What’s the Meaning of Life?

Former Probe staffer Jerry Solomon explains how Christianity answers the biggest question of them all: What is the meaning of life?

Cathy has been married to her husband Dan for twenty years and is the mother of two teenagers. She is very involved in family, church, and community activities. Many consider her to be the model of one that “has it together,” so to speak. Unknown to her family and her many friends, lately she has been thinking a lot about her lifestyle. As a result, she has even questioned whether there is any ultimate meaning or purpose underlying her busyness. At lunch one day she finds herself in an intimate conversation with a good friend named Sarah. Even though they have never talked about such things, Cathy decides to see how Sarah will respond to her questioning. Lets eavesdrop on their conversation.

Cathy: Sarah, I’ve been doing some serious thinking lately.

Sarah: Is something wrong?

Cathy: I don’t know that I would say something is wrong. I just don’t know what to make of these thoughts I’ve been having.

Sarah: What thoughts?

Cathy: This may sound like Im going off the deep end or something, but I promise you Im not. Ive just started asking some really heavy questions. And I haven’t told another soul about it.

Sarah: Well, tell me! You know you can trust me.

Cathy: Okay. But you promise not to laugh or blow it off?

Sarah: Stop being so defensive. Just say it!

Cathy: Sarah, why are you here? I mean, what is your purpose in life?

Sarah: (She pauses before responding flippantly.) You're right, you *have* gone off the deep end.

Cathy: Sarah, I need you to be serious with me here!

Sarah: Okay! I'm sorry! I'm just drawing a blank. Actually, I try *not* to think about that question.

Cathy: Yeah, well, denying it doesn't work anymore. It just keeps rolling around in my head.

Sarah: Cant you talk to Dan about it?

Cathy: I've thought about it, but I don't want him to think there's something wrong between *us.*

Sarah: Well, what about talking to your pastor? I bet he'd have some answers.

Cathy: Yeah, I've thought about that too. Maybe I will.

Is Cathy really "weird," or is she an example of people that rub shoulders with us each day? And what about Sarah? Was her nervous response typical of how most of us would respond if we were asked questions about meaning and purpose?

James Dobson relates an intriguing story about a remarkable seventeen-year-old girl who achieved a perfect score on both sections of the "Scholastic Achievement Test, and a perfect on the tough University of California acceptance index. Never in history has anyone accomplished this intellectual feat, which is almost staggering to contemplate."{1} Interestingly, though, when a reporter "asked her, What is the meaning of life? she replied, I have no idea. I would like to know myself."{2}

This intellectually brilliant young lady has something in

common with Cathy and Sarah, doesn't she? She is able to understand complicated subject matter, but she has no idea if life has any meaning.

Our goal in this essay is to see if there is an answer for them, as well as all of us.

The Questions Around Us

As I was driving to my office one day I heard a dramatic radio advertisement for a book. It began something like this: "Would you like to find meaning in life?" As I listened to the remainder of the ad I realized that the books author was focusing on New Age concepts of purpose and meaning. But the striking thing about what was said was that the advertisers obviously believed that they could get the attention of the radio audience by asking about meaning in life. Some may think it is advertising suicide to open an ad with such a question. Or perhaps the author and her publicists are on to something that "strikes a chord" with many people in our culture.

Questions of meaning and purpose are a part of the mental landscape as we enter a new millennium. Some contend this has not always been the case, but that such questions are an unprecedented legacy of the upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.{3} Others assert that such questions are a result of mans rejection of God.{4}

Even though most of us don't make such issues a part of our normal conversations, the questions tend to lurk around us. They can be heard in songs, movies, books, magazines, and many other media that permeate our lives. For example, Jackson Browne, an exceptionally reflective songwriter of the 60s and 70s, wrote these haunting lyrics in a song entitled *For a Dancer*:

> Into a dancer you have grown
> From a seed somebody else has thrown

Go ahead and throw
Some seeds of your own
And somewhere between the time you arrive
And the time you go
May lie a reason you were alive….{5}

Russell Banks, the author of *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, both of which became Oscar-nominated films, has this to say about his work: "I'm not a morbid man. In my writing, I'm just trying to describe the world as straightforwardly as I can. I think most lives are desperate and painful, despite surface appearances. If you consider anyone's life for long, you find its without meaning."{6}

Woody Allen, the film writer, director, and actor, has consistently populated his scripts with characters who exchange dialogue concerning meaning and purpose. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* a character named Mickey says, "Do you realize what a thread were all hanging by? Can you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything. I gotta get some answers."{7}

Even television ads have focused on meaning, although in a flippant manner. A few years ago you could watch Michael Jordan running across hills and valleys in order to find a guru. When Jordan finds him he asks, "What is the meaning of life?" The guru answers with a maxim that leads to the product that is the real focus of Jordan's quest.

Even though such illustrations can be ridiculous, maybe they serve to lead us beyond the surface of our subject. We often get nervous when we are encouraged to delve into subject matter that might stretch us. When we get involved in conversations that go beyond the more mundane things of everyday life we may tend to get tense and defensive. Actually, this can be a good thing. The Christian shouldn't fear such conversations. Indeed, I'm confident that if we go beyond the surface, we can find peace and hope.

Beyond the Surface

Listen to the sober words of a famous writer of the twentieth century:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy…. I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.{8}

These phrases indicate that Albert Camus, author of *The Plague, The Stranger,* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was not afraid to go beyond the surface. Camus was bold in exposing the thoughts many were having during his lifetime. In fact, his world view made it obligatory. He was struggling with questions of meaning in light of what some called the "death of God." That is, if there is no God, can we find meaning? Many have concluded that the answer is a resounding "No!" If true, this means that one who believes there is no God is not living consistently with that belief.

William Lane Craig, one of the great Christian thinkers of our time, states that:

> Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.{9}

Francis Schaeffer agrees with ' analysis, but makes even bolder assertions. He also maintains that the Christian can

close the hopeless gap that is created in a persons godless worldview. Listen to what he wrote:

> It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice. Thus, when you face twentieth-century man, whether he is brilliant or an ordinary man of the street, a man of the university or the docks, you are facing a man in tension; and it is this tension which works on your behalf as you speak to him.{10}

What happens when we go "beyond the surface" in order to find meaning? Can a Christian worldview stand up to the challenge? I believe it can, but we must stop and think of whether we are willing to accept the challenge. David Henderson, a pastor and writer, gives us reason to pause and consider our response. He writes:

> Our lives, like our Daytimers, are busy, busy, busy, full of things to do and places to go and people to see. Many of us, convinced that the opposite of an empty life is a full schedule, remain content to press on and ignore the deeper questions. Perhaps it is out of fear that we stuff our lives to the walls—fear that, were we to stop and ask the big questions, we would discover there are no satisfying answers after all.{11}

Let's jettison any fear and continue our investigation. There are satisfying answers. It is not necessary to "stuff our lives to the walls" in order to escape questions of meaning and purpose. God has spoken to us. Let us begin to pursue His answers.

Eternity in Our Hearts

The book of Ecclesiastes contains numerous phrases that have entered our discourse. One of those phrases states that God "has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set

eternity in their heart. . .” (3:11). What a fascinating statement! Actually, the first part of the verse can be just as accurately translated “beautiful in its time.” Thus “a harmony of purpose and a beneficial supremacy of control pervade all issues of life to such an extent that they rightly challenge our admiration.”{12} The second part of the verse indicates that “man has a deep-seated sense of eternity, of purposes and destinies.”{13}But man can’t fathom the vastness of eternal things, even when he believes in the God of eternity. As a result, all people live with what some call a “God-shaped hole.” Stephen Evans believes this hole can be understood through “the desire for eternal life, the desire for eternal meaning, and the desire for eternal love:”{14}

> The desire for *eternal life* is the most evident manifestation of the need for God. Deep in our hearts we feel death should not be, was not meant to be. The second dimension of our craving for eternity is the desire for *eternal meaning*. We want lives that are eternally meaningful. We crave eternity, and earthly loves resemble eternity enough to kindle our deepest love. Yet earthly loves are not eternal. Our sense that love is the clue to what its all about is right on target, but earthly love itself merely points us in the right direction. What we want is an *eternal love*, a love that loves us unconditionally, accepts us as we are, while helping us to become all we can become. In short, we want *God*, the God of Christian faith.{15}
>
> We must trust God for what we cannot see and understand. Or, to put it another way, we continue to live knowing there is meaning, but we struggle to know exactly what it is at all times. We are striving for what the Bible refers to as our future glorification (Rom. 8:30). “There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied.”{16} For example, we attempt to find meaning while searching for what is beautiful. C.S. Lewis referred to this in a sermon

entitled *The Weight of Glory*:

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.{17}

Lewis's remarkable prose reminds us that meaning must be *given* to us. "Meaning is never intrinsic; it is always derivative. If my life itself is to have meaning (or *a* meaning), it thus must derive its meaning from some sort of purposive, intentional activity. It must be endowed with meaning."{18} Thus we return to God, the giver of meaning.

Meaning: Gods Gift

Think of all the wonderful gifts that God has given you. No doubt you can come up with a lengthy record of God's goodness. Does your list include meaning or purpose in life? Most people wouldn't think of meaning as part of Gods goodness to us. But perhaps we should. This is because "only a being like God—a creator of all who could eventually, in the words of the New Testament, work all things together for good—only this sort of being could guarantee a completeness and permanency of meaning for human lives."{19}So how did God accomplish this? The answer rests in His amazing love for us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Consider the profound words of Carl F.H. Henry: "the eternal and self-revealed Logos, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is the foundation of all meaning."{20} Bruce Lockerbie puts it like this: "The divine nature manifesting itself in the physical

form of Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the integrating principle to which all life adheres, the focal point from which all being takes its meaning, the source of all coherence in the universe. Around him and him alone all else may be said to radiate. He is the Cosmic Center."{21}

Picture a bicycle. When you ride one you are putting your weight on a multitude of spokes that radiate from a hub. All the spokes meet at the center and rotate around it. The bicycle moves based upon the center. Thus it is with Christ. He is the center around whom we move and find meaning. Our focus is on Him.

When the apostle Paul reflected on meaning and purpose in his life in Philippians 3, he came to this conclusion (emphases added):

> 7…whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value *of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order *that I may gain Christ,* 9 *and may be found in Him,* not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 *that I may know Him,* and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order *that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Did you notice how Christ was central to what Paul had to say about both his past and present? And did you notice that he used phrases such as "knowing Christ," or "that I may gain Christ?" Such statements appear to be crucial to Paul's sense of meaning and purpose. Paul wants "to know" Christ intimately, which means he wants to know by experience. "Paul wants to come to know the Lord Jesus in that fulness of

experimental knowledge which is only wrought by being like Him."{22}

Personally, Paul's thoughts are important words of encouragement in my life. God through Christ gives meaning and purpose to me. And until I am glorified, I will strive to know Him and be like Him. Praise God for Jesus Christ, His gift of meaning!

Notes

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13. Ibid., 91.

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18. Morris, 57.
19. Ibid., 62.
20. Carl F.H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, Vol. III (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 195.
21. D. Bruce Lockerbie, *The Cosmic Center: The Supremacy of Christ in a Secular Wasteland* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986),127-128.
22. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Volume Two (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 93.

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Worldview and Truth

Each day Christians are confronted with a bewildering array of choices in ethics, actions, and lifestyles. The only way to make sense of this data is to have a consistent worldview. And Christians should be operating from a biblical worldview. As we will see, that is often not the case.

The Barna Research Group conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only 4 percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that 9 percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.{1}

Everyone has a worldview, but relatively few people (even religious people) have a biblical worldview. This explains a great deal about behavior. One reason so few people act like Christians is because they don't think like Christians. Behavior results from our values and beliefs. Thinking biblically about the issues of life should ultimately result in living biblically in society. Conversely, not thinking biblically should result in not living biblically within society.

Nancy Pearcey, in her latest book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity,* tells the story of Sarah, a practicing Christian who worked for years as a counselor for Planned Parenthood. She did not try to talk women out of an abortion, but merely was content to make sure they knew what they were doing. She said that after she graduated from college, "My Christianity was reduced to a thin veneer over the core of a secular worldview. It was almost like having a split personality."{2}

Unfortunately, there are millions of Sarahs in the world who willingly live with a split personality. The split is between the sacred and the secular. Or the split is between fact and value. In their personal lives they try to live as Christians, but in their public world they think and act just like the non-Christians around them. They do not have a Christian worldview even though they are Christians.

Now you might wonder where the pastors are in all of this. After all, shouldn't pastors and church leadership be calling people to think and behave according to Christian principles? It turns out that part of the problem is the lack of sound biblical teaching about a biblical worldview.

The Barna Research Group found in a nationwide survey of senior pastors that only half of the country's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview. The gap among churches is reflected in the outcomes from the nation's two largest

denominations. Southern Baptists had the highest percentage of pastors with a biblical worldview (71 percent), while the Methodists were lowest (27 percent).{3}

Obviously we need to do a better job within the church thinking about the array of issues that confront us from a biblical perspective. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that we have not been doing this effectively.

Absolute Truth

One of the foundational aspects of a Christian worldview is the matter of absolute truth. The Bible rests upon belief in it. Yet surveys by George Barna show that a minority of born again adults (44 percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (9 percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.{4}

Even more disturbing is the growing evidence that even adults have abandoned their belief in absolute truth. By a three-to-one margin adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.{5}

Social scientists as well as pollsters have been warning that American society is becoming more and more dominated by moral anarchy. Writing in the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim said in *The Day America Told the Truth* that there was no moral authority in America. “We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect.”{6}

Researcher George Barna, writing ten years later in his book *Boiling Point*, concludes that moral anarchy has arrived and dominates our culture today.{7} His argument hinges on a substantial amount of attitudinal and behavioral evidence,

such as rapid growth of the pornography industry, highway speeding as the norm, income tax cheating, computer hacking, rampant copyright violations (movies, books, and recordings), increasing rates of cohabitation and adultery, Internet-based plagiarism, etc{8}.

When asked the basis on which they form their moral choices, nearly half of all adults cite their desire to do whatever will bring them the most pleasing or satisfying results. Although the Bible should be the basis of our moral decision-making, the survey showed that only four out of every ten born again Christian adults relies on the Bible or church teaching as their primary source of moral guidance.{9}

The survey also found that the younger generation was even more inclined to support behaviors that conflict with traditional Christian morals. "Among the instances in which young adults were substantially more likely than their elders to adopt a nouveau moral view were in supporting homosexuality, cohabitation, the non-medicinal use of marijuana, voluntary exposure to pornography, profane language, drunkenness, speeding and sexual fantasizing."{10}

Clearly, Christians are neither thinking nor behaving as Christians. And a large part of the problem centers on this abandonment of a belief in absolute truth. If Christians believe that morality is relative and determined by the situation, then they have changed biblical moral principles. Today there is a critical need for Christians to think and act biblically in every area of life.

De-conversion

You have no doubt known of young people who go off to college and end up rejecting their faith. The story is more common than we might imagine. Nancy Pearcey, in her book *Total Truth,* tells the story of two such people.{11}

One said, “In my senior year of high school I accepted Jesus as my Savior and became a born-again Christian. I had found the One True Religion, and it was my duty—indeed it was my pleasure—to tell others about it, including my parents, brothers and sisters, friends, and even total strangers.”{12}

But his religious convictions waned when he confronted the theory of evolution. The student underwent “a de-conversion in graduate school six years later when I studied evolutionary biology.” Who is this person? He is Michael Shermer, the director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine. He has dedicated his life to debunking Christianity and defending evolution against people who believe in intelligent design.

Another prominent atheist tells a similar story. “I was a born-again Christian. When I was fifteen, I entered the Southern Baptist Church with great fervor and interest in the fundamentalist religion.” But he also found that his religious convictions were adversely affected by the theory of evolution. He says that he left the church “at seventeen when I got to the University of Alabama and heard about evolutionary theory.”{13}

This person described his encounter with evolution as an “epiphany” and was enthralled with the implications of evolution. Who is this person? He is E.O. Wilson, Harvard professor and founder of sociobiology (which attempts to explain everything in life from an evolutionary process).

Sadly, these stories are repeated year after year at universities throughout this country. The students who go through this de-conversion may not grow up to become famous skeptics or atheists like the ones we just mentioned. But they will grow up without a solid, Christian faith.

Teenagers who are raised in stable Christian homes, educated in Christian schools, all too often go to college and reject

their Christian faith. They fall prey to the naturalistic, evolutionary foundation of modern education. Or they adopt one of the current intellectual or cultural fads on campus.

So how are we to better prepare these young people for their college experience? A key element is to teach a Christian worldview. As our secular culture becomes more hostile to Christian ideas, it is more difficult to live out our Christian worldview consistently. When the culture was more hospitable to Christian values, a Sunday school understanding of Christianity could survive. Now we live in a culture hostile to those values. A rudimentary understanding of Christianity in such a hostile culture will soon wilt and die.

Young people, and youth ministry to young people, must be more intentional if Christian beliefs are to survive. Teaching a Christian worldview and training young people in the basics of apologetics are absolutely crucial if their faith is to survive.

Dichotomy of Truth

A Christian worldview should encompass all of reality. But the world today (and even most Christians) has divided truth into two categories. Francis Schaeffer used the concept of a two-story building. Science and reason are found on the lower story. Religion and morality can be found in the upper story.

Nancy Pearcey says that the upper story is the realm of private truth. This is where we hear people say such things as “that may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me.” Or to put it another way, the lower story is modernism, while the upper story is postmodernism.

This dichotomy of truth has served to marginalize Christianity. When Christians attempt to speak to moral issues of the day, their perspective is dismissed because critics believe that it is in the realm of private truth. So when they

speak on subjects ranging from bioethics to science to public policy, the world perceives these comments as merely subjective value assumptions.

Unfortunately, Christians have also accepted this dichotomy of truth. They assume that science deals with facts and their faith deals with values. And they also assume that the two can exist simultaneously and independently of each other.

A good illustration of this can be found in a recent article in which a young writer described her first day in a theology class at a Christian high school. "My theology teacher drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other side. He informed us that the two are as divided as the two sides of the blackboard—the *heart* is what we use for religion, and the *brain* is what we use for science."{14}

Even more disturbing was the fact that in a classroom of some two hundred students, she was the only one who objected to the teacher's division of truth. Sadly, this is how more and more Christians have decided to deal with the conflicting and confusing facts of the modern world. And this is how we are supposedly "preparing" young people for college and society.

We need to give young people more than just a "heart" religion which will most certainly fail to equip them for the hostility towards Christianity found in modern society. They need a "brain" religion that includes at least training in worldview and apologetics.

Christian education and youth ministry must be more than opening the session in prayer. It must address this dichotomy of truth that places science and reason on one story of the building and leaves religion and morality on another story of the building. If we don't address this problem, we will continue to turn out students who are Christians in their private life but essentially secular in their public life. And ultimately, their brains win out over their hearts so they end

up living and thinking like non-Christians.

Christian Worldview

There are many elements to a Christian worldview, and the Probe Web site is full of articles that will help you in the development of a Christian worldview. A key verse in this endeavor is Mark 12:30: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Jesus is telling us that we cannot live with a dichotomy of truth. We are to love God with our heart, soul, and mind. We cannot live our Christian life out on two different floors of a building where science and reason are on one story of the building and religion and morality are on another.

Jesus is also telling us that we must strive to know God intimately. He describes this as a whole-hearted, consuming desire to know God. Christianity isn’t a hobby; it’s a lifestyle. We are to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Another important verse is 2 Corinthians 10:5: “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” The apostle Paul wrote these words because he knew how important it was for Christians to have a Christian worldview in the midst of the pagan, secular culture of his day.

Notice that he describes the Christian mind in terms of warfare. We are engaged in a battle of worldviews and must be prepared for battle. We are to put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, he is our commander in this battle of worldviews.

Another key verse is Colossians 2:8: “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." The apostle Paul's words warn all Christians not to be "taken captive" by false philosophy. How true that is especially for young people headed off to college.

When we consider these last two verses, we notice an interesting contrast. Either we take every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5) or we run the risk of being taken captive (Col. 2:8) by false philosophies.

A final verse is 1 Peter 3:15: "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." The Greek word *apologia* is where we get our word apologetics. It does not mean to apologize. But it does mean to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

Christianity requires both offense and defense. While 2 Corinthians 10:5 focuses on the "offensive" nature of Christianity, 1 Peter 3:15 focuses on its "defensive" nature. We must always be ready to give an answer for our faith as we engage a world that is often hostile to the Christian worldview.

Notes

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What Happens After Death? A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran brings a biblical perspective to a question we all would like to know: what happens to me after I die? He looks to the Bible to determine what we can and cannot know about our life after we pass out of our present bodies.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Differing Perspectives on Death

For the entire existence of mankind, we have struggled with the question, "What happens after death?" Our answer to this dilemma has great implications for our life here on earth. Although many avoid the issue, we must sooner or later address the question. There are many competing answers to this question.

Atheists believe that at death one ceases to exist. There is no afterlife or eternal soul that continues in eternity. All there is to look forward to is our inevitable death, the future death of mankind, and the universe. It is in the face of this future that the atheist must seek to find meaning and purpose for his own existence.

The Eastern and New Age religions that hold to a pantheistic worldview teach that one goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation until the cycle is broken and the person becomes one with the divine. What form a person becomes in the next life depends on the quality of life lived in the previous life. When one unites with the divine, he ceases to exist as an individual, but becomes part of the divine life force, like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

Those who hold to the animistic or tribal religions believe

that after death the human soul remains on the earth or travels to join the departed spirits of the ancestors in the underworld, also called the realm of the shadows. For eternity they wander in darkness, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Some of the spirits of the deceased may be called upon to aid or torment those on earth.

Islam teaches that at the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise. The rest will be consigned to hell. The Koran teaches that in paradise men will be drinking wine and entertained by heavenly maidens and that they may take several of these maidens for their wives.

Most worldviews must accept their belief in the afterlife on *untested* faith, but the Christian hope is sure for two reasons; the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of God's Word. The Bible gives us the true view of what happens after death. However, many Christians have a misunderstanding of the afterlife. Some believe that they become one of the angels, others believe they go into a state of "soul sleep," while others believe they will be floating on clouds playing harps. In this article, we will examine some popular misconceptions of what lies beyond the grave and perceive what the Bible teaches.

Christians can be assured that death is not something to be feared. Instead, at death we arrive home in heaven. To live means we exist in a foreign country. Death has lost its sting and now is a victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Near Death Experiences

For the past thirty years, thousands of people have reported experiencing what are called near death experiences (NDEs). NDEs are encounters where a person, being in full awareness, leaves the body and enters another world. Such experiences

have resulted in life transformation in many individuals. What are we to make of these accounts?

Let us understand that NDEs come from those who have been *clinically* dead, not *biologically* dead. In clinical death, external life signs such as consciousness, pulse, and breathing cease. In such cases, biological death results if no steps are taken to reverse the process. Biological death, on the other hand, is not affected by any amount of attention, for it is physically irreversible.{1}

The NDE accounts occur at various stages of clinical death. Some occur when the patient is comatose, very close to death, or pronounced clinically dead. Other accounts occur when the patient's heart stops beating. Others occur while the patient's brain ceases to register any activity on the EEG monitor. There have not been any cases of biological or irreversible death for a significant amount of time followed by a resurrection.

What has intrigued scientists and theologians in their study of NDEs is that many of the patients have similar experiences. These include leaving the body and watching from above as doctors work on it, entering a dark tunnel, seeing light, seeing others, meeting a spirit being, experiencing peace, and then returning to the body.

Scientists and doctors from various worldviews have sought to explain this phenomenon. Those from an atheistic worldview have sought to give naturalistic explanations. Their explanations range from hallucination induced by medication, chemical reactions the brain experiences in near death crises, previous encounters long forgotten, and others. These fall short of explaining NDE events.

Many NDEs have occurred without medication. Drowning victims are one example. Also, thousands of NDE victims were able to clearly describe places and people with exact detail while

they were clinically dead. One girl, while near dead, was able to describe what her family did that night at home, what was made for dinner, where everyone sat and even what was said. Others were able to describe in detail objects in rooms nearby and far away from them. One patient described a shoe on the rooftop of a hospital. When the nurses looked, they found the shoe exactly as described. A boy in an accident involving his brother and mother told those around him moments before he died, "They are waiting for me now." The doctor discovered that at that exact time in another hospital the boy's mother and brother had just died. Dr. Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland provide a comprehensive discussion of NDEs in their book *Beyond Death*, arguing that naturalistic explanations cannot satisfactorily explain the events that occur in NDEs.

NDEs may not conclusively prove there is a heaven or hell, but they do indicate that at death the soul separates from the body, and that a person's spirit is conscious and coherent at death.

However, NDEs do not accurately reflect what lies beyond the grave. NDEs deal with accounts that give a short glimpse behind the curtain of death and therefore they give us an incomplete picture. Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus "is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Christ overcame biological death and lives forevermore as ruler over all creation. His supremacy over everything was established through His resurrection. Also, we know that Satan masquerades as an angel of light and can produce counterfeit appearances. It is imperative that we evaluate all experiences in light of Scripture.

Can We Communicate with the Dead?

Do the spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate with the living? One of the most popular current TV shows is "Crossing Over," with psychic John Edward. He, like other

psychics, claims to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. He amazes spectators with his ability to reveal details about which only the deceased loved one may have known. From this communication, people attempt to receive comfort, advice, and encouragement.

The Bible teaches that communication with the dead is not possible. Throughout the Bible God commands His people not to indulge in the practice of necromancy, the art of communicating with the dead.

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 states,

> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead . . .

The Canaanites consulted spirits and the dead in hopes of gaining power and predicting future events. This practice is an abomination to God and it is for this reason the Canaanites were ejected from the land. Israel was warned not to imitate the Canaanites or they too would suffer a similar fate.

Contacting the dead is forbidden because the spirits of the dead cannot contact the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him.

Who, then, are mediums and spiritists contacting? If they are indeed contacting a spiritual being, it is most likely a demonic counterfeit. Although the demonic spirit may communicate some truths, the ultimate intention of the spirit is to deceive and take one away from the Lord. This practice can ultimately lead to demonic possession and injury to the person.

In Acts 16:16 Paul encountered girl who could predict the future because a spirit possessed her. Knowing this, Paul eventually cast the spirit out of the girl. Throughout the Bible the practice of necromancy is forbidden.

Some will try to defend necromancy by pointing to 1 Samuel 28. Here Saul requests the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel from the grave. The spirit of Samuel arises and delivers a prophetic message to Saul. Bible scholars take two views on this. Some believe it was a demonic counterfeit masquerading as Samuel. I believe since the prophecy given came to pass, this was indeed Samuel the prophet. Despite Saul's disobedience to God, God made an exception here.

Whichever view you take, it is clear this verse does not encourage one to consult mediums. Saul at this point in his life was out of God's will and because the Spirit of God had left him, he could not receive any word from God. In desperation, he disobeyed God as was the pattern of his life and suffered the consequence. His story teaches us a lesson and is not an example to follow.

One Minute After Death

What happens when we breathe our final breath? The Bible teaches what will occur.

First our immaterial soul and spirit will be separated from our physical body. Second, we will immediately receive the judgment that will determine our eternal destiny. Those who have trusted in Christ's payment on the cross for our sins will enter into eternal life in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 5:8 states, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." There will be no delay in a state of unconsciousness many call "soul sleep." We will immediately be in God's presence.

Second, the soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our

old sin nature is eradicated. Hebrews 12:23 mentions “the spirits of righteous men made perfect.” The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle with sin that Paul described and all Christians fight comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

Those who reject this gift, will receive what they have chosen, eternity separated from God in Hell. Hebrews 9:27 states, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” There is no second chance and there is no cycle of reincarnation. Our eternal destiny is determined by the decision we make for Christ here on earth.

Many assume that after receiving Christ all that remains is a joyful entrance into heaven. Scripture teaches that Jesus will reward us according to how we lived our life on earth. He taught this principle in the parable of the talents in Luke 19. Each servant was entrusted to administer the talents the master gave him. Upon the return of the master, each servant had to give an account for his stewardship. The wise servants were rewarded doubly while the wicked servant was removed.

The lesson for the Christian is that each of us will give an account for our time here on earth. This is not the same as being judged on our salvation status. Christ’s death on the cross allows all who believe to enter God’s kingdom. We will be judged on our works done since the time of our salvation. This judgment of believers is called the *Bema Seat judgment.* This event is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

> No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work, which he has built upon it, remains, he shall

> receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul states that Christ is our foundation. Our works are the building on this foundation. The materials of gold, silver, and precious stones refer to works done with pure motives for the glory of God. The works of wood, hay, and straw are works done with the wrong motives to glorify self.

At the Bema Seat, our works will be tested with divine fire. Those works that were done for the glory of God will endure the flames and will be our reward. Some will regretfully see all their works on earth burned up before their eyes and enter heaven with little or no reward.

The unbeliever will be judged and sentenced to hell. At the end of the age, he faces the Great White Throne judgment. Here, all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time are judged based on their rejection of the Savior. They are then thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Revelation 20:11-15 says:

> And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; . . . and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Knowing that as Christians we will one day give an account for our lives, we should live as wise stewards over what God has given us. Knowing the fate of the unsaved should fill us with boldness to share Christ unashamedly, with urgency to all. Knowing what lies beyond the grave should motivate us to live life on earth with a mission.

What Will We Be Like in Heaven?

Upon our physical death, the soul is separated from the body and enters immediately into the presence of the Lord. Looking again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, he says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." The soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. As discussed above, Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle that Paul and all Christians fight with sin comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

We will not remain in heaven as a soul without a body. At God's appointed time, there will be a final resurrection where the spirit will be unified with the resurrected body. Although Christians have various views on when this resurrection will take place, we all agree on the resurrection of the body. What will the resurrected body look like?

Philippians 3:20-21 says, "And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." 1 John 3:2 promises, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

From these two passages we know that our glorified bodies will be like that of Christ. We will not be deified, but we will have the same qualities of His resurrection body. First, our heavenly bodies will be our glorified earthly bodies. Christ's body that died on the cross was the same one that was resurrected. His glorified body was able to travel through walls, appear suddenly, and ascend to heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:1 reads, "[W]e have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." The hands

of God will make the resurrected body. 1 Corinthians 15:39-40, 42b-43 tells us:

> All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

In answering the mockers of the resurrection, Paul explains that our heavenly bodies will possess flesh that is of a different variety than our earthly ones. They will be bodies of flesh, but as different from our earthly bodies as humans are from animals.

We further conclude that, like a seed, the body will be sown or buried and then one day be raised to life. It is buried in death, decay, weakness, and dishonor. When it is resurrected, it will be changed in every way. It is raised imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. We will then have eternal, permanent, and perfected bodies.

We will also maintain our identities. In Luke 16:23, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham all retained their identity. Imagine, one day we will no longer struggle with the weakness of sin, sickness, and aging. A great future is in store for those in Christ.

What Will We Do in Heaven?

What will we do in heaven for all eternity? Some envision playing golf for eternity, while others envision saints floating on clouds strumming harps of gold. Although great thoughts, they fall short of the glorious future that actually

awaits those in Christ. We are told relatively little about what activities will occur in heaven. We are only given a brief glimpse of our life to come.

First, the moment that saints of all the ages anticipate is seeing the Lord they served face to face. This will be the first and greatest moment after physical death. From then on we will have fellowship in His presence for all eternity.

Second, our life in heaven involves worship. A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:1-5:

> After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. . . .” And again they shouted, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah.” Then a voice came from the throne saying: “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him both small and great.”

Like the sound of roaring waters comes the praise from the saints of all ages. Recently the men from our church described the experience of singing the hymn How Great Thou Art at a Promise Keepers conference. Nothing they said could accurately describe that majestic experience. The closest they could come to putting it into words was, “Awesome! Just awesome!” Can you imagine what it will be like when we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” along with the saints of all ages in the presence of God? Our worship here is preparation for our future, grand worship in heaven.

Third is the aspect of rest. Heavenly rest here does not mean a cessation from activity, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. In Hebrews 4:9-11 the writer, addressing the people of God states, “There remains, then, a

Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." Heaven is the final goal reached after our pilgrimage here on earth. We will rest from our sufferings and struggles against sickness, the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Fourth, we will serve the Lord. Luke 19:11-27 teaches a parable about stewardship. The wise servants who multiplied their master's talents were given rule over ten and five cities. Revelation 22:3 tells us, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him." In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul rebukes the carnal Christians who cannot settle their own disputes and asks them, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" In Revelation 3:21 the Lord Jesus promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne." Apparently we will be given authority over a sphere in God's eternal kingdom. How much we are given depends on our faithfulness to Him on this earth.

Fifth, we will experience fellowship with God and with one another. One of the most painful experiences in life is to say goodbye. Whether it is to see loved ones move to another residence or because of death, farewells are a painful time. For the Christian, there is hope in knowing, our goodbyes are not permanent. One day we will meet again and this time we will never say goodbye again. What awaits the believer after death is a glorious future that cannot truly be imagined!

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The Council of Nicea

Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.

This article is also available in Spanish.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."{1} So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to " . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past

with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.{2} Another writes, "The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible."{3}

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, "Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son" (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

Arius

Let’s look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander’s comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah’s Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander’s.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different

understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."{4} He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."{5}

Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."{6} It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of

doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, “My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . .”{7} This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine’s active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death."{8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also

removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.{10} Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."{11}

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

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7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity,* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 60.

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The Origin of Man's Religions: Evolutionary Artifact or Remnants of Knowing Our Creator

Dr. Zukeran examines different theories on the origin of different religions. Are they made up from different experiences and dominant myths in a region or are they remnants of memories from a common Creator and a common fall from grace? He presents examples of how beginning from the remnant in a culture has been an effective way of introducing the gospel in a culture.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Is It Psychological?

What is the origin of man's religion? Why does every culture in the world worship some divine being? Anthropologists and historians have studied this question, and presently there are three primary theories: the subjective theory, the

evolutionary theory, and the theory of original monotheism.

The subjective theory teaches that religion originates with man. Humans have a psychological need for a transcendent being that provides meaning and hope to their existence in this vast impersonal universe. Adherents of this view believe that this religious makeup exists below our conscious awareness. Cultures have various views of reality according to their experience, but the awareness and desire for religion is a universal phenomenon. They therefore conclude that this disposition lies in our subconscious. In other words, our beliefs about a transcendent being are not the result of external realities or interactions with such a being. Rather, these beliefs derive from our psyches.

These feelings are expressed in more concrete terms through symbols and attitudes, not through a set of defined belief systems. As a culture progresses, these symbols and attitudes are developed into a set of beliefs and practices.

Several proponents were important in promoting this theory. Friedrich Schleiermacher believed that religion began with a feeling of dependence. This led to a need for an object to depend on which resulted in the idea of God. Ludwig Feuerbach taught that the concept of God is really a picture of an idealized person. Sigmund Freud believed that God derived from the basic human need for a father image. The idealized father figure becomes our image of God. {1}

The subjective theory may teach us about human nature, but it does not adequately explain the origin of religion or where this universal desire to know and understand God comes from. Dr. Winfried Corduan writes, “I may carry in my subconscious mind an abstract representation of God, but I cannot on that basis conclude that there is no independently existing, objective being that is God. God may have created me with that idea so that I can relate to God.” {2} Every effect has a cause. What is the cause of this powerful desire for a

relationship with God? If we are the products of a divine creator, that would explain this universal drive in all mankind to know Him because He placed this desire within us.

The Bible provides answers to the questions the subjective theory cannot answer. Genesis 1 states that we are created in the image of God. Therefore, we were created in the image of God with the intent to have a relationship with Him. Romans 1:20 states that all men have ingrained in their hearts a knowledge of God. Chapter 2 states that our conscience testifies that a moral law giver exists. The desire for God is a basic part of human nature.

Darwinian Theory of Religion

The second theory regarding the origin of religion is the evolutionary approach. This is the most popular view that is taught or implied in the study of religion. Proponents of this theory believe, as in the subjective theory, that religion originates with man. Religion is the result of an evolutionary process in human culture.

In the most primitive period of a culture, the most basic form of religion begins with an innate feeling that a spiritual force exists. This force is impersonal and pervades all of creation. It is called *mana,* derived from the name given to it by the inhabitants of Melanesia. Mana may be concentrated more intensely in some areas and objects more than others. A magnificent tree, or unique rock, or a certain animal may contain a higher concentration of mana.

The goal is to manipulate this force so that one may attain a desired outcome. Objects such as sticks or dolls, called *fetishes*, may contain the force and be used or worshipped.

The next stage is animism. At this stage, the force is visualized as personal spirits. Animism teaches that a spirit or spiritual force lies behind every event, and many objects

of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

There are two categories of spirits: nature spirits and ancestor spirits. Nature spirits have a human form and inhabit natural objects such as plants, rocks, or lakes. Ancestral spirits are the spirits of the ancestors. Both categories of spirits are limited in knowledge, power, and presence. One must maintain a favorable relationship with the spirits or else suffer their wrath.

The next stage is polytheism. Cultures progress from belief in finite spirits to the worship of gods. From polytheism a culture evolves to henotheism, which is belief in many gods but worship directed to only one of them. The final stage is monotheism, the worship of one God.

There are several problems with this theory. The first is that these stages of development have never actually been observed. There is no record of a culture moving in sequence from the *mana* stage to the monotheistic stage as described in the evolutionary model. With *mana* and animism, evolutionary proponents expect that cultures in these stages would be free of the notion of any gods. However, this is not the case. Animistic cultures have gods, and most have a belief in a supreme being. Finally, there is evidence that indicates religions actually develop in the opposite direction from the evolutionary model.

For these reasons the evolutionary and subjective theories do not provide an adequate explanation for the origin of religion. Does history or even the Bible provide us with a better answer?

Original Monotheism

The third model for the origin of religion is original monotheism. This theory teaches that religion originates with God disclosing Himself to man. The first form religion takes

is monotheism, and it deviates from there. Dr. Winfried Corduan identifies nine characteristics of man's first form of religion.

- *God is a personal God.*
- *He is referred to with masculine grammar and qualities.*
- *God is believed to live in the sky.*
- *He has great knowledge and power.*
- *He created the world.*
- *God is the author of standards of good and evil.*
- *Human beings are God's creatures and are expected to live by his standards.*
- *Human beings have become alienated from God by disobeying his standards.*
- *Lastly, God has provided a method of overcoming the alienation. Originally this involved sacrificing animals on an altar of uncut stone.* [{3}]

Studies of world cultures have revealed that each one has a vestige of monotheistic beliefs which are described by Dr. Corduan's nine qualifications. Cultures that are very primitive provide some of the strongest proof of original monotheism.

Anthropologists Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, author of the 4000 page treatise, *The Origin and Growth of Religion,* and, more recently, Don Richardson , author of *Eternity in Their Hearts,* documented this fact in the hundreds of cultures they studied. They discovered that the religion of some of the most ancient cultures were monotheistic and practiced little or no form of animism or magic. In almost every culture around the world, the religion of a particular culture began with a concept of a masculine, creator God who lives in the heavens. He provided a moral law by which the people would enter into a relationship with him. This relationship was broken when the people were disobedient, and as the relationship deteriorated, the people

distanced themselves from the creator and their knowledge of him faded. As the civilization moved further away, they began to worship other lesser gods. In their search to survive in a world filled with spiritual forces, they desired power to manipulate the forces, and thus there was an increase in the use of magic.

This theory fits very well with what is revealed in Scripture. Genesis teaches us that God created man and that man lived according to his knowledge of God and His laws. However, from Adam's first act of disobedience, mankind continued his sinful path away from God. Paul summarizes this history in Romans 1. The theory of original monotheism is the most consistent with Scripture and appears to have strong historical support.

Examples of Original Monotheism

Here are just a few examples. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* states that the Chinese culture before Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, 2600 years before Christ, worshipped Shang Ti. They understood Him to be the creator and law-giver. They believed that He was never to be represented by an idol. When the Zhou Dynasty controlled China during the years 1066-770 B.C., the worship of Shang Ti was replaced by the worship of heaven itself, and eventually three other religions were spawned in China.

In a region north of Calcutta, India, there lived the Santal people. They were found worshipping elements of nature. However, before these practices developed, they worshipped Thakur Jiu, the genuine God who created all things. Although they knew Thakur Jiu was the true God, the tribe forsook worshipping Him and began entering into spiritism and the worship of lesser gods who ruled over some aspect of creation.

In Ethiopia, the Gedeo people number in the millions and live in different tribes. These people sacrifice to evil spirits out of fear. However, behind this practice is an older belief

in Magano, the one omnipotent creator.

The Incas in South America also have this same belief. Alfred Metraux, author of *History of the Incas,* discovered the Inca's originally worshipped Viracocha, the Lord, the omnipotent creator of all things. Worship of Inti, the Sun God, and other gods are only recent departures from this monotheistic belief.

These examples follow Paul's description in Romans 1 where he states that men departed from worship of the creator to the worship of the creation.

Original Monotheism and the Missionary Revolution

If original monotheism is true, it should impact our strategy for missions. {4} In fact, this theory has had a tremendous impact on evangelistic strategies throughout the world.

Don Richardson's book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, illustrates how this theory shaped the missionary effort in China and Korea. In ancient China, the Lord of the Heavens was referred to as Shang Ti. In Korea, he was referred to as Hananim.

Over the centuries, the Chinese departed from the worship of Shang Ti and adopted the beliefs of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that taught the worship of ancestors and the Buddha. However, even after two thousand years, the Chinese still mentioned the name of Shang Ti.

The first Christian missionaries to China arrived in the eighth century A.D. In the years that followed, instead of capitalizing on the residual monotheistic witness already in the land, missionaries imposed a completely foreign name to the God of the heavens. They emphasized that the God of the Bible is foreign and completely distinct from any God the Chinese had ever heard of before. As Don Richardson writes, "Those who took this position completely misunderstood the

real situation." {5} Roman Catholic missionaries adopted new terms like Tien Ju, Master of Heaven or Tien Laoye for God in the Chinese language.

When Protestant missionaries arrived, they debated as to whether they should use Shang Ti or another term for the Almighty. Some argued that there should be a new name for a new thing. Those who chose to use Shang Ti did not take advantage of the full meaning behind the term. As a result, Protestant missionaries did not have as great an impact in China as they were to have in Korea.

In 1884, Protestant missionaries entered Korea. After studying the culture, they believed that Hananim was the residual witness of God. As these missionaries began to preach utilizing this remnant witness, their message was enthusiastically received. Instead of introducing a foreign God from the west, they were reintroducing the natives to the Lord of their ancestors whom they were interested to know. The Catholic missionaries who had been in Korea for decades were still employing designations for God from Chinese phrases like Tien Ju. As a result, the Korean people responded to the message from the Protestant missionaries and Christianity spread throughout the country at an explosive rate.

Paul writes in Acts 14, "In the past he (God) let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony." (vv. 16-17) The fact that all cultures have this remnant witness has had—and should continue to have—an impact on the missionary movement all over the world.

Notes

1. See Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 22-23.

2. Ibid., 24.

3. Ibid., 33.

4. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Calif.: Regal Books, 1984), 33-71.

5. Ibid., 67.

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The Failure of Modern Ethics

Rick Wade looks at the rejection of the idea that ethics are rooted in reality external to us and the consequences of that rejection for modern ethics.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Fall of Ethics

When you hear people discussing ethical issues today, do you get the sense they're talking on different levels? I don't mean different intellectual levels; I mean talking as though they are on different planes, in different worlds, even. When we discuss ethical differences, we often find we're so at odds that the discussion quickly grinds to a halt . . . or degenerates into name-calling.

For example, consider the matter of a just war, something that's been a hot topic in recent years. Some say there can be no just war because it's impossible to tell who's the good guy and who's the bad, and no way to predict the outcome. So we ought to all be pacifists. Others say it is just to prepare militarily to meet potential threats, and to make clear that we will go to war to defend ourselves. Still others see justice as applying only to the defense of Third World nations against the exploitation of the Great Powers.{1} Such differences are the result of different fundamental beliefs about what justice *is*.

Because there are competing ideas about ethics, all of which seem to have some truth, the idea has taken root that there is no way to rationally justify ethical beliefs, that they come from within us rather than from some source outside us. The idea that our ethical assertions are rooted in our feelings and desires is called *emotivism*. Traditionally it was believed that ethics were rooted in something external to us, something

objective and permanent. A fundamental reason for the change from the traditional view to contemporary subjective emotivism was that foundational beliefs about the nature of man and the universe were lost.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says ethicists today are like scientists trying to piece together a right understanding of science after a catastrophe has destroyed most of the records of scientific thought from the past. They have the jargon of ethics from former times, but they don't understand the fundamental principles underlying it or how it all ties together. Their task is similar to trying to put together a puzzle with pieces missing and no picture on the box to show what the puzzle is supposed to look like when put together.

It's tempting here to simply attribute this to the fact that Christian beliefs no longer have authority in our society. While this is true, it doesn't provide enough detail. For two reasons (at least) we need to have a fuller understanding of why people think the way they do with respect to ethics beyond just attributing their ideas to unbelief. First, understanding how we got where we are will help us see the problems with our view of ethics today. To simply say, "Well, that isn't biblical" means little today—indeed, some might be *pleased* to know their ideas don't accord with Scripture! If we want to bring about change in individuals and in society, it will be helpful to offer a more detailed and nuanced response.

Second, because we ourselves are so profoundly influenced by our society, Christians often think like non-Christians about moral issues. If we can't find it in a list of rules in the Bible, we often rely on our feelings or pragmatic thinking to guide us. Or if challenged about something we do, we might say, "Well, that's between me and the Holy Spirit. Stop being so legalistic!"

So how did we get here? Let's begin with a brief overview of the history of ethics in the West.

Traditional Ethics

Today people tend to ground their ethical beliefs in their own feelings or desires. Traditionally, however, ethics were grounded in the nature of external reality and the nature of man.

In the days of the ancient Greeks, morality had its foundation in the role into which one was born, or in the nature of the universe. In the tradition of Homer, for example, one's role in life defined one's good. So the king was a good king if he acted as a king should. A carpenter was good if he built well, and a slave was good if he served well.

For Plato, the ground of ethics was the nature of external reality. The standard for goodness, he believed, exists in a world beyond that of our senses—in the world of what he called the *forms.* Forms are abstract entities which allow us to identify a particular thing on earth. So, for example, we know what a dog is because we have an idea of the form "dog." Forms provide a standard by which particular things in the universe are measured. And the highest form, according to Plato, was "the Good."

For Aristotle, the universals Plato called "forms" are not off in some abstract, immaterial realm, but are inherent in the universe. Because the forms are in the natural world, Aristotle believed *purpose* was built into the natural world; by nature things are intended to move toward particular goals, to fit the image of the form.

Early Christian thinkers accepted the basic idea of Plato's forms. However, they believed the forms—including the form of the Good—were in the mind of God, not in some abstract realm. Because God created the universe out of His wisdom and knowledge, morality was thus built into the order of the universe.

Aristotle believed that, as part of this purposeful universe, we, too, have purpose; we too move toward a goal or *telos*. The good toward which we move Aristotle called *well-being*. He believed all of us share a nature which requires us to live a certain kind of life in order to find well-being. Fulfillment is achieved by living a life of virtue. By reason we learn what is good for us in keeping with our nature, and we seek to find that end through the virtues.

A millennium later, Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that the universe has purpose built into it. He believed that this was due to the creative work of God. For Aquinas, the supreme good is higher than the universe. It is God Himself who is the Good that defines all goods. Our lives are to lead upward to God. Although the ultimate fulfillment of the experience of God will only occur in the next life, Aquinas taught we are now to pursue the goodness of God, our well-being, through a virtuous life governed by the law found in Scripture and in nature.

Both Greek and early Christian ethics, then, were grounded in objective realities: the nature of man, the nature of the universe, and, with Christians, the nature and creative work of God. What we *ought* to do was determined by what *is*, by the nature of ultimate realities. But this was all to change.

Modern Ethics: The Loss of a *Telos*

About the time Aquinas was formulating his ideas on ethics, some other Christian scholars decided that God's law was *not* grounded in His *mind* but rather in His *will*. What was the significance of this shift? Well, God's law could change (according to His will), rather than being something eternally fixed. Laws were thus not universal and eternal. They could be provisional or have exceptions.

This change eventually resulted in a major shift in ethical thought. If morality wasn't grounded in God's reason and hence

into the order of the universe He created, there was no necessary connection between what *was* and what *ought to be.* Ethics no longer had any ground in the universe itself. Fact and value were separated.{2} Without value built into the universe, the idea of a purposeful (or *teleological*) universe was lost.

In modern times, the loss of the idea of an end or *telos* for the universe was extended to mankind. Belief in human nature had been undercut. What are we supposed to be? Alasdair MacIntyre says that previously there were three elements in ethics: man-as-he-is, man-as-he-should-become (referring to man's end or *telos*), and the ethical precepts that would enable him to move from one to the other. Now, because it is no longer known what man really is by nature (or is supposed to be) the second part (man-as-he-should-become) was lost. What was left was man-as-he-is and some ethical principles that were mostly just holdovers from the past. So ethics is no longer about helping us become what we should be, but about helping us do our best as we are now.

In modern times multiple ethical systems have been devised to improve man-as-he-is with no understanding of man-as-he-should-become. Some have looked to psychological impressions as guiding principles (David Hume, for example). Utilitarians believe our greatest good is happiness, and they use a scientific approach to determine what makes for happiness. With Friedrich Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, the split between fact and value was complete—his ideal man stands alone under no other rules but those of his own making.

One result of all this is that Westerners have ended up with a rule mentality in ethics rather than a character mentality. Because there is no universal law and no *telos* of man, we confine ourselves to what we should *do* rather than what we should *be*. Also, as noted earlier, because there are so many opinions about ethics, some have concluded that reason isn't a reliable source for ethics, that moral assertions are simply

expressions of our own feelings and desires.

Emotivism

Thus, modern ethics has been left with the chore of understanding what makes for the good life for man-as-he-is with no notion of man-as-he-should-become. Different systems have been presented, each of which has a different starting point. While there is often agreement on particular ethical precepts, this is usually because these precepts are held over from traditional ethics albeit without their traditional foundation. It is also because of our God-given basic understanding of the law (Rom. 2:14-15).

How is it that two people can present systems of belief, each of which seems to be logically consistent, yet which are very different? It can be very confusing! Thoughtful people put together systems of ethics they think are objective and consistent, and then don't understand why others don't agree with them. This is because of different starting points. Starting points for ethics are important, for they determine which direction the logical progression of thought will lead. These starting points include ideas about the nature of mankind and the existence of God and whether He has revealed His desires to us. Other ideas grow out of these, such as notions about freedom and obligation. Such starting points are rarely brought into the conversation; they are simply assumed. And I think most people have no clue that, first, they *do* simply make important assumptions like those just noted, and second, that the ethical precepts they espouse are dependent upon these unspoken (and often unrecognized) starting points. Thus they state their moral opinions as if they are settled facts which everyone should recognize, and they are baffled when others don't agree. When people with opposing ethical ideas or systems clash, it is rather like two groups of people deciding to build highway systems, choosing places to start building on the basis of some nonrational reason, and

constructing their highways according to different ideas about how highways are to function in transportation. Would it be any wonder if the two highway systems don't fit together well?

This is one reason ethical debates so often degenerate into name calling. For surely if someone doesn't recognize how clearly true what I'm saying is, it must be because the person is just being stubborn or dogmatic, or (one of the worst charges one can make today) allowing his religious beliefs to inform his moral beliefs!

The perceptive listener who understands the importance of starting points might want to press the individual to clarify his starting points and defend them.{3} What one is likely to find, however, is that the person hasn't given such matters any thought. All we know is that we should be free to do what we like. Even the old maxim, "One's freedom goes as far as the next man's nose" doesn't mean too much. He should just move his nose!

One might excuse this on the basis that the average person doesn't have the time or training to probe such philosophical minutia. But even with philosophers, it has been observed they too have simply chosen or accepted their starting points for no rational reason.{4} The fact is that, philosophically speaking, the basic principles of each system cannot themselves be proved; they are *non*rational. (This isn't to say they are *ir*rational; just that they are outside the limits of rational proof.) They might be simply assumed or consciously chosen, but they have their basis in something other than reason.

As a result of all this confusion, some have concluded that there really *is* no rational basis for ethics; that all moral statements are in the final analysis just expressions of our own feelings, attitudes, or preferences.{5} As noted previously, this is called *emotivism*. But one has to ask: If our feelings and preferences are ultimately personal and

individual, how can we then expect others to hold to the same beliefs? And in a society in which we must function together, how do we get others to agree with us if our beliefs aren't grounded in something external to the individual which can be rationally understood and acknowledged? It is done by swaying people emotionally. Morality isn't considered a factual matter, but an emotional, psychological one.

MacIntyre describes the situation this way:

> Moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others.{6}

In traditional ethics, one could present a law to a person—a law coming from an outside source and presented as factual—along with reasons to believe it, and leave that person to think about it and decide whether it was true or false. But with emotivism, since there are no objective reasons behind a precept, one person must manipulate another to get the other to change his or her mind. C. L. Stevenson, "the single most important exponent of the theory" according to MacIntyre, said "that the sentence This is good' means roughly the same as I approve of this; do so as well'. . . . Other emotivists," MacIntyre continues, "suggested that to say This is good' was to utter a sentence meaning roughly Hurray for this!'" Thus, to say "arson is wrong," for example, is simply to express one's own feelings and to try to influence others by producing certain feelings or attitudes in them. It's like saying, "I disapprove of arson and you should, too."

Thus, although I might *talk* as though I'm giving you good reasons, I'm really just trying to emotionally manipulate you.

A *law* isn't the authority; the person making the ethical claim is. When we realize this, we become suspicious, expecting others to try to manipulate us to get us to agree with them.

We see this kind of manipulation routinely in our society. An advertisement selling fast food might say absolutely nothing about the food itself (which may actually be bad for one's health), but instead will seek to evoke feelings of warmth and happiness using images of people having a good time together. Intimidation through name-calling has been used by supporters of abortion rights in saying that pro-lifers are woman haters, vindictive, unconcerned about women's health. Gay rights supporters call proponents of the traditional (and biblical) model of human sexuality "homophobic."

In his excellent study on the rise of secular humanism in our society, James Hitchcock describes three stages of acceptance employed by the mass media that served to bring about a transformation in our moral outlook that had little or nothing to do with reason.{7} The first stage was bringing to light things which were previously unmentionable all in the spirit of a new openness. The second was ridicule, "the single most powerful weapon in any attempt to discredit accepted beliefs." Hitchcock notes that "countless Christians subtly adjusted their beliefs, or at least the way in which they presented those beliefs to the public, in order to avoid ridicule. Negative stereotypes were created, and people who believed in traditional values were kept busy avoiding being trapped in those stereotypes." The third stage was "sympathy for the underdog." Those upholding traditional morality (thinking primarily of the Judeo-Christian tradition) were depicted as bullies.

Such charges work on our emotions. Who wants to be considered a bigot or be charged with being a "fundamentalist" with all the negative baggage that term bears today? On the other hand, shouldn't we support the "rights" of the supposed "oppressed" among us? The "victims" of "repressive" laws?

The Failure of Emotivism

There are a number of problems with emotivism.{8} One problem is the moral divisions it permits in society. There is no single moral "umbrella" which covers all people. If your morality is yours, I cannot correct you; I cannot pull you under the umbrella, so to speak. When someone is accused of moral wrongdoing, the accused will likely say something such as, "Who are *you* to tell *me* I'm wrong? To each his own!" The person who responds this way believes an individual's morality is his own and not objectively true for everyone. The person is thus offended that another person would try to force *his* preferences on him. The idea that the accusation might be based on objective, universal moral law isn't even considered. Moral consensus is faltering in our society today largely because of such thinking.

The closest people get to thinking in objective terms is when they agree that something could be bad because of its practical consequences. But that's not at all the same as morality grounded in something universal and eternal. The individual is left to weigh the odds: to do the thing in question and suffer such-and-such consequences, or *not* to do it and suffer the loss of whatever he or she is trying to obtain or accomplish. Although it can be helpful to point out the consequences of our actions—there *are* consequences to sin—we can't base our moral decision making on such things, because we can't always predict the future. Even if we're accurate, the other person can still think, "Well, it won't hurt me," or, "I can handle that (the particular consequence)" and brush our objection aside.

The flip side of that is that we are often afraid to take a stand on ethical matters ourselves for fear of being accused of pushing our own subjective beliefs on others. We are only heard if we can couch our objection in terms of the other person's self-interest.

Another obvious problem with emotivism is inconsistency. Although emotivists *claim* to believe that moral precepts are expressions of personal preference, they often speak as though they are making objective moral claims binding on everyone. They exhibit here, I think, the truth of Paul's comment in Romans 2 that we all have the law written on our hearts. We *do* believe there is a difference between right and wrong, and that there are universal moral laws. As C.S. Lewis was fond of pointing out, we all know about fairness, and we expect others to as well. Thus, the emotivist moves back and forth between expressing moral beliefs as though they should hold for everyone, while also meeting challenges to their *own* actions by saying the challenger's beliefs are his own and can't be forced on others. They can tell *you* what *you* should do, but don't dare tell *them* what *they* should do.

Finally, on the philosophical level, emotivists try to mix too different kinds of statements, which results in confusion. They hold that *evaluative* statements—those which are supposed to be making objective evaluations such as "arson is wrong"—express personal *preferences*. Evaluative statements and statements of preference are two different kinds. To substitute one for the other is illegimate. If a person says arson is wrong, does he mean that arson is really wrong—for everyone? Or is he really just saying that he doesn't like arson? If a person is making an evaluative statement, then I need to consider his case and decide whether to continue my career as an arsonist! However, if he is just expressing his personal preferences, I can smile and say "that's nice" and start flicking my matches. Imagine the difficulty in public discussions of ethical issues under such circumstances.

Response

How shall we respond? To simply point people back to the Bible as the proper source of morality won't do today. The Bible is seen as just a religious book with rules pertinent only for

those who believe it. That isn't to say we *shouldn't* speak God's Word into our society. The question is *how* we are to do that. When Paul was in Athens and had the chance to address the whole crowd assembled in the marketplace, he didn't quote Scripture. He *did,* however, give people biblical truth (Acts 17: 22-31)—in his own words and addressing their specific need.

Thus, we ought to consider offer more sophisticated arguments which are thoroughly biblical and which address the need of the day. As part of our efforts to convince people of the rightness of a biblical view of ethics, it would be helpful to follow the lead of early champions of traditional morality and reinvigorate the notion of purpose in the universe. We should seek to reestablish the truth that we share certain characteristics simply because we are human, and that a virtuous life makes for a good life because of the way we're made. We can point out specific needs all humans share, such as security, belonging, and physical provision (food, etc.). We also know that certain things are wrong (such as incest), and that certain things are right (such as justice and courage). These kinds of things are universal; we rightly expect others to recognize their value or their evil. They are not matters of individual tastes.

We might not be able to gain the agreement of every individual on all the universals we propose, but if we work at it we can find at least one moral "law" any given individual will agree is universal. Once one is established, we can go for a second and third and so forth, until we think the person is willing to seriously rethink the current belief that ethics is a subjective matter. From there we can explain these realities by the fact that we are created by God.

Some scholars propose a return to the virtue tradition of ethics.{9} As Christians we can easily see the ethical benefit of recognizing that we have a nature given us by God through creation, and that there is an end or *telos* toward which we

are moving which is defined by the character of Christ. This makes ethics a matter of character development rather than just rule following. Perhaps Protestants should reconsider the natural law tradition long championed in Roman Catholic theology. Whether that is the best direction to go is now being considered by reputable evangelical scholars. Whatever we decide about that, we must turn away from emotivism. It is bad for individuals and bad for society.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6.

2. Cf. Arthur Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 77.

3. The late Francis Schaeffer is a very helpful resource for understanding the significance of starting points and learning how to expose them. See his *The God Who is There,* 30th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), especially Section IV.

4. MacIntyre, 19f.

5. Ibid., 11-12.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. James Hitchcock, *What Is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism Became Secular and How It Is Changing Our World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 83f.

8. Those wishing to consider a more philosophically rigorous study are urged to read MacIntyre's *After Virtue.*

9. Recall the popularity of William Bennett's book *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Bennett, by the way, is a Roman Catholic who holds a B.A. in philosophy and a

Ph.D. in political philosophy in addition to his law degree.

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Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

Utilitarianism is an ethical system that determines morality on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. A modern form of utilitarianism is situation ethics. Kerby Anderson examines the problems with this ethical system, and evaluates it from a biblical perspective.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.

In this article, we are going to talk about the philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness.

Philosophers refer to it as a "teleological" system. The Greek word "telos" means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.

Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism

gets its name from Bentham's test question, "What is the use of it?" He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" in Joseph Priestly's *Treatise of Government*.

Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been called the "utilitarian calculus." An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham's hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."{1}

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness." {2}

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him "that all previous moralists were superseded." He believed that the principle of

utility “gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life.”{3}

Mill modified Bentham’s utilitarianism. Whereas Bentham established an *act* utilitarianism, Mill established a *rule* utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time.

Analysis of Utilitarianism

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.

Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of

cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does *not* justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia.

The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.

A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the

action itself.

Situation Ethics

A popular form of utilitarianism is *situation ethics* first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name.{4} Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the *agape* (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."{5}

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. "Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that "no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever."{6}

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So some of those around him accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, "If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does*?"{7}

Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an "end justifies the means" philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

Analysis of Situation Ethics

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act.

Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well.

The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific

than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the "good thing" or the "right thing." Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, "We can't always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try."{8} But according to his ethical system, we have to *know* the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that "There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death." The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an "ends justifies the means" ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, "Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?" His response is "May it never be!"

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God's revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

Notes

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* printed in 1781 and published in 1789 (Batoche Books: Kitchener, ON Canada, 2000), 14.
2. Ibid.
3. John Stuart Mill, "Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education," *Autobiography, 1873* (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14).
4. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).
5. Ibid., 70.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. Ibid., 121.
8. Ibid., 136.

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The Sovereignty of God

Rick Wade helps us understand the full meaning of the sovereignty of God highlighting its immense practical importance. If God is truly sovereign, then what He says He will do, He can and will bring to pass. It is the choice of our sovereign God to endow us with free will and as sovereign He can make it so without limiting His sovereign power. God has promised us a glorious future and He has the power and the resolve to make it happen.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

What's the Issue?

In whom or in what do people place their trust these days? Money? Their social group? Themselves? Some use exercise to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and maybe even add years to their lives. Some look to spiritual practices, or work for a safer environment. Such things have their proper place, but should they be our source or sources of confidence? We all live with a basic insecurity that causes us to look for something stable to hold onto. It is obvious that there are forces in this world stronger than we are, some of which have no concern for our welfare. So we latch on to something that will see us through whatever problems might come our way.

Although Christians are to attend to their financial, physical, and social welfare (among other things), they are look to God ultimately for their security. We're derided by some for seeking a "crutch" or a "security blanket," but everyone looks for support in one place or another. The question is, Which crutch or security blanket is true and sufficient for our needs? Christians look to the true God Who has promised to be our "help in times of trouble."

Because of our different personalities and situations in life, we look for different things in God. What do you want in a God? What do you need in a God? Love? Justice? Mercy? No matter what we might need in a God, if that God lacks one particular thing, the others will do little good. That is the power to "pull it off," to exercise His love, justice, and mercy, and to do all the things He says He will do without opposition powerful enough to deter Him. We need our God to be sovereign; to be, as Arthur Pink said, "the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will."{1}

Often when the subject of God's sovereignty comes up among

Christians, it's in the context of the sovereignty/free will debate. Although I will address that matter at a later point, my desire is that we will see the sovereignty of God as a foundation for confidence rather than simply a topic for debate.

God's sovereignty has immense practical importance. For one thing, it makes Him our proper object of worship. He is the almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all that exists. There is none higher, none more worthy of worship and honor.

For another thing, that God is sovereign means He can be counted on, for nothing can stand against Him. He can be counted on for our salvation. He can be counted on to carry us through times of difficulty such that nothing touches us that is not in keeping with His desires for us. And He can be counted on to keep all the promises He has made to us.

Characteristics of Sovereignty

What does the Bible say about God that causes us to believe He is sovereign? For one thing, God is called by names that convey the meaning of sovereignty. In the Old Testament, He is called *Adonay*. Second Samuel 7:22 in the NIV reads: "How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears." In the New Testament, God is called *despotēs*, from which we get our word "despot." This word "denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life." The term is usually used over against the word *doulos* or "slave."{2} In Rev. 6:10 we read where those slain for their testimony "called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"

Another thing we see in Scripture is that God has characteristics that call for ascribing sovereignty to Him.

First, God exercises rightful *authority*. He has the right to do with the creation what He desires because it is His creation. He also is active in His creation, contrary to the deistic understanding which is that God created the universe but then left it to run according to natural laws with little or no intervention on His part.

Second, God has the *power* to do what He desires with His universe. “All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing,” Daniel wrote. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?'” (4:35).

Third, God has the *knowledge* required to rule over all. He knows what’s going on, and exactly what needs to be done. He knows the past, present, and future perfectly.

Fourth, God has the *will* to do what He desires. He does what He says He will do. (Is. 46:9, 10; 55:11)

Biblical Examples

These attributes are seen in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, for example, God showed His sovereignty in the experience of Moses and the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt. He showed His *authority* when He simply stepped in and told Moses what He would do for His people and later when He overrode Pharaoh’s ruling and showed who was really in charge. He demonstrated His *power* by turning Moses’ staff into a serpent; by making Moses’ hand leprous and then healing it; through sending the plagues upon the Egyptians; and then by parting the sea before the fleeing Israelites. “By this you shall know that I am the LORD,” He said (Ex. 7:17). God had perfect *knowledge* of the plight of the Israelites (3:7, 9), and He knew what He would do with and for them (3:12, 19, 20, 22). Finally, He was faithful to His promises; His *will* was not thwarted.

God showed His sovereign rule in the New Testament as well in the experience of Mary. He showed His *authority* over this young woman when He simply stepped into her life and told her what He was going to do (Lk. 1:26ff). He claimed to have the *power* to do what He desired: "For nothing will be impossible with God," said the angel (v. 37). God *knew* Mary (v. 30), and He knew what her future held because He had plans for Her (vv. 31, 35). And He faithfully fulfilled His promises, according to His *will*, as Mary knew He would (1:42; 2:6, 7; see also her exclamation of praise in 1:49-55).

These are only two of numerous illustrations of the sovereign authority of God in Scripture. We can read about similar demonstrations in the lives of other people such as Job (Job 38-41; 42:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:31, 32, 34-35), Joseph (Gen. 50:20), and Jesus (Acts 2:23, 24). And that's just a small sampling.

But God's sovereign rule didn't end with the writing of the Bible. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is still sovereignly active in His creation. God is "the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords" who will draw history as we know it to a close with the coming of Christ "at the proper time" (1 Tim. 6:15). He determines the times and boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26). Not only did He create all things, Paul writes that "in Him all things hold together" (Col. 2:17). Notice the present tense in Eph. 1:11 which says that God is the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will."

Sovereignty and Free Will

The problem of the tension between God's sovereign control and man's free will is a perennial one among Christians, especially theology students! While this is an interesting debate (to some), it easily overshadows any discussion of the benefits of God's sovereignty. Battle lines are drawn and the

debate commences, with the result that sovereignty becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Nonetheless, it seems inappropriate to ignore the issue in a discussion of sovereignty. So I'll offer just a few comments, not to attempt to settle the issue, but to bring a few points to light for you the reader to consider.

From our previous discussion, we already have a basic understanding of what sovereignty is. What about free will? Note that here we aren't talking about the freedom that comes when we are released from the power of sin through faith in Christ. According to Scripture, we are enslaved to whichever master we choose to follow. But to be "enslaved" to Christ is to be free to be and do what we were made to be and do.

We're talking here about freedom of the will, the ability to choose or determine one's actions without coercion. Because one's actions are so strongly influenced by one's upbringing, religious beliefs, circumstances of life, etc., our situation can never be one of complete indeterminacy. {3} Thus, the issue at hand doesn't pit completely free will against God's control. It really is over our ability to make uncoerced, significant choices for which we can be held responsible: it is about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Just as we read of a God in control of the history of His creation throughout Scripture, we also observe people making choices for which they are either rewarded or punished. It seems clear enough in Scripture that we are able to make uncoerced choices. Jesus bewailed the condition of Jerusalem in His day: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," He said, "and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). The Jews are blamed for their choice—or lack of it. We're even commanded to make choices: "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua commanded (24:15). Jesus told us to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15) as if we could choose to do so. Abraham received what God had promised because he chose to obey God

(Gen. 22:15-18).

But if we have this freedom to choose, how can God be truly sovereign over the course of history? What a conundrum!

One principle that absolutely must remain paramount is that Scripture is our final authority, not reason. This isn't to say the scriptural position is against reason; it's merely an affirmation that our reason is not up to fully grasping God and His ways. We have to make do with what He tells us; all speculation beyond that is merely—well, speculation.

What do we read in the Bible? We read that both God is in control and that we can be legitimately held responsible for our choices. And we don't have to find one verse in support of one and another verse in support of the other! In Gen. 50: 20, Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Peter rebuked the Jews at Pentecost: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," he said (Acts 2:23). That the executioners bore at least some of the guilt is clear from the fact that Jesus asked for their forgiveness on the cross (Lk. 23:34). In Isaiah we read that it was God who sent the Assyrians to punish Judah, but then punished them for doing it with the wrong attitude (10:5-15)!

This issue typically arises in discussions of the matter of election to salvation. Jesus and the apostles made the offer as though listeners (or readers) could accept it or reject it. God doesn't play games; it would make the whole call to repentance and salvation a farce if our choice had nothing to do with it. We're told to "repent and believe in the Gospel," (Mk. 1:15). But we're also told that it is God who chooses (cf. Jn. 15:16; Rom. 9:14-22).

This duality is also seen in our prayer life. We're taught

that all things come to pass according to God's will, but also that our prayers make a difference. Paul said that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). But through Ezekiel God said, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (22:30, 31). Someone might say that it is God who inclines us to pray, but that doesn't diminish the fact that we can be scolded for not praying as though the responsibility were ours to do so (James 4:2).

People who spend much time thinking about this matter tend to lean more heavily to one side than to the other. It's important to note, however, that we do not lose a bit of tension by emphasizing one over the other—either God's sovereignty or man's free will. If we overemphasize God's sovereignty, there is the difficulty of understanding the judgment of God of those who weren't elected.{4} How does this mesh with the scriptural teaching that God doesn't show favoritism, or to the command to love all people, even our enemies? On the other hand, if we overemphasize man's free will, how can a man ever be saved? "An excessively narrow Arminianism," says Mark Hanna, "lapses into synergism (the union of human effort or will with divine grace)." It diminishes the enslaving power of sin, and it gives us the power to limit God. {5}

Because of these tensions, I'm inclined to agree with Donald Carson who says that "the sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be explored."{6} It is an issue that I personally have had to let stand without any real hopes for final resolution. Some might consider this an "easy out," but I'm content to see this as one of the "secret things" spoken of in Dt. 29:29.

However, that doesn't mean the matter of God's sovereignty isn't important. As I see it, the important question is, How

shall I live with both biblical truths in view: that God is sovereign over all, and that I will be held responsible for my choices? I think the old hymn “Trust and Obey” sums it up. I have been given the responsibility to obey God. But I’m thankful that the final burden of accomplishing His will doesn’t rest on me! For that, I am to trust Him. This is the crux of the sovereignty-responsibility issue as far as I’m concerned. While we have the ability and responsibility to choose, we can have confidence that God’s plan will be accomplished, that His promises will be fulfilled, and that in the end, everything is going to turn out just right.

The Significance of Sovereignty for Our Lives

Let’s wind up this brief overview with a look at some applications of God’s sovereignty in our lives.

First, that God is sovereign makes clear who is to be the focus of our worship. All glory goes to Him. To Jesus “be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen,” John said (Rev. 1:6). “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (5:12) the angels sang. When we worship individually and corporately, our eyes should be on the sovereign God rather than on ourselves. Although we will share in the glories of Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), God will not give His glory away to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11). He is the One who should get all the credit.

That God is sovereign means that God’s redemptive purposes will not be thwarted. He will build His church (Matt. 16:18), and we can know we are part of it. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

It also means that all God has foretold will surely come to pass. He is working out His plans (Is. 42:5-9), and nothing

will take away what God has for us. No one can hold back His hand (Dan. 4:35). He is able to keep His promises, and because He is true to His word, He can be counted on to keep them (Is. 55:11; 2 Tim. 2:13; cf. Rev. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6).

In addition to that, because the sovereign God is also the God of love, He can be trusted in the fullest sense. The awesome power of God is a fearful thing to His enemies (Matt. 10:28; Heb. 10:31). But to those who love Him, the combination of His sovereignty and love makes it possible for us to truly rest, to live without fear. This is in stark contrast to gods of other religions who constantly have to be appeased to avert their anger, or even to the gods of our secular society, such as money, power, health, and prestige, all of which can let us down.

Finally, that God is sovereign means He will ultimately triumph over evil. We're told that in the end the great enemy death will be done away with (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes," John writes. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4).

Earlier I noted that the topic of God's sovereignty easily becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Just as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should serve to bring comfort to those who sometimes doubt their ability to hold on to God, the doctrine of sovereignty should serve to comfort those who fear, to encourage those who understand clearly their own limitations, and to provide a counter to the pessimism of our day. While being fully aware of the futility of the course of this world, we should still be optimistic people, because God has promised us a glorious future, and He has the power and resolve to make it happen.

Notes

1. A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker,

1982), 19.
2. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Lord, Master," by H. Bietenhard.
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4. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 60.
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The Meaning of the Cross

Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ" has brought the topic of Jesus' suffering and death into the national conversation. Rick Wade explores the meaning of the cross.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A Scandal At the Center

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created quite a bit of controversy, both inside the church and out. One objection from Christians is that the film is imbalanced for not giving due attention to the resurrection of Jesus. There is at least one reason I disagree. That is because, as theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, the focus today is primarily on the

resurrection, and the cross takes second place.{1} I recall Carl Henry, the late theologian, noting in the 1980s that the emphasis in evangelicalism had shifted from justification by faith to the new life. We talk often about the positive differences Christianity can make in our lives because of the resurrection. Gibson has forced us to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. And that's a good thing.

Before the foundation of the world, it was established that redemption would be accomplished through Jesus' death (Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Peter wrote that we were "ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Isaiah 53:5 reads: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

But what a way to save the world! It flies in the face of common sense! From the time of Christ, the crucifixion as the basis of our salvation has been a major problem. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18a). The Greeks saw the cross as foolishness (literally, "moronic"), for they believed that truth was discovered through wisdom or reason. For the Jews it was a scandal, a stumbling block, for they couldn't believe God would save through a man accursed. They asked for signs, but instead got a crucified Messiah.

In modern times the cross was a problem because it meant we could not save ourselves through our own ingenuity. In postmodern times, while many young people feel an affinity with Jesus in His suffering, they have a hard time accepting that this is the only way God saves. And the atonement was much more than a simple identification with suffering humanity.

It is easy for us to rush past the cross and focus on the empty tomb in our evangelism. Think about it. How many of us

make the cross central in our witness to unbelievers? The new life of the resurrection is a much easier “sell” than the suffering of the cross. We want to present a Gospel that is appealing to the hearer that grabs people’s attention and immediately makes them want it.

In our apologetics, our arguments and evidence must be presented in terms unbelievers understand while yet not letting unbelievers set the standards for us. Paul was an educated man, and he had the opportunity to show off his intellectual abilities with the philosophers in Corinth. But Paul wouldn’t play the game on their turf. He wouldn’t rest the Gospel on philosophical speculation as a system of belief more elegant and persuasive than the philosophies of the Greeks. In fact, he unashamedly proclaimed a very unelegant, even repulsive sounding message. He knew the scandal of the cross better than most, but he didn’t shy away from it. He made it central.

A key word today among Christians is “relevant.” We want a message that is relevant to contemporary society. But in our search for relevance, we can unwittingly let our message be molded by what current fashion considers relevant. We become confused between showing the relevance of the Gospel to our true situation and making the Gospel relevant by shaping it to fit the sensibilities of our neighbors.

Os Guinness had this to say about relevance:
By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.{2}

Guinness doesn’t deny the relevance of the Gospel. Indeed, it

is part of our task to show how it is of ultimate relevance to our situation as fallen people. If the message of Scripture is true—that we are lost and in need of a salvation we cannot secure on our own—then there is nothing more relevant than the cross of Christ. For that was God's answer to our problem. But it is relevant to our true situation as God sees it, not according to our situation as we see it.

Sin and Guilt in Modern Times

The cross of Christ addresses directly the matter of sin. But what does that mean? Do people "sin" anymore? What a silly question, you think. But is it? Of course, we all agree that people do things we call "bad". But what is the nature of this "badness"? Is it really sin? Or, is something "bad" just something inconvenient or harmful to me? Or maybe a simple violation of civil laws? Sin is a word used to describe a violation of God's holiness and law. While the majority of people in our country still believe in God, the consensus about what makes for right and wrong is that we are the ones to decide that, that there is no transcendent law. If there is no transcendent law, however, what are we to make of guilt? Is there such a thing as objective guilt? What do we make of subjective guilt—of guilt feelings?

As the battles of World War I raged in Europe, P.T. Forsyth reflected on the question of God and evil and the meaning of history. He reviewed the ways people had sought peace and unity and found them all wanting. Reason, basic emotions or sympathies, the fundamental workings of nature, and faith in progress all were found wanting. Turning back in history he could find no "plan of beneficent progress looking up through man's career."{3} Anytime it seemed enlightenment had come, it would be crushed by war. In his own day, World War I dashed the rosy-eyed hopes of progress being voiced. He said, "As we become civilised [sic], we grow in power over everything but ourselves, we grow in everything but power to control our

power over everything."{4} But what if we looked to the future? Could hope be found there? If the past couldn't bring in a reign of love and unity, he asked, why should we expect the future to? What is there to make sense of the world we know?

The problem was, and is, a moral one, Forsyth said. "All deep and earnest experience shows us, and not Christianity alone, that the unity of the race lies in its moral centre, its moral crisis, and its moral destiny." What could possibly deal adequately with the guilt, "the last problem of the race"?{5} Is there anything in the history of our race that offers hope?

From the beginning, the church has taught that our fundamental problem is sin, and the cross of Christ provides hope that sin can and will one day be overcome. In modern times, however, the concept of "sin" seems rather quaint, a hold-over from the days of simplistic religious beliefs. Arthur Custance writes:

> The concept of sin is largely outmoded in modern secular thinking because sin implies some form of disobedience against an absolute moral law having to do with man's relationship with God, and not too many people believe any such relationship exists. It would not be the same as social misconduct which has to do with man's relationship to man and is highly relative but obviously cannot be denied. We have reached the point where social custom has displaced the law of God as the point of reference, where mores have replaced morals.{6}

We seem to be caught between two poles. On the one hand, we accept the Darwinist belief in our accidental and even materialistic nature—really no more than organic machines. On the other, we can't rid ourselves of the thought that there's something transcendent about us, something about us which is other than and even greater than our physical bodies which relates to a transcendent realm of some kind. We recognize in ourselves a moral nature that expresses itself through our

conscience. In short, we know we do wrong things, and we know others do them, too. The problem is that we don't seem to know the nature and extent of the problem nor its solution. Many believe that there is no God against whom we sin, or if there is a God, He is too loving to hold our mistakes against us.

From a historical perspective, this is quite a turn-about, says Custance:

> Throughout history there has never been a society like our own in which the reality of sin has been so generally denied. Even in the worst days of the Roman Empire men felt the need to propitiate the gods, not so much because they had an exalted view of the gods but because they had a more realistic view of their own worthiness. It is a curious thing that even some of the cruelest of the Roman Emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, for example, were very conscious of themselves as sinners. We may call it superstition, but it was a testimony to a very real sense of inward unworthiness which was not based on man's relationship to man but rather man's relationship to the gods.{7}

On the other hand, despite the contemporary dismissal of sin, guilt is still a constant presence in the human psyche. Karl Menninger writes:

> I believe there is a general sentiment that sin is still with us, by us, and in us—somewhere. We are made vaguely uneasy by this consciousness, this persistent sense of guilt, and we try to relieve it in various ways. We project the blame on to others, we ascribe the responsibility to a group, we offer up scapegoat sacrifices, we perform or partake in dumb-show rituals of penitence and atonement. There is rarely a peccavi [confession of sin or guilt], but there's a feeling.{8}
> "This is a phenomenon of our day," writes Custance: "a burden of guilt but no sense of sin."{9}

But to what is the nature of this guilt? If there is no objective moral law that stands outside and above us all, what is guilt and who is guilty? Who judges us?

In the film, *A Walk on the Moon*, Pearl begins to have an affair with a traveling salesman. Pearl's husband, Marty, is a good man, but a bit of a square. It's 1969; Woodstock is about to make the news. And Pearl, who got pregnant by Marty when she was 17, is feeling a need to experiment, to capture what she missed by having to get married and starting the family life so early. When Pearl's affair is discovered, her husband is distraught. So is her daughter, Alison, who saw Pearl with her lover at Woodstock behaving like the teenagers around them. She's broken up that her mother might leave them.

But in all that happens following Pearl's confession, there is no mention of her affair being morally wrong. When she confessed, she told Marty she was sorry. Later, she told him she was sorry she'd hurt him. But her deed was at least somewhat excusable because there were things Pearl wanted to try, and her husband was too square, he didn't listen, he made jokes when she tried to suggest experimenting, especially sexually. Even in her interactions with others, there is no mention of her act being morally wrong. When Alison told Pearl she had seen her at Woodstock, her complaint was that she was the teenager, not Pearl (implying it would be okay for Alison to go wild at Woodstock but not Pearl). Pearl's mother-in-law pointed out what the early marriage cost Marty: a college education promised by Marty's boss, who withdrew the offer when Pearl got pregnant. "Do you think you're the only one with dreams that didn't come through?" she asked.

So the affair was understandable given Marty's old-fashioned ways (which he shows to be shedding by switching the radio from a big band station to rock station, and when he's shown dancing to Jimi Hendrix on the stereo). The problem was the hurt Pearl cost a good man and a teenage girl. And that's about all there is to sin and guilt anymore.

According to one modern view, guilt is nature's way of teaching us what not to do in the future that has caused us problems in the past. Dr. Glenn Johnson, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, said "Guilt seems to be a very primitive mental mechanism that was programmed into us to protect us in the future from mistakes we made in the past." It is a "simple debriefing and rehearsal process that the mind engages in after perceiving that something negative has taken place and has caused painful and/or anxious feelings. . . . By forcing repeated reviews of a painful experience and the behaviors and elements leading up to it and associated with it, guilt essentially burns into our brains the connection between our behavior and the uncomfortable feelings we feel."{10}

What can we do about guilt? According to Dr. Johnson, the issue is behavior and what might need to be changed to prevent future problems for us. "When guilt is appropriate," says Dr. Johnson, "tell yourself that. You might modify intensity with anti-anxiety medications or relaxation exercises—but if the bulk of the guilt feelings are avoided, so will the learning be." In other words, learn from your mistakes. Inappropriate, excessive guilt, says Dr. Johnson, can be dealt with using "hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery, NLP, Reiki, etc. . . . The focus of the self-help stuff should be on letting one's self grow from experience," he says, "trusting in one's own ability to be a better person, allowing one's self permission to make mistakes and go through losses, trusting in some form of higher power, etc."

People come up with all kinds of ways to rid themselves of guilt feelings. One of the strangest I found on the internet, one with a New Age flavor, was Aromatherapy Angelic Bath Kits provided by Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc.{11} All one needs to do is pour some special herbs and oils in the tub, climb in, and read some prescribed meditations to "foster positive thoughts and reinforcements."{12} One of these kits is a "ritual to clear feelings of guilt." We're asked, "Who

hasn't felt guilty in their lives? Who doesn't still feel guilty about something? There are two kinds of guilt: good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt is when you have truly done something that you feel remorse for. Bad guilt is for the rest." The forgiveness kit includes "special mixtures [which] help wash the guilty feeling away." Notice that "good guilt" has to do with things "you feel remorse for," not necessarily for things that are truly wrong. It's your feelings about such things that matter.{13} This may seem silly to you. Who would even bother with such a thing? we wonder. But people do.

Somehow, such remedies don't seem to be working. Maybe it's because we can't rid ourselves of the knowledge Paul said we have by nature: a knowledge of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).

Sin and Guilt According to God

What does God say about sin and guilt? Briefly put, God has declared us guilty of violating His holy law by our sin and deserving of eternal banishment from His presence. Contrary to current opinion, there is transcendent law that has been broken and for which there must be payment.

Imagine that someone has done something to offend you, and his reaction to your complaint is something like, "Yeah, that really bothered me, too. But I've forgiven myself of that, and I'm fine with it now." This is only a slight caricature of the mentality we all encounter today. The person clearly has missed the point that there was a real, objective violation against you!

The message of the cross is that there is a very real fracture in our relationship with God. We're told in Scripture that there is nothing we can do to make up for what we've done. Is there anything to offer us hope?

There is: the cross of Christ, "the race's historic crisis and

turning-point," says Forsyth.{14} The cross dealt with our greatest need, namely, redemption. Humanists of a secular stripe who trumpeted the inevitable progress of humanity saw our fundamental nature as one of ordered process. The truth, though, is that it is "tragic collision and despair." All of man's efforts have been unable to reach down into the depths of our sinfulness and bring about fundamental change. All except that of the God-man Jesus Christ, who attacked the moral problem head on to the point of dying on the cross and came out victorious.

Several understandings of the atonement—what Jesus accomplished on the cross—have been offered through history, and several of them have some truth in them. The key aspect of Christ's cross work was that it satisfied the demand for punishment for our sin. This is called substitutionary atonement: Jesus was substituted for us, so He took the punishment for sin in being separated from God and dying, thus paying the penalty for us. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us." (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul wrote to the Romans that "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." (Romans 8:3) And to the Galatian church he said that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

By His death on the cross, Jesus, the one who "knew no sin, became sin for us." This was done because of His love for us: "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2; Rom. 5:8) Jesus' sacrifice is appropriated by faith: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul wrote (Eph. 2:8). By putting our faith in Him, we participate in the payment He made. It counts for those who believe it and who receive Him.

I should note quickly, however, that the reality of our

objective guilt isn't dependent upon our subjective guilt. In other words, whether we feel guilty or not, we are. And because we are guilty of violating God's law, we must do more than just forgive ourselves as we're taught today. We must, and may, participate in God's solution through Christ.

The Moral Triumph of the Cross

What I've been talking about is the judicial aspect of the cross work of Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

However, this payment isn't to be thought of like making a payment to the utility company for electricity. All that matters is that the money gets there. What it takes to get it there isn't really significant. The cross, by contrast, was a triumph over sin; it was a moral victory in itself. Jesus overcame evil through His perfect obedience and righteousness; "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," Paul wrote (Rom. 5:18). His death on the cross was the capstone of a life of moral victories over sin and Satan.

We're so used to thinking about Jesus as God and as sinless that we don't often think about His obedience. He said and did the things the Father told Him (Jn. 5:19, 30; 8:28). To the Jews he said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." (v. 4) Before He gave up His spirit on the cross, Jesus knew that "all things had already been accomplished." (Jn 19:28) He fulfilled the law perfectly (Matt. 5:17), and thus put the basis of our salvation on our faith in him as the one who did so, thus robbing the law of its power to encourage us to sin (cf. Rom. 8:2-4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). Jesus had defeated Satan; He had not given in to any temptation to not give up His life. He was obedient to

death. (Phil. 2:8). And by His obedience He was made perfect or complete and able to be the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9; see also 2:10; 5:8; and Rom. 5:19).

P.T. Forsyth wrote that the cross "is the moral victory which recovered the universe. The Vindicator has stood on the earth," he said. "It is the eternal victory in history of righteousness, of holiness, of the moral nature and character of God as Love."{15} He continued:

> The most anomalous thing, the most poignant and potent crisis that ever happened or can happen in the world, is the death of Christ; the whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil met there for good and all. And to faith that death is the last word of the holy omnipotence of God.{16}

What is the significance of Jesus' cross work—indeed, His whole life—as a moral victory? Forsyth said that in creating the world, God revealed His omnipotence, His absolute power. In the new creation inaugurated through the cross, He revealed His moral power, His ability to triumph over His worst enemy, Satan, and the sin that infects His creation. God's power has been revealed as "moral majesty, as holy omnipotence" said Forsyth. "The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of a God but of a holy God."{17}

In the cross and resurrection, we see that good can triumph over evil now, and we have the promise that one day that triumph will be complete. Not only us but all of creation will be set free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-24).

But this isn't just a promise for the future. Because, like Jesus, we have the Spirit living in us, we can live in obedience to God; we can stand firm in the presence of the evil that wages war against us (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20). The cross bears witness to that.

The secular humanism and new spiritualism of our day have no resources for affecting us so deeply on the moral level. Christianity does—the cross of Christ—and it is this that makes it relevant for our day and for all time.

A Fully-Engaged God

It's easy to think of God as remote from us, as a judge way up there making His laws and wreaking vengeance on anyone who violates them. We hear about the love of God, but how does love fit in with a God of judgment? And if God does love us, how does He show it? Love comes near; it isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Is God willing to come near? To get His hands dirty with us?

In the cross of Jesus we see both the judgment of God and His love. Herein lies its beauty. In the cross we find a God who does not stand afar off, but takes on the worst of what His own law requires! He has pronounced judgment, but He so much wants us saved that He is willing to take on the burden of paying for it Himself. "For God so loved the world that He gave His Son," says John (3:16).

In all the brouhaha surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, one complaint heard several times was that a God who would put His Son through that isn't a God to be worshipped.{18} But Jesus did this freely. "No one takes [my life] from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn.10:18). And He did this knowing that as He laid His life down, so also would He take it up again (Jn.10:17). For the joy set before Him, He took up the cross (Heb. 12:2).

We wonder if God can reach us in the messiness of our lives. But God is no stranger to mess. The Bible reveals a God who isn't afraid to get dirty, who engages life even with all kinds of difficulties it may bring. This message is appealing in our day especially, to GenXers who have suffered the fallout of the excesses of earlier generations. The optimism

Boomers inherited from their parents fizzled out for a lot of their children. Regarding that generation, Tom Beaudoin says this:

> I have witnessed a sadness and anger about the generation's suffering and dysfunction, a suffering that—whatever its economic reasons may be—expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism. Xers' relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. . . . Suffering is a catalyst for GenX religiosity.{19}

While they often reject the form of religion their parents embraced, many GenXers have a fascination and respect for Jesus, for his suffering didn't make sense, and yet it was redemptive.{20}

Here the true awesomeness of the cross is made plain. God, who deserves all glory and is so far above us in holiness and purity, became man, and endured horrific torture at the hands of people He created . . . for their benefit! The life and death of Christ make plain that God was willing to roll up his sleeves and engage life on earth fully, even accepting the worst it had to offer.

But, one might wonder, since Christ took on evil and won, shouldn't we be done with suffering? Eventually it will end. In the meantime we, too, learn obedience through what we suffer. If that was Jesus' way of learning, and the servant isn't above his master (Matt. 10:24), can we expect anything else? Furthermore, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that hardship isn't just an inconvenience on the road of discipleship. Redemption wasn't brought about in spite of the cross but through it.{21} Likewise, our growth comes not in spite of hardship but through it.

Someone who has suffered for many years might complain that Jesus' suffering doesn't compare. Jesus' sufferings and resurrection spanned a short period of time. But what He suffered was the experience of the weight of the guilt of the whole world on the shoulders of one who was sinless. It isn't anything new for us to feel guilt; we can become somewhat hardened to it. But Jesus felt it to the fullest extent imaginable. This isn't to mention the hurt of the betrayal of Judas (and to a lesser extent, of Peter). Worse yet, He experienced separation from the Father, the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Jesus knew suffering.

In the cross and resurrection we see what God has promised to do for us in a compressed timeframe. But what happened to Jesus will happen for all who believe. He suffered . . . and He arose. We suffer . . . and we will rise.

Jesus allowed people to see what God is like. He not only taught truth, he lived it. People could touch Him, and feel Him touch them. They could see how He lived and how He died. The cross was a real, live illustration of love.

In Jesus, people saw goodness and love demonstrated even toward those who persecuted Him. That should be no surprise, because it was just that kind of person Jesus came to die for! Sin was overcome through a love that gave all. This is the meaning and the message of the cross, the message we, too, are to take to our world.

Notes

1. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 28ff.

2. Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 15.

3. P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent

Press, 1948), 17.

4. Forsyth, 18.

5. Forsyth, 19.

6. Arthur C. Custance, *The Doorway Papers,* vol. 3, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1975), 267.

7. Custance, 274.

8. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 17.

9. Custance, 273.

10. Dr. Glenn Johnson, head-cleaners.com, www.head-cleaners.com/guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

11. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/wellness_about.htm (February 17, 2004).

12. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/ritual_package.htm (February 17, 2004).

13. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/rituals_guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

14. Forsyth, 19.

15. Forsyth, 121.

16. Forsyth, 122.

17. See Forsyth, 123.

18. See for example the comment by Kip Taylor in Susan Hogan/Albach, "The Purpose of the Passion," *The Dallas Morning News,* Feb. 21, 2004, 1G.

19. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998),

99.

20. Beaudoin, 99.

21. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

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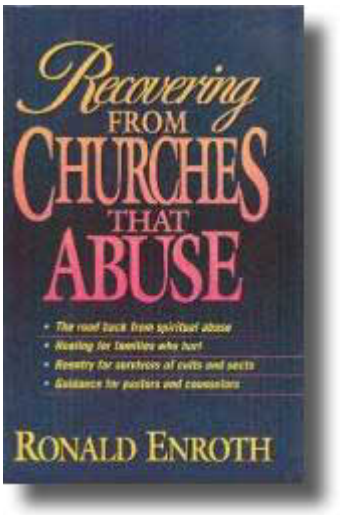
Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Painful Exit Process

In a previous article Abusive Churches, I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.{1} As a result of the questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.



Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.

One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, "I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It's like experiencing a death in the family." The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, "Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."{2}

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label "role exit." Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a "vacuum." In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member wrote, "I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don't know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all

together."{3}

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.{4} Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled "spiritually abusive" range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don't ask questions and don't make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to

disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son's wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter's prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One's spiritual quality is determined by one's allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas? Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a

need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the "sinful" world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a "true disciple," abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: "The greatest threat to the church today is not from without but from our own leadership within."{5} Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, "I have heard many pastors say to

their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them."{7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the truth. "Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims."{8} Blue continues: "Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism."{9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a "pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in

hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt."{10}

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ's example. "Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all" (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader's heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God's flock as a steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse,* and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith,* provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don't give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God's character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that "God

is love.” In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God’s grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However, a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.{11}

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."{12} It

is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "Abusive Churches," 1993, Probe Ministries.
2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse,* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits,* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 65.

11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

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