaware of the possible negative consequences and limitations of new inventions. This approach is essential because it demonstrates the fallibility

of all technological progress and removes its divine status.

Technocriticism humanizes technology. We assert nothing more than the idea that technology expresses human nature. Technology is us! Technology suffers the same faults and failures that plague human nature. Technology is not a means of restoring our lost divine image or reasserting our rightful place over nature. This amounts to a works-based salvation and leads to dangerous utopian and millennial delusions that amount to one group imposing its grandiose vision of the perfect society on the rest. Such ideologies include Marxism, Technological Utopianism and now Transhumanism. We are restored to the divine “image of His Son” by grace through faith alone (Rom. 8:29). Technology, serving as an extension of ourselves, means that what we create will bear our likeness, both as the image-bearers of God and in sinful human identity. It contains both positive and negative consequences that only patient wisdom can sort through.

Through criticism we limit the hold technology has on our minds and free ourselves from its demands. We use technology but do not ascribe salvific powers of redemption to it. A critical approach becomes even more crucial the further we advance in the fields of genetic engineering and AI. We do not know where these fields will lead and an uncritical approach that accepts them simply because it is possible to do so appears dangerous. We live under the delusion that technology frees us, but as Lewis warns, “At the moment, then, of Man’s victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely ‘natural’—to their irrational impulses.”[\[24\]](#) The famous science-fiction writer Frank Herbert echoes Lewis’s sentiments in his epic novel *Dune*: “Once men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them.”[\[25\]](#) Genetic engineering or merging humanity with AI only exchanges one condition for another. We

will not reach the glorified condition transhumanists anticipate. A responsible critical approach will ask, Into whose image are we transforming?

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 77.
2. Ibid., 86.
3. Lewis, of course, did not originate this ancient Chinese concept but rather applied it to universally accessible principles.
4. Ibid., 56.
5. Ibid., 72
6. See [Darwin's Racists: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow](#) by Sharon Sebastian and Raymond G. Bohlin, Ph.D. Though the German Nazis acted out this hideous ideology to an extreme, eugenics was actually first promulgated in the United States, Germany and Scandinavia around the turn of the 20th Century.
7. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 71.
8. See Dr. Ray Bohlin's article [PBS Evolution Series](#), especially the section entitled "'Great Transformations' and 'Extinction'."
9. Gregory Stock, *Metaman: The Merging of Humans and Machines into a Global Superorganism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 165.
10. Ibid., 20.
11. Ibid., 228.
12. Ibid., 231.
13. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Penguin, 2005).
14. Ibid., 9.
15. David Gregory, *The Last Christian*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2010), 102.
16. David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 9.
17. Ernst Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of*

the Future from Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin trans., Heinz G. Frank (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 124-125.

18. Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, 4, 5.

19. Ibid., 14.

20. Ibid.

21. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Reason and Revelation Being and God*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 13.

22. FC, *The Unabomber Manifesto: Industrial Society and Its Future* (Berkeley, CA: Jolly Roger Press, 1995).

23. See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 5.

24. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 79, 80.

25. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace, 1965), 11.

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Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

The [Youth Transition Network](#) has released the results of research about why 70% of students in high school youth groups have left the church within a year after high school graduation.

One big reason is the unrealistic expectations that our young people sense from parents and church authority figures. When asked, "What does it mean to be a good Christian," students responded with a long list of do's and don'ts, always and nevers:

- No sex
- No secular music

- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model
- Don't doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible
- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back
- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

Wow. And that's a PARTIAL list! If someone said to you, "This is what it means to be a Christian," would you want to sign up?

What's also heartbreaking is what ISN'T on the list:

Reveling in God's love for me

Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy

Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

No wonder so many students live a "goody-two-shoes" Christian life on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and a completely other, separate life the rest of the week! No wonder they don't see

the point of staying connected to a church once their parents stop making them go.

So many of our students feel that they can't be successful Christians. They think it's hopeless to live up to the expectations they sense. They think that being a Christian is just too hard.

Sounds like they need to be introduced to what grace looks like. Sounds like they need to have it modeled to them. Sounds like the rest of us need to embrace it ourselves and live it out so they can see it up close and personal, and see why following Jesus is so much more than checking off the boxes on our spiritual report cards!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_kids_leave_the_church_after_high_school on April 28, 2009.

Spiritual Family Gatherings

This week (July 6, 2010) my husband and I are back in the Chicago area, where we both grew up. We're enjoying a few days with his family first, and then mine. Both of us are from large families; I'm #1 of seven children, he's #3 of six. Most of our siblings have children, and some have their own grandkids, which means a lot of people when we gather.

There are no intentional, earth-shaking conversations, but important conversations happen while we're just hanging out with each other. They're important because they solidify our connections with each other.

In our families, there's fun too. Different kinds of fun,

since our family cultures are quite different. In my husband's family, we enjoy "the littles," being their charming toddler selves when they have sufficient sleep and food. (And we give grace when they're not so charming because they need a nap or a snack.) One of the things my family is looking forward to is a gig where my brother's terrific band is playing. He's a marvelous keyboardist and entertainer, and they cover other people's songs. It's fun to clap and sing and watch Brother Bill bounce and sway at the piano with an enormous amount of energy, rejoicing at the way he displays his giftings.

The reason we came up here is for a family reunion fueled by Facebook connections. Some of us have reconnected online, and it will be good to spend time face to face as adults for the first time. Others of us only see each other every few years at a wedding or funeral, and it will be such a blessing to just gather together simply to be together.

Family connections are different from any other. Blood relatives share genes and family history that have their own special kind of bonds. Cousins can enjoy a unique connection with each other that goes beyond same-age friends.

So often, God gives us earthbound experiences and illustrations to help us understand spiritual truths. When I think of the biblical injunction to "forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some" (Hebrews 10:25), I think about how God wants us to connect with and enjoy our spiritual family the way we can enjoy our physical families.

When we hang out with our spiritual family, important conversations can happen simply because we're together. There is fun to be had in these families, especially when people exercise the gifts God gave them.

There is certainly a different depth of connection with our spiritual family. We are blood relatives, because we are bound

together by the blood of the Lord Jesus, Who bought us for Himself. We share spiritual DNA and the privilege of being family as well as friends.

And, at least in the cultures I am aware of, anywhere in the world, where the spiritual family gathers, there is always food. When we gather together, we should always remember why we are family, Whose family we are, and invite Him to the party. We can and should always remember the Lord whenever we break bread together, even if the bread is hot dog buns!

This blog post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/spiritual_family_gatherings

Examining Our Cultural Captivity – A Christian Look at the Impact of Popular Thought on the Church

Steve Cable looks at the current epidemic of cultural captivity as a repeat of the concerns introduced by the Apostle Paul in the second chapter of Colossians. When Christians give up their biblical worldview and take on the ideas of the culture around them it weakens their witness to a dying world. He offers practical ideas to combat the types of captivity identified: carnal, confused, compromised and contented.

A common theme of many science fiction tales is mass delusion. From *The Matrix* to *The Truman Show*, we find fictional

characters who think they are making decisions on their own volition based on an accurate perception of their situation. In each of these cases, the people are actually experiencing a false reality manipulated by outside forces using them for their own purposes.

Sadly, many of us are unwittingly being manipulated by distorted perceptions of reality. And, just as in these fictional tales, these distortions are not an accident. They are promoted by the spiritual forces of darkness to keep us from being effective agents of light in this world.

As the Apostle Peter explained, to fulfill our purpose of proclaiming Christ in a world of darkness, we must

Keep (our) behavior excellent . . . so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Pet. 2:12)

Distinctive thoughts produce distinctive behavior. Only by applying Christ to every aspect of life will we be able to “keep our behavior excellent” even as we are being slandered by the world. This is why Paul commands us:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Col. 2:8-9)

Paul is not talking about physical bars or chains. He is warning us about invisible chains constraining our minds to think like the world. Whenever we assume that the perspective of the world overrides the truth of Christ in some aspect of life, we are allowing ourselves to be taken captive. Paul also says that “in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3) Since that is true, we need to filter all truth claims through biblical revelation about the nature of God, man and the universe.

Let's be honest. Most of us are oblivious to the invisible bars of cultural captivity. We think we are A-OK in balancing our spiritual beliefs with our everyday lives. However, most of us must be captive to some degree or the church would not be conforming to a degraded culture. As believers, we have the resources to escape from cultural captivity, but we need to make it a priority.

In this article we look at four types of captive believers: ***carnal, confused, compromised*** and ***contented***.

As we consider these different manifestations of captivity, let's ask God to make us aware of areas of captivity in our own lives.

Carnal Christians

Just as there are different types of prisons, there are different ways that captivity can affect the lives of believers. **Carnal Christians** are believers who have misplaced priorities. As citizens of heaven,[\[1\]](#) they are living as if they are citizens of earth. The apostle Paul introduces us to these believers in his first letter to the Corinthians:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. . . . For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Cor 3:1-3 NKJV)

The word *carnal* comes from the Greek word that literally means *fleshly*. These are believers who are focused on serving their flesh rather than on using their flesh to serve God. The carnal Christian looks upon salvation as an opportunity to cater to the flesh while avoiding eternal consequences.

For example, carnal Christians view marriage as a means to meet their needs. As one young husband told his pastor, "God wants me to be happy. I am not happy in my marriage. So, God

must want me to get a divorce.”[{2}](#) A 2008 survey found the divorce rate among “born again” Christians was the same as the rate among the population as a whole: about one in three (33%).[{3}](#) However, the rate of divorce among those who regularly attend church is much lower, about 1 in 4.[{4,5}](#) And my personal observation among actively growing Christians is a rate of less than 1 in 10.

Another area where carnality is evident is in business practices. We all drop our heads when we read about a “respected” church member who has been caught applying unethical and sometimes illegal business practices. It is highly likely that these individuals viewed the Scriptures as supporting their unethical attempts for temporal riches.

As Paul points out, minds that view the world through a fleshly perspective often lead to division and strife within the church. In fact, if the church is dominated by carnal Christians it may be worse than the world as “cheap grace” turns into license.

Let’s examine ourselves. Do we elevate the temporal above the eternal? What do our daily decisions reveal about our perspective? Is it carnal or spiritual?

A Christian struggling with a carnal perspective needs to start asking the question, “Which decision or course of action has the most positive benefits for eternity?” In Christ, we are no longer slaves to our flesh, so when we start turning control over to the Holy Spirit, the flesh cannot keep its control over us.

[For helpful articles on divorce: [Probe’s Marriage and Family section](#)

On business: [Business and Ethics](#) and [Can the Just Succeed?](#)]

Confused Christians

Confused Christians desire to please God, but they are confused about what God wants. Unlike the carnal Christian, confused Christians are concerned about the spiritual life. However, instead of being grounded in the Bible, they create their own spiritual truth from multiple sources.

Two thousand years ago, Paul warned believers that people will try to “delude you with persuasive arguments” (Col. 2:5) based on “the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14). Today, believers are still bombarded with deceptive ideas designed to prevent them from living in a way that exalts Christ.

Recent surveys by the Barna Group show that this approach is prevalent among those between the ages of 18 and 25. According to their surveys, 78% of young adults identify themselves as Christians,^{6} but more than half of them believe that the Qur’an and Book of Mormon offer the same spiritual truths as the Bible.^{7} Is it any wonder that many sincere believers are confused?

Confused Christians are often influenced by those who offer to enhance their Christian experience with new insights. Recently, Oprah hosted a popular webinar with Eckhart Tolle. His repackaged Eastern mysticism is counter to the teachings of Christ on almost every topic. However, many of the participants were Christian women duped into believing that this false teaching was what Jesus was really trying to say all along.

One woman asked, “It’s really opened my eyes up to a new way of thinking; . . . that doesn’t always align with the teachings of Christianity. . . . Oprah, how have you reconciled these spiritual teachings with your Christian beliefs?”

In part, Oprah's reply was "I took God out of the box. . . I'm a free-thinking Christian who believes in my way, but I don't believe that it's the only way," In other words, "I am going to abandon the God of the Bible and create my own God who thinks like me."

Confused Christians often misapply God's character of love and compassion. We see this confusion in the debates on abortion, same sex marriage and homosexual clergy.

[For more information on these issues see these Probe articles:

[Abortion](#)

[Arguments Against Abortion](#)

[The Dark Underside of Abortion](#)

[Same Sex Marriage: A Facade of Normalcy](#)

[Answering Arguments for Same Sex Marriage\]](#)

Once again, we need to examine ourselves. Am I confident that my beliefs are based on the principles revealed in the Bible? Am I confusing the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of Christ?

The primary prescription for a confused Christian is a steady dose of God's word through personal study and trusted teachers who understand the Bible as the ultimate source of truth.

Compromised Christians

Compromised Christians profess a set of beliefs generally consistent with a biblical worldview, but compromise those beliefs by living like the world in one or more areas.

Jesus may have been referring to compromised Christians when He said,

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the

worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (Mark 4:18-19)

Knowing that they are called to a fruitful life, they allow the pressures and the temptations of the world to take precedence over the truth of Christ. They have allowed their concern for the things of the world to compromise their walk.

Some Christians are compromised by the desires of the flesh, addictions to alcohol, drugs or pornography. The high percentage of Christian men struggling with pornography is an example. Satan promotes the lie that this is a secret sin that can be kept from compromising one's public witness for Christ. Yet, anytime we consistently make provision for the flesh, it is going to result in a compromised walk. I distinctly remember the day my friend and fellow church leader who had been struggling with pornography had to confess to his wife that he had committed adultery. Even with his sincere heart for restoration and reconciliation, the healing process was painful.

Other Christians are compromised by their pride or desire for earthly success. As Jesus warned the Jewish leaders,

How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? (John 5:44-45)

They rationalize unethical practices, questionable morals and exploitation of others as worth the price to achieve success. These Christians embrace the sacred/secular split described by Nancy Pearcey in her book *Total Truth*. They partition their lives and their minds so that biblical truth only applies to their spiritual, church life while pragmatism determines what is true for every other aspect.

Let's examine our lives to see if we are rationalizing un-Christlike behavior to satisfy our own selfish desires. Are we

choosing to conform to the world because we think we will enjoy that more than conforming to Christ?

If you are struggling with compromise, look for others who can help hold you accountable, mature believers who can join with us in allowing God's Spirit to "destroy fortresses and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God." [\[8\]](#)

Contented Christians

Contented Christians are actively choosing the truth of Christ for their own lives, yet they are content to allow others to continue in cultural captivity. Either from fear of persecution or concern with hurting others or time pressures, these Christians avoid confronting others to unmask the deceptive, destructive ideas crippling their witness.

Although the apostle Paul was always content despite his physical circumstances, [\[9\]](#) he was never satisfied with the spiritual condition of the world. Paul said:

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.
(Col. 1:28-29)

Mature Christians are called to impart their understanding to others, particularly carnal, confused and compromised Christians. The fact that we have not been doing so in recent decades can be seen in the diminished influence of the church on public life.

For example, over 87% of Congress members are affiliated with a Christian denomination. Yet, this Congress recently passed so-called "hate crimes" legislation which will limit the ability of Christians to speak biblical truth on sexuality. While abhorring any crimes, we realize that one of the most

loving things we can do is to point out to others when they are engaged in destructive behavior. Yet contented Christians stood by as a nation with a Christian majority elected national leaders who seem to be carnal, confused and compromised.

As contented Christians, we have let family hour on television move from "Father Knows Best" to "The Secret Life of Teenagers" which feeds American youth a constant diet of promiscuity and disrespect for authority.

As contented Christians, we have let carnal, confused and compromised believers set the example for our younger generations. Is it any wonder that these generations are largely confused about their beliefs? Recent surveys indicate that although over one in three young adults can be identified as born again, less than one in a hundred has beliefs consistent with a biblical worldview.

So let's examine ourselves. Do I sit on the sidelines watching other believers conforming to the world without attempting to intervene?

We are not spectators seeking to keep from getting stains on our white, linen knickers; instead, we are called to be warriors in the battle for the fate of our fellows. If we do not stand firm and confront error, we are just as much captives of our culture as the others.

Notes

1. Philippians 3:20
2. Al Janssen, *The Marriage Masterpiece* (Colorado Springs: Focus Publishing, 2001).
3. Barna Group, New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released, March 31, 2008, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released
4. Ibid.

5. Bradley Wright, Divorce Rates Among Christians by Church Attendance, December 4, 2006, brewright.blogspot.com/2006/12/divorce-rates-among-christians-by.html

6. Barna Group, Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twenty-somethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years

7. Barna Group, New Research Shows How Different Generations View and Use the Bible, October 19, 2009, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible

8. 2 Corinthians 10:4

9. Philippians 4:11-13

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Hume's Critique of Miracles

Michael Gleghorn examines Hume's influential critique of miracles and points out the major shortfalls in his argument. Hume's first premise assumes that there could not be miracles and his second premise is based on his distaste for the societies that report miracles. As a Christian examining these arguments, we find little of value to convince us to reject a biblical worldview saying that God can and has intervened in natural history to perform miracles.

Introduction

One of the most influential critiques of miracles ever written came from the pen of the skeptical Scottish philosopher David

Hume. The title of the essay, "Of Miracles," originally appeared in Hume's larger work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1748. This was the Age of Enlightenment, a time in which skepticism about miracles was becoming increasingly widespread among the educated elite.[\[1\]](#) So what were Hume's arguments, and why have they been so influential in subsequent scholarly discussions of this topic?

Hume essentially "presents a two-pronged assault against miracles."[\[2\]](#) He first argues that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." But since "a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle," he says, "is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."[\[3\]](#) In other words, given the regularity of the laws of nature, Hume contends that miracles are exceedingly improbable events. But this is not all. He also argues that since miracle reports typically occur among uneducated, barbarous peoples, they are inherently untrustworthy and, hence, unworthy of our belief.[\[4\]](#)



Now clearly, if Hume is correct, then this presents a real problem for Christianity. For Christianity is full of miracles. According to the New Testament, Jesus walked on water, calmed raging storms, healed diseases, exorcised demons, and brought the dead back to life! But if miracles are really as utterly improbable as Hume maintains, and if reports of miracles are completely lacking in credibility, then it would seem that the New Testament's accounts of miracles are probably unreliable and that Christianity itself is almost certainly false!

So how compelling are Hume's arguments? Should believers be quaking in their boots, fearful that their most cherished beliefs are a lie? Not at all! As philosopher of science John Earman observed in a scholarly critique of Hume's arguments, Hume's essay is not merely a failure; it is "an abject failure." He continues, "Most of Hume's considerations are

unoriginal, warmed over versions of arguments that are found in the writings of predecessors and contemporaries. And the parts of 'Of Miracles' that set Hume apart do not stand up to scrutiny. Worse still, the essay reveals the weakness and the poverty of Hume's own account of induction and probabilistic reasoning. And to cap it all off, the essay represents the kind of overreaching that gives philosophy a bad name." {5} Now admittedly, these are strong words. But Earman argues his case quite forcefully and persuasively. And in the remainder of this article, I think the truth of his remarks will become increasingly evident.

Hume's Argument from the Laws of Nature

What are we to say to Hume's argument that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" and that "the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined"?

First, we might question whether miracles *should* be defined as violations of the laws of nature. According to Christian philosopher Bill Craig, "An examination of the chief competing schools of thought concerning the notion of a natural law...reveals that on each theory the concept of a violation of a natural law is incoherent and that miracles need not be so defined." {6} Thus, we might object that Hume's definition of a miracle is simply incoherent. But this is a debated point, so let's instead turn our attention to a more pressing matter.

When Hume says that the laws of nature are established upon "a firm and unalterable experience," is he claiming that the laws of nature are never violated? If so, then his argument begs the question, assuming the very thing that needs to be proved. It would be as if he argued this way:

- *A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.*
- *Experience teaches us that the laws of nature are never*

violated (i.e. that miracles never occur).

- *Therefore, experience teaches us that miracles never occur.*

Such an argument is clearly fallacious. Hume would be assuming “as a premise for his argument the very conclusion he intends to prove.”[{7}](#) But this is probably *not* what Hume intended.

As Earman observes, Hume’s view rather seems to go something like this: “When uniform experience supports” some lawlike regularity “that is contradicted by testimony,” then one must set “proof against proof,” and judge which of the two is more likely. The result of this new formulation, however, is that “uniform experience does *not* furnish a proof against a miracle in the sense of making the . . . probability of its occurrence flatly zero.”[{8}](#)

This is an important point. After all, there is a great deal of human testimony that solemnly *affirms* the occurrence of miracles. Thus, the only way that Hume can maintain that the uniform experience of mankind is against the occurrence of miracles is by *assuming* that all miracle reports are false. But *this* assumption, as we’ll see, is completely untenable when miraculous events are attested by numerous, independent witnesses.

Hume’s Argument Against the Reliability of Human Testimony

In Part II of “Of Miracles,” David Hume argues that there has never been the kind of testimony on behalf of miracles which would “amount to entire proof.”[{9}](#) He offers four reasons for this claim.[{10}](#)

First, no miracle on record has a sufficient number of intelligent witnesses, of good moral character, who testify to a miraculous event that occurred in public and in a civilized part of the world. Second, human beings love bizarre and

fantastic tales, and this irrationally inclines them to accept such tales as true. Third, miracle reports are usually found among barbarous peoples. And finally, the miracle reports of different religions cancel each other out, thus making none of them effective for proving the truth of their doctrines.

What should we say in response to these arguments? While all of the points have merit, nevertheless, as Bill Craig observes, “these general considerations cannot be used to decide the historicity of any particular miracle.”[{11}](#) The only way to determine if a miracle has actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence. How many witnesses were there? Are they known to be honest, or are they generally unreliable?

These questions are particularly important when one considers the cumulative power of independent witnesses for establishing the occurrence of some highly improbable event like a miracle. By “independent witnesses” I simply mean witnesses whose testimony to an event comes from firsthand experience and is *not dependent* on the testimony of others.

As Charles Babbage demonstrated in his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, if one can find enough independent witnesses to a miraculous event, who tell the truth more often than not, then one can always show that the occurrence of the miracle is more probable than not.[{12}](#) Craig explains the matter this way: “If two witnesses are each 99% reliable, then the odds of their both independently testifying falsely to some event are only . . . one out of 10,000; the odds of three such witnesses being wrong is . . . one out of 1,000,000.” “In fact,” he says, “the cumulative power of independent witnesses is such that individually they could be *unreliable* more than 50% of the time and yet their testimony combine to make an event of apparently enormous improbability quite probable in light of their testimony.”[{13}](#)

So while Hume’s arguments should make us cautious, they cannot

prevent human testimony from plausibly establishing the occurrence of miracles. And the only way to determine if the testimony *is* plausible is to carefully examine the evidence.

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 1)

Hume argues that since miracles run contrary to man's uniform experience of the laws of nature, no testimony can establish that a miracle has occurred unless "its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."[\[14\]](#) Although Hume makes it sound as though establishing one miracle would require an even greater miracle, all his statement really amounts to, as John Earman rightly notes, is that no testimony is good enough to establish that a miracle has occurred unless it's sufficient to make the occurrence of the miracle more probable than not.[\[15\]](#)

But in Hume's view this is virtually impossible. *No* testimony is really ever sufficient to establish that a miracle has occurred. And this is problematic. For it can be perfectly reasonable to accept a highly improbable event on the basis of human testimony. In fact, we do it all the time.

Suppose the evening news announces that the number picked in the lottery was 8253652. As Craig observes, "this is a report of an extraordinarily improbable event, one out of several million."[\[16\]](#) If we applied Hume's principle to such a case, it would be irrational for us to believe that such a highly improbable event had actually occurred. So something is clearly wrong with this principle. But what?

The problem, says Craig, is that Hume has not considered all of the relevant probabilities. For although it might be highly improbable that just this number should have been chosen out of all the possible numbers that *could* have been chosen, nevertheless one must also consider the probability that the evening news would have reported just *this* number if that

number had *not* been chosen. And this probability is “incredibly small,” for the newscasters would have no reason to report just this number unless it had, in fact, been chosen!{17}

So how does this relate to the question of miracles? When it comes to assessing the testimony for a miracle, we cannot simply consider the likelihood of the event in light of our general knowledge of the world.{18} This was Hume’s mistake. Instead, we must also consider how likely it would be, if the miracle had *not* occurred, that we would have just the testimony and evidence that we have.{19} And if it is highly unlikely that we would have just this evidence if the miracle had *not* occurred, then it may actually be *highly probable* that the miracle did, in fact, occur. Even if a miracle is highly *improbable* when judged against our general knowledge, it may still turn out to be highly *probable* once all the specific testimony and evidence for the miracle is taken into account.{20}

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 2)

There’s still another problem with Hume’s critique, namely, that he never actually establishes that a miracle *is* highly improbable in light of our general knowledge of the world. He simply assumes that this is so. But the problem with this becomes evident when one reflects upon the fact that, for the Christian, part of what’s included in our “general knowledge of the world” is the belief that God exists. What’s more, as believers we have at our disposal a whole arsenal of arguments which, we contend, make it far more plausible than not that this belief is really true.

But notice how this will influence our estimation of the probability of miracles. If belief in God is part of our general knowledge of the world, then miracles will be judged to at least be possible. For if an all-powerful God exists, then He is certainly capable of intervening in the natural

world to bring about events which would never have occurred had nature been left to itself. In other words, if God exists, then He can bring about miracles! Thus, as Bill Craig observes, whether or not a miracle is considered highly improbable relative to our general knowledge of the world is largely going to depend on whether or not we believe in God. So the question of God's existence is highly relevant when it comes to assessing the probability of miracle claims.^{21} While those who believe in God may still be skeptical of most miracle reports, they will nonetheless be open to the *possibility* of miracles, and they will be willing to examine the evidence of such reports on a case-by-case basis.

To conclude, although Hume's critique of miracles is one of the most influential ever written, it really doesn't stand up well under scrutiny. Indeed, John Earman concludes his devastating critique of Hume's arguments by noting his astonishment at how well posterity has treated Hume's essay, "given how completely the confection collapses under a little probing."^{22} Although Hume was doubtless a brilliant man, his critique of miracles is simply unconvincing.

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 248.
2. *Ibid.*, 250.
3. David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 122.
4. *Ibid.* See Hume's discussion in Part II of his essay.
5. John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.
6. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 261.

7. Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 65.
8. Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 32
9. Hume, "Of Miracles," 124.
10. See *ibid.*, 124-41.
11. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 277.
12. This sentence is a paraphrase of a statement from Babbage's treatise cited in Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 54.
13. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 272, n. 26.
14. Hume, "Of Miracles," 122-23.
15. Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 41.
16. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.
17. *Ibid.*, 271.
18. Jason Rennie, "Epistemology and the Resurrection: An Interview with William Lane Craig," in *Sci-Phi Show Outcasts*, 2006, available in the "Interviews" section at bit.ly/9SSrWU (note: this page is accessible by members only. We urge you to register free of charge to access this and many excellent resources. The link is down the page underneath the "Closer to Truth" links.)
19. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.
20. Rennie, "Epistemology and the Resurrection."
21. *Ibid.* See also the discussion in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 274-76.
22. Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 71.

Humanitarian Aid

dear world,

if i'm just a walking sac of chemicals,
then there's no such thing as miracles
and caring isn't caring; just synapses
flaring—so tell me, why should i care?

movies end happily, but i can't for the life of me
understand—if God is dead, what's the hurry?
why this cumbersome worry?
there's no referent and nothing is definite;
so do as you please; forget
poverty, education, disease.

please tell me why should I care; pack my bags
and go over there; pay plane, bus and taxi fare?
so what if children don't eat and people can't walk
down the street without rape, AIDS, pregnancy to meet?

i get the green thing. i have to live in this space with all
the rest of this evolving race. but there's no Telos
so Darwin tells us—no meaning in our beginning;
no meaning in our end—so why should i care?

because apparently, we ain't goin' nowhere.

so dear world,

i decided i don't care. but i can't. i mean, just listen to
this rant.

there's care there.

care's there from the start, presupposing Science and Art;
care recessed, repressed in my bleeding heart.

things aren't the way they're supposed to be,
and the Story of Biology is not sufficient—
they say we're here on accident... but i need more.

i need more in order to account for this life
as we live it. look around and see people caring,
friend and neighbor sharing—poverty and injustice repairing.
there's care there... but, from where?

people don't love wholly right—even when striving
with all our light. we withhold, we withdraw, we fight.
we harbor anger; we brandish pride; we've all of us
murdered and lied; selfishly denied truth, justice, mercy.

and yet... there's Care there. it echoes in our tomes,
recalling to our breath and bones our Original Shimmering
Start,
pulsating, all along, in our heart.

Originally published at Renea's [blog](#).

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The Time of Our Lives

In his song "Time in a Bottle," Jim Croce sings about wishing he could capture and contain time so he could spend eternity with the one he loved. But he laments that:

*There never seems to be enough time
To do the things you want to do
Once you find them*

You know the feeling. Our days get filled up with things that, upon reflection, don't seem to really matter much, leaving

little time for things that are important. Rather than being a friend, time seems more like a foe; “more of a nemesis or taskmaster,” says organizational coach Mark Freier.^{1}

In the Middle Ages, time was measured primarily in periods within which people dwelt. Days were divided into rhythmic patterns: sunrise, breakfast time, work hours, evening, sunset. Hours were significant in relation to the daily cycle of prayers prescribed by the Church. But even in that case, there wasn't a concern with sticking to precise times of the day.

In the Middle Ages people weren't primarily concerned with time measured by the clock but with the quality of life's experiences.

As the West moved into modernity, clock time assumed greater importance. Now we worry, not only about hours, but about minutes. As a fund raising specialist told me, if you ask a businessman for ten minutes, take ten minutes and no more. His time is carefully apportioned out, and, as we have heard many times, time is money.

Busyness has become so routine that we easily feel guilty if we don't have anything we have to do. How can we “waste time” like that? But that's usually not a problem! The world outside has a way of filling up our daily planner even if we don't.

There are two ways to think about time I'd like to consider, designated by different words.

One is *chronos*. Chronos was the name given by the Greeks to the god who represented time. Chronos time is clock time. It is marked off by seconds, minutes, hours. Chronos is what I'm thinking about when I'm adding new things to my daily calendar. It's the measure of time I can give to one project or person before I must be moving on to the next item on the agenda.

The other word for time is *kairos*. Kairos was a child of Zeus. He represented opportunity. While chronos time is a quantitative thing, kairos is more qualitative; the concern is with the *what* that is to be done and the importance of doing it. Both are ways of measuring our experience in life, but they do so quite differently. Let's look at them more closely.

Two things help with understanding what kairos is. It speaks of the quality of our actions and of opportunity. Kairos time focuses on what we're doing (or planning to do) rather than the number of minutes or hours it will take. And it connotes the perfect time, the perfect moment, to do what needs to be done. It points to the significance of certain things. Success isn't measured by how many things we get done in a short amount of time, but by how well we've done the important things.

Theologian Daniel Clendenin uses Martin Luther King, Jr., and an example of someone who wanted to grasp the moment. Even though he knew his life had been threatened, he determined to press on with his work for civil rights. It was the time for that, even if King's chronos time might well be cut short very soon. And indeed it was. [\[2\]](#)

Winston Churchill provides another illustration. When things were going very badly for England in World War II, Churchill rallied the country to fight as hard as they could, because it was a time in which freedom could be lost by many, many people. The Nazis had to be defeated. It was the right time, in the sense of kairos. But even as kairos speaks of the opportunity to do something great, it can also be fraught with danger.

Still one more illustration is the song by the Byrds, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, taken from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes:

To everything / There is a season / And a time to every purpose, under Heaven

A time to be born, a time to die / A time to plant, a time to reap

Notice the songwriter didn't say, "There's a time to plant, and that's at 6 a.m. on September 3. And we have eight hours to get it done." Even though farmers might set a day for everyone to gather and begin, that isn't the point of the song (or the Scripture). The time to plant is different from the time to harvest. When it's time to plant, nothing else will do but to plant.

Chronos and kairos are certainly connected, but they are qualitatively different. Kairos intersects chronos. It is within chronos time that we experience kairos. We can't have kairos without chronos, but we can have chronos without kairos.

Chronos time can often be made up, but that isn't so easy with kairos. I can find an open half hour block in my schedule tomorrow for that meeting I couldn't attend today. But can I get back that time I should have given a co-worker who's been going through tough times and really needed a listening ear? What matters with kairos isn't whether something fits in my schedule. What matters is, what matters! In kairos time, minutes aren't the measure of the value of our acts. The things we do, rather, grant value to the minutes they take. Mark Freier put it very well: "'To miscalculate kronos {3} is inconvenient. To miscalculate kairos is lamentable.'" {4}

Kairos speaks of a quality of life that sees ourselves, others, the world, as significant and worthy of our time, attention, energy, resources. Its enemies include pragmatism, doubts about our own significance, an absence of a long view of things, and, even more so, no eternal view—no understanding of what gives our lives eternal significance.

The old cry was "Carpe diem!" "Seize the day!" Someone might wonder, seize it for what? If nothing lasts, if nothing has

eternal significance, what is the point? It all slips through our fingers and is gone. Seizing the day isn't to be understood as the existentialist's call to experience the moment. The focus on the latter is on fleeting experiences. The hope is that by focusing on those, one can shape one's own life rather than living the life others hand you. But there's nothing eternal about this. I am reminded of Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, who believes he lives in an indifferent world, or what *should* be an indifferent world, and wonders why people think anything is really significant. Nothing is of any more value than anything else because it all ends in death. The universe doesn't care.

Which brings me to a specifically Christian view of time as *kairos*.

My search through the NT showed eighty uses of the word. It's a significant concept in Scripture. The most familiar reference to *kairos* in the New Testament is probably Eph. 5:15-16: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." The King James used the more familiar phrase, "redeem the time." It means literally to buy up, or rescue from loss, the opportunity, the proper season, the right time. The word *kairos* is also used in the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. After Jesus resisted Satan, Luke writes that "he [Satan] left Him until an opportune time" (Lk. 4:13).

What gives significance to our time (and even to *chronos* time) is that we live in a world created by God who is working out His plan that will be consummated at His appointed time. Theologian James Emery White wrote this: "Kairos moments are never pragmatic moves to ensure a blessed life during our short tenure on earth. They are moments to be seized for the sake of eternity and the Lord of eternity."⁵ Good works have been prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10), and we should apply ourselves because they matter beyond the grave.

So, how do we do it? How does one live in kairos time in a world governed by chronos? Others want me to think of time the way they do, as openings in my schedule that can be filled with something else. I have responsibilities in my job and with my family and church that require keeping a calendar.

We aren't going to return to an agrarian society like that of the Middle Ages. And our lives *are* intertwined with others'. We *can*, however, do something about it. For starters, we can be more aware of how we use the time that *is* truly ours. Are we doing useful things? That doesn't mean to fill our time with "meaningful busyness." There's a proper time for rest as well as for work, for creativity as well as for chores. Changing a mindset and habits takes practice. Little by little we can "re-color" our lives.

More significantly, however, is a fundamental change in our thinking about the importance of the things we do. Few of us will become Martin Luther Kings or Winston Churchills. But we—you and I—are important, and we touch the lives of important people. Not all kairos times have to be of society wide significance. The main point is that life and what we do with it, even in the details, is rich with significance and meaning. We can make a difference in this world, in others' lives, if we'll but seize the opportunities while they are present.

Notes

1. Mark Freier, [Whatif Enterprises](#).
2. Daniel Clendenin, ["When Chronos Meets Kairos, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2006."](#)
3. Alternate spelling for "chronos"
4. Freier.
5. James Emory White, *Life Defining Moments: Daily Choices with the Power to Transform Your Life* (Waterbrook Press, 2001), 97; quoted by Mark Freier.

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