Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector

Critical thinking skills are necessary for thinking biblically and in a way that glorifies God. Sue Bohlin explores some of the ways to develop those skills.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

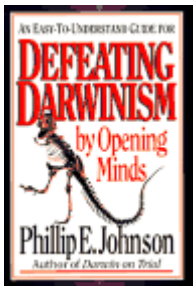
The Need to Think Critically

One of our main objectives here at Probe Ministries is to help people learn to love God with their minds. You really can't do that without learning to think biblically, and think critically. In our television-saturated culture, we have discovered that more Christians are conformed to the philosophies and deceptions of the world than the teachings and truths of the Bible. So in this essay I offer some suggestions on how to sharpen our thinking skills. The apostle Paul exhorts us in 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 way to prevent ourselves from being taken captive to unbiblical, ungodly thinking is to build a kind of mental grid through which we filter what we see, hear, and read.

The first element of the grid is to know what the Bible says, so we can compare the ideas that permeate our culture to the absolute truth of what God has revealed. There is no room for shortcuts here; it takes time in God's Word, reading and meditating on what we read. And in order to understand the context for what we read, we need to work our way through the Bible one book at a time rather than opening it up at random and reading in a hit-or-miss fashion. We know that not everyone is a reader; God made some people auditory learners,

and they need to hear the Word rather than read it. That is fine—the Scripture says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). It doesn't say "reading"! It is now possible to hear the Bible on cassette or CD or even on the Internet.{1} Whatever it takes for you, get the Bible into your head and heart.

As you learn what the Bible says, you will be able to recognize counterfeits to God's truth. For instance, over the past several years the definition of truth has shifted. It used to be that everyone assumed that there was such a thing as absolute truth: things which are true for all people, at all times, in all places. Today, many people believe that contradictory beliefs, such as the different world religions, can all be true at the same time and that murder, lying, and adultery can be acceptable under certain conditions. The belief that truth is relative is a worldly philosophy that has taken many captive, and Christians should filter this out of our thinking because God has revealed unchanging truth to us in His Word.



In his book *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds,* Phillip Johnson has a great chapter called "Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector." He lists a number of critical thinking tools that originally came from Carl Sagan, the late astronomer who made science understandable to us lay people. (Unfortunately, Dr. Sagan failed to point his baloney detector at himself as he ferociously insisted that true science was the same as a purely naturalistic worldview.)

A well-tuned baloney detector will be able to filter out several kinds of baloney that would take Christians captive when we swallow the thinking that comes from the surrounding culture.

Vague Terms and Shifting Definitions

One kind of baloney we need to be alert for is the use of vague terms. People with a non-Christian worldview can start off using language that we think we understand and then suddenly veer off into a new meaning. Once when I was a brand-new believer, people collecting money to care for underprivileged kids approached me on the street. I asked, "Do you teach them about Jesus?" and they said, "Yes. . . ." After I gave them money and took their brochure, I discovered that they taught that Jesus and Satan were brothers! We also see this deliberate vagueness happening in the abortion debate. It is much easier to justify getting rid of a glob of unwanted cells if you do not call it "shredding and mutilating an unborn baby."

We also need to be on the lookout for shifting definitions. In the evolution debate, many people will start out defining evolution as "change over time." Who can argue with that? But then we find out that the true working definition of evolution is unguided, purposeless change.

Believing What We Want to Believe

We also need to be on the lookout for what Phillip Johnson calls the "original sin" of believing what we want to believe, even if there is evidence to the contrary. It is intellectually dishonest to deny facts that contradict our pet beliefs so that we can stay in our comfort zone. We get critical e-mail at Probe complaining about the fact that we do not take a position on the age of the earth. It comes from people who believe what they want to believe regardless of the fact that there is good evidence for another position. One of the wisest prayers we can pray is "Lord, show me where I'm being deceived." Whether we are talking about our emotional, spiritual, or intellectual life, we need to move from the darkness of believing what we want to believe, into the light

of truth as God shows it to us.

Selective Use of Evidence

Another critical thinking skill is to be watchful of the selective use of evidence. We need to be careful not to jump on bandwagons of all kinds before checking out any evidence that would provide a different conclusion. The creation-evolution debate is a great example of this principle, because it's awfully hard to find any biology textbooks that provide students with the evidence against evolution. They do not learn that evolutionists cannot account for things like flight, or the eye, or the explosion of fully formed animals in the Cambrian layers of rock.

I know of several women who deeply regret having had abortions based on the selective use of evidence. They were told that this would solve their problem, that it was simply removing unwanted fetal tissue, that it was really no big deal. They were not given a sonogram where they could have seen their babies moving around inside them, or told about how the Bible declares the personhood of even the tiniest unborn human being. They also weren't told about the horrendous burden of guilt and shame they would carry for years afterwards. We need to know both sides of an argument in order to avoid being held in captivity to the world's philosophies.

Appeal to Authority

Another critical thinking skill is to be wary of is the appeal to authority. "Nothing is true just because some big shot says it is true."{2} In our culture, we practically worship experts (especially scientific experts), and willingly set aside our own beliefs and instincts if somebody with a white lab coat or letters after their name tells us something is true or right or good. That is how we got millions of students who are poor readers in the U.S.: educational experts decided to throw out

phonics, which works very well, and substitute the whole-word approach to reading, which fails miserably.

But it's not just white lab coats; the appeal to authority exploits the way our culture values celebrity. Michael Jordan may be the world's best basketball player, but does that mean he is an authority on underwear too? We need to be skeptical of anybody who says, "Believe it because I say so."

Ad Hominem and Straw Man Arguments

Two kinds of communication that ought to set our internal alarms off are the ad hominem argument and the straw man argument.

Ad hominem is Latin for "to the man." When people use this kind of argument, they are attacking the person instead of what he is saying. My son experienced this on one occasion in his college class where he got into a spirited discussion with a girl who was not being too logical. She could not counter his arguments, got frustrated, and dismissed him with, "Oh, you're just too pretty to be a boy anyway." That's an *ad hominem* argument. It means someone is out of ammunition and defenses for their argument, so they attack the other person or the other side instead.

Now, there is a value to pointing out that someone has a bias, because it is going to impact their conclusions. That is not the same as attacking the person. When people e-mail us here at Probe and accuse us of being biased about Christianity, we freely admit we are very biased. But that does not change whether it is true or not. On the other hand, if a tobacco company releases a study showing that secondhand smoke is not dangerous, one can legitimately question the inherent bias without attacking the people making the argument.

Another critical thinking tool is to watch out for straw man arguments. This is where an opponent distorts someone's

position to make it easier to attack. Recently I participated in a panel discussion on therapies and organizations that help people leave homosexuality. One of the students in the class pointed at me and said, “I just think you shouldn’t try to make gays change against their will. That’s not right.” Well, I agree, and I do not know anyone who tries to change homosexuals against their will. He was using a straw man argument, because the truth is, I work with a ministry that offers help only to those who want it.{3} We do not even let anyone in the door unless they are willing to consider that change is possible, and they are the ones seeking us out. This student twisted my position to make it easier to attack.

Of course, nobody announces that they are using a straw man or ad hominem argument when they do it! But when you recognize it and call it what it is, you are thinking critically about what you are hearing.

Untestable Theories

When I was a young girl, my mind was a sponge—an avid learner, I soaked up everything with a total lack of discernment. There was a time when I was confused about whether the gods of Greek and Roman mythology were real or not!

In this article we have been looking at loving God with our minds by building a mental filter through which we examine what we see, hear, and read. A mental filter consisting of a Christian worldview allows us to keep what is true and right and good, and not swallow the rest like I did! One final baloney detector involves recognizing theories and ideas that cannot be proven either true or false. Many people believe things simply because they sound good, even though there is no way to find out if they are right or not. For example, Carl Sagan opened his famous Cosmos series with the worldview statement that “The Cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be.” How do you test such a statement to see if it

is true or not? At Probe we get e-mail from people who have accepted such untestable theories. What test is there to prove or disprove reincarnation or the existence of the Goddess? How do you run an experiment to prove whether people who have died are sending messages to us when we come across pennies on the pavement?

On the other hand, testability is one of the things that makes Christianity so robust. If someone were able to come up with the bones of Jesus Christ, it would prove Christianity wrong and the millions of believers deluded. It's a testable idea, not an unprovable, pie-in-the-sky concept. Remember what Paul says in 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." In order to do that, we need to work to build a strong mental filter that constantly compares what we see and hear and read to the truth of God's word. We need to interact with TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines, identifying those things that contradict the truth God has already given us. We should feel free to jot comments in the margins of books, especially when we find baloney in them. We need to remember that the world system and our adversary, the devil, are both continually working to tear down what is good and true, and erect false arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. So we can take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

To mix metaphors, we need to tune up our baloney detectors so we will not be sponges.

Notes

1. bible.gospelcom.net

2. Phillip Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 39.

3. Living Hope Ministries. For more information, please see www.livehope.org.

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Evidence of Jesus' Existence?

Rusty Wright responds to the 2002 news about the ossuary (bone box) with the very intriguing and unusual inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

Rarely these days does Israel make headlines for something other than conflict. But a recent (Fall 2002) announcement about an ancient artifact there attracted wide attention.

Biblical Archaeology Review revealed that a stone ossuary (bone receptacle) has an inscription reading "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." If authentic, this would be the earliest archaeological find that corroborates biblical references to Jesus.

Andre Lemaire, a French expert on ancient writings from the Sorbonne, suspected the ossuary's significance when he saw it in the owner's private collection.

Time magazine claims that if the ossuary is authentic and the inscription refers to the biblical James, "this would be the most important discovery in the history of New Testament archaeology."

The New Testament in several places refers to James, Jesus' brother. In Matthew 13:53-55, citizens of Jesus' hometown Nazareth mention "His brother…James…." Paul, an early expositor of the faith, refers to "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19), a leader of Jerusalem's Christians.

Is the ossuary a first-century antiquity or a later forgery? The Geological Survey of Israel subjected it to rigorous tests. It is made of Jerusalem-area limestone quarried from the first or second century A.D. Its patina (sheen) bears evidence of centuries in a cave and shows no evidence of modern chemicals or disruption. Survey scientists conclude it's not a later forgery.

Paleography, the science of ancient writings, supports the early date. Johns Hopkins paleographer P. Kyle McCarter says the "script is consistent with a date in the middle of the first century A.D." Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, put James' death in 62 A.D.

Does the inscription refer to the biblical James, Joseph and Jesus? Lemaire's statistical analysis argues that in mid-first-century Jerusalem "there were probably about 20 people who could be called 'James son of Joseph brother of Jesus.'"

Only one other known ancient Jewish ossuary inscription mentions a brother. Was this Jesus, James' brother, mentioned because he was well known? Lemaire sees a 90 percent chance that the ossuary's James is the biblical brother of Jesus.

The case has critics. We know nothing of the ossuary's original location; evidence might have been compromised. At least one scholar disagrees with Lemaire's paleographic dating of the box. Some question his statistical basis for eliminating other possible Jameses in Jerusalem and feel that Lemaire overstates his case. But at least one feels he understates it.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam claim historical foundations. Historical and archaeological confirmation – or contradiction – of their writings affects their credibility.

Christian faith does not stand or fall on the authenticity of this ossuary. But if genuine, the ossuary supports the conclusion of the late, renowned Jewish archaeologist Nelson

Glueck, who asserted “the almost incredibly accurate historical memory of the Bible, and particularly so when it is fortified by archaeological fact.”

Duke University Judaic Studies professor Eric Meyers, while advising caution on the James ossuary, feels “there is a strong possibility that the artifact is what Lemaire says it is: the oldest extra-biblical archaeological evidence of Jesus.”

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Myths Christians Believe – False Beliefs Exposed

Sue Bohlin identifies and examines some common false beliefs held by many Christians. These beliefs, which are countered by biblical scripture, range from considerations of angels to heaven to salvation to “God helps those who help themselves.”

Angels, Good and Bad

In this article we examine some of the myths Christians believe.

There are lots of misconceptions about angels and devils that come from non-biblical sources ranging from great literature to films to the comic strips in our newspaper.

One myth about angels is that when a loved one dies, he or she becomes our guardian angel. While that can be a comforting thought, that’s not what Scripture says. God created angels before He created the physical universe; because we know they sang together in worship and shouted for joy at the creation

(Job 38:7). When believing loved ones die, they stay human, but they become better than they ever were on earth, and better than the angels. No angel was ever indwelled by God Himself, as Christians are!

An even greater myth that many people believe is the image of Satan as an ugly red creature with pitchfork, horns, and a tail who gladly reigns in hell. For this misconception we have several authors to thank, mainly the 13th century work of Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost,* written in the 1700s. The biblical image of Satan is of an angel who has fallen to irredeemable evil and depravity but yet can transform himself into a beautiful angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:14) He can make himself appear winsome, which is why people can be attracted to the occult. But Satan is not the king of hell. Jesus disarmed him at the Cross, made a public spectacle of him and the rest of the demons, and made him into a defeated foe destined for an eternity of torment in the lake of fire. (Col. 2:15, Rev. 20:10)

Another misconception about Satan that many people believe is that he is the evil counterpart to God. In C.S. Lewis' preface to the Screwtape Letters, he answers the question of whether he believes in "the Devil":

> *Now, if by 'the Devil' you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly No. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a "perfect badness" opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will, memory, energy, and existence itself) there would be none of him left.*

If I Do Everything Right, Life Will Work

Smoothly.

A very common myth that many Christians believe is, “If I do everything right, life will work smoothly.” We seem to be immersed in an attitude of entitlement, believing that God owes us an easy and comfortable life if we serve Him. We expect to be able to avoid all pain, and we look for formulas to make life work. Frankly, many of us are addicted to our own comfort zones, and when anything disturbs our comfort zone, we feel betrayed and abandoned by God.

So when life doesn’t go so smoothly, we often jump to one of two conclusions. Either we must be sinning, or God is out to get us. The book of Job draws back the curtain on the unseen drama in the heavenlies and shows us that when problems come, it doesn’t have to be one of these two options. Sometimes things are going on behind the scenes in the heavenly realm that have nothing to do with our sin. And since God is totally good, it’s a lie from the pit of hell that when bad things happen, God is out to get us in some kind of cosmic sadistic power play.

Even when we do everything right—although NOBODY does everything right, not even the holiest, most disciplined people—things can go wrong. The Bible gives us insight into why it might be happening. First, we live in a fallen world, where bad stuff happens because that’s the consequence of sin. This includes natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes and floods, and includes moral disasters like divorce and abuse and murder.

Secondly, we live in a spiritual battle zone. Unseen demonic enemies attack us with spiritual warfare. God has provided spiritual armor, described in Ephesians 6, but if we don’t put it on, His armor can’t protect us.

Third, we have an inaccurate view of suffering. We think that if we’re suffering, something is wrong and needs to be fixed.

But 1 Peter 4:19 says that some people suffer according to the will of God. That doesn't sound very nice, but that's because we often think the most important thing in life is avoiding pain. But God isn't committed to keeping us comfortable, He's creating a Bride for His Son who needs to shine with character and perseverance and maturity.

The Lord Jesus promised that we would have tribulation in this world. (John 16:33) The word for tribulation means pressure; it means we get squeezed in by trouble. Jesus said that in the world we would have pressure, but in Him we have peace. Life won't always work smoothly, no matter how well we live, but we always have the presence and power of God Himself to take us through it.

God Won't Give Me More Than I Can Handle.

People get baffled and angry when bad things happen, and it just gets worse when God doesn't make the difficult situation go away. We start wondering if God has gone on vacation because we're nearing our breaking point and God isn't stepping in to make things better.

The problem with this myth is that God is in the business of breaking His people so that we will get to the point of complete dependence on Him.{1} Brokenness is a virtue, not something to be protected from. When the apostle Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn in the flesh, God said no. Instead, He responded with an amazing promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul realized that his weakness was the very key to experiencing God's strength and not his own.

One of my friends ministered as a chaplain at Ground Zero in New York after the Sept. 11 attacks. She got so tired and exhausted that she knew it was more than she could bear. That's when she discovered that her exhaustion took her out of God's way and He could shine through her, ministering with His

strength through her profound weakness.

I love this definition of brokenness: “Brokenness is that place where we realize that all the things we counted on to make life work, don’t.”{2} God makes life work. Formulas don’t. Our own efforts don’t. Trustful dependence on Him plugs us into the power source for life. And that often happens when we’ve crossed over the line of what we can handle on our own.

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.

This myth has been repeated so many times that many people think its in Scripture. It’s not. In fact, the truth is exactly the opposite. A heart full of self-dependence and self-reliance says to God, “I don’t need You, I can do it myself. I can handle life without You.” God honors our choices and the exercise of our will; He doesn’t push His help on us. He waits for us to ask for it. He can’t help those who help themselves because we’re too busy *doing* to receive His strength and His help. It’s like the way you can’t fill a cup with coffee when it’s already full of tea. Jesus said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) But that doesn’t stop lots of us from trying! The truth is, God doesn’t help those who help themselves; God helps the helpless.

Two Myths About Heaven

The first myth is perpetuated by the many jokes and comics about St. Peter at the pearly gates. Many people believe that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, St. Peter will let us into heaven. It doesn’t work that way.

God has one standard for getting into heaven: absolute perfection and holiness. The person who has sinned the smallest sin is still guilty and cannot be perfect and holy. It’s like a balloon: once it’s popped, there’s nothing anyone can do to make it whole again. Only one Person has ever qualified for heaven by being perfect and holy—the Lord Jesus.

When we trust Christ as our Savior, He does two things for us: He pays the penalty for our sin, which keeps us out of hell, and He exchanges our sin for His righteousness, which allows us into heaven.

Another myth is that heaven is like a big socialist state where everybody gets a standard issue harp and halo and we all sit around on clouds all day praising God in a never-ending church service. Doesn't sound all that great, does it?

Fortunately, heaven's a whole lot better than that. For one thing, the reason we think worshiping God for all eternity is boring is because we don't know God as He really is. We're like the six-year-old boy who declared that "girls are stupid, and kissin' 'em is even stupider." Kids don't have a clue how great love can be, and we don't have a clue how wonderful God is.

Heaven is no socialist state. There will be varying degrees of reward and responsibility in heaven, depending on the way we lived our life on earth. All believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, when God will test our works by passing them through the fire of motive. If we did things in His strength and for His glory, they will pass through the refining fire and emerge as gold, silver and costly stones. If we did things in our own flesh and for our glory or for the earthly payoff, we will have gotten all our strokes on earth, and our works will be burned up, not making it through the testing "fire."

There are different types of rewards in heaven: a prophet's reward, a righteous man's reward, and a disciple's reward. Some will receive the crown of life, or a martyr's crown, and there's also the crown of righteousness. Our lives in heaven will be determined by the choices, sacrifices, and actions of earth. Some will be very wealthy, and others will be "barely there." You can check our Web site for the scriptures about this.{3}

Myths About the Bible and Salvation

Many non-Christians believe a myth that is accepted by a lot of Christians as well—that the Bible has been changed and corrupted since it was written. The historical evidence actually makes a rather astounding case for the supernatural protection and preservation of both Old and New Testaments.

As soon as the New Testament documents were written, people immediately started making copies and passing them around. There are so many copies in existence that the New Testament is the best-documented piece of ancient literature in the world. And because there are so many copies, we can compare them to today's Bible and be assured that what we have is what was written.

The Old Testament scribes were so meticulous in copying their manuscripts that they were obsessive about accuracy. They would count the middle letter of the entire original text and compare it to the middle letter of the new copy. If it didn't match, they'd make a new copy. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, they demonstrated that this collection of Old Testament scriptures has been faithfully preserved for two thousand years.

Many people believe that certain parts of the Bible have been corrupted or deleted, such as supposed teaching on reincarnation. However, this is just hearsay from people who do not understand how the canon of scripture was decided on. From the beginning of the church, Christians recognized the 27 books that make up the New Testament as God's inspired word, and the writings that weren't inspired were eventually dropped. We have some great articles on our Web site that explain about the reliability of the Bible.{4}

Many Christians believe another myth: "I believe in Jesus, but surely God will let people of other faiths into heaven too." Many seem to think that being a "good Muslim" or a "sincere

Buddhist" should count for something.

This does make sense from a human perspective, but God didn't leave us in the dark trying to figure out truth on our own. He has revealed truth to us, both through Jesus and through the Bible. So regardless of what makes sense from our limited human perspective, we need to trust what God has said.

And Jesus, who ought to know because He is God in the flesh, said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) No other religion deals with the problem of sin and God's requirement of perfection and holiness on God's terms. There may be many ways to Jesus, but there's only way to the Father. It's God's heaven, and He makes the rules: it's Jesus or nothing.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr. Al Meredith, the pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, for this perspective. Wedgwood Baptist was the site of the massacre the night of the "See You At the Pole" celebration when seven youth and staff members were killed and seven others wounded by a crazed gunman.

2. Jeff Kinkade, pastor of Reinhardt Bible Church in Garland, Texas.

3. "Probe Answers Our E-Mail: Help Me Understand Rewards in Heaven."

4. "Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?". Also, "The Authority of the Bible" and "The Christian Canon".

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The Will of God

Christians often suffer anxiety over knowing the will of God. Should we? Maybe we have a wrong understanding of what it is or how to know it.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

"Evangelicals differ from most Roman Catholics and liberals in that they are constantly uptight about guidance," says J.I. Packer. "No other concern commands more interest or arouses more anxiety among them nowadays than discovering the will of God."{1}

I know what he means. How many times have I fretted over *what* I was supposed to do? And *when*? And *how*? A number of readers are probably nodding in agreement right now. The desire to do what God wills for us slips almost unnoticed from a simple desire to please into a fretful anxiety. We're confronted with a decision that must be made, and when no solution comes readily to mind, we look to God to tell us what to do. When no answer is immediately forthcoming, we begin to panic. Or maybe we've been taught that our hearts are "desperately wicked," so any idea or desire *we* have just has to be opposed to what God wants. So we throw that possibility out and look for the answer that must be right because it's just what we *wouldn't* want to do!

Packer's experience is that "the more earnest and sensitive a believer is, the more likely he or she is to be hung up about guidance."{2} We want to do what is right, but we aren't sure *what* we're to do or *how* we're to do it. And we fear the consequences if we get it wrong.

Why do we worry so much about finding God's will? Could it be we have a distorted idea of what it is or of how to find it?

An idea about God's will found frequently in the church is

that God has a plan prepared for each individual life and it is our duty to discover what it contains and follow it. If we fail to do just the right thing, we will probably have to settle for second best or worse. And a number of us seem to have a really hard time finding out what it is. Garry Friesen calls this the "traditional view,"{3} but Packer points out that this "traditional view" goes back no further than about 150 years.{4}

What's going on? Does God have us on a great big scavenger hunt, poking about here and there, trying to find His elusive will before time runs out? Bruce Waltke likens this view to "a version of the old con man's ruse, the three-shell game,"{5} where a rock is put under one of three shells that are slid around the table in a confusing fashion to make you lose track of where it is. Is God playing games with us? Or is He telling us but we're hard of hearing?

Packer notes that this view can leave Christians feeling second-rate. "You may not be on the scrapheap, but you are on the shelf," he says. He also says that this perspective leads to fear, causing some to avoid making decisions for fear of messing up, or others to live their lives with heavy hearts, believing they've already messed up and are stuck with less than God's best. Of course, God must then be rather upset with us.

Besides this, Waltke believes this view can result in immaturity since it isn't really up to us to *choose,* but rather to simply pick the shell under which is the rock.

Does it make sense that God would make finding His will so hard? That can't be right. Maybe we have a wrong understanding about what it means to know God's will or even what God's will *is.*

The Will of God in Scripture

In the Bible, the "will of God" refers to a few things. It can mean the eternal, sovereign plan of God, which will be accomplished *regardless* of any conscious acceptance and participation on our part. (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:9-11) We cannot undo the sovereign will of God. The phrase can also be used "to describe God's desire or consent – what He wants and what is favorable to Him," as Waltke puts it.{6} This includes God's laws or specific instructions that we can choose to obey or disobey, or a desire of His for a specific situation as when Moses had to settle disputes between the people of Israel. (Ex. 8:15,16)

More often than not, the "will of God" in Scripture refers to God's moral laws or commands dealing with the stuff of everyday life. In the Old Testament we read, "Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law, And keep it with all my heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it" (Ps. 119: 34,35), and "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."(Ps. 40:8) In addition to these general laws, however, occasionally, prophets gave instructions regarding specific matters.

In the New Testament we find Paul giving the Ephesians general instructions for not living as the world does. He writes, "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Eph. 5:17) Instructing the Thessalonians about sexual purity he writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." (1 Th. 4:3) Waltke sums up several passages when he says that "God's will is that you be holy, wise, mature, joyful, prayerful, and submissive."{7}

Does He have a specific plan for each of us? Surely He does, for how could He work the whole of history toward His desired end if the individual parts were left indefinite? Paul introduced himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." (Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1) The question is: Is God going

to tell us what to do in each specific situation? And, is it true that there's only one right choice?

Foundations of Decision Making

Typically when we find ourselves concerned about the will of God, it's in the context of decision making. There are several elements in the decision making process. Before looking at some of them, however, I need to establish a few foundations.

First, we need to reintegrate the concept of knowing and living in God's will into the whole fabric of our lives. It is a matter of importance for all our lives, not just for decision making. Understanding this casts a new light on what is meant by the "will of God."{8}

Second, against the "traditional" view of decision making, I believe that there *isn't* necessarily only one right choice with respect to nonmoral decisions. We give the different elements of decision making their due place in our consideration, make the best choice we know how, and trust God to accomplish His will. Unless there is undoubtable direction by God to go a specific way, we have the freedom and the responsibility to choose.{9}

Third, there is a change in how people seek guidance from the era of the Old Covenant to that of the New. In Old Testament times, people used various ways of divining God's will, including casting lots, using the Urim and Thummim, and interpreting dreams. However, things changed after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke points out that "after Pentecost there is no instance of the church seeking God's will through any of the forms of divination" seen in the Old Testament. "The New Testament gives no explicit command to 'find God's will,' nor can you find any particular instructions on how to go about finding God's will."{10} He later adds, "God does not administer His church in the same

way He administered old Israel."{11} In Acts 1:24 we read of the apostles casting lots to know God's will about choosing another apostle to take Judas' place, but after this, "there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God's will" recorded.{12}

Fourth, good decision making comes through having a close relationship with God, which is fostered in a variety of ways.{13} It is the very things that we do or should do *routinely* that assist us in making decisions, things such as learning the Bible, praying, being in close fellowship with other believers, etc. We do the kinds of things that work together to conform us into His image, and these very things feed our ability to make wise decisions along the way.

Fifth and last, the elements of decision making don't form some kind of neat, orderly system in which particular steps are taken in a necessary order, one following the other, so that when we reach the end the decision pops out.{14} Each element is weighed along with the others with some having more weight than others. For example, both my desires and the Bible are elements of decision making. But the Bible carries more weight. Sometimes one of the elements might incline us to say "no," but consideration of another, more weighty one will change that to a "yes." This is a part of wise thinking: understanding the weight of each factor using God's understanding as the standard.

So how do we go about seeking guidance for making decisions? Let's look at a few elements of decision making.

Elements of Decision Making

The Bible

Romans 12:2 says we are able to "test and approve what God's will is" as our minds are renewed. And this renewal comes through a knowledge of His Word illuminated by His Spirit.

As God's Word is our final authority for faith, it is our final authority for practice as well. It is our most authoritative source for knowing God and His will. Solomon said we would know how to live as we follow God's commands: "When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you." (Prov. 6:22) Waltke notes what Paul says about the purpose of Scripture: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. It is there that we learn about God and His work, find rebuke and correction when we stray, and discover what makes for righteous living. This includes the decision making part of life.

Because of the clarity of Scripture on many things, we have an immediate answer for a lot of the decisions we have to make. For example, a man doesn't need to ask if it's God's will for him to fool around with his neighbor's wife! The Bible is clear on that.

In addition to telling us what *not* to do, the Bible also has a lot to say about what we *should* do. We learn about the love of God and what that means for relating and reaching out to other people. We learn about the value of the created realm, of work, of personal gifting, of money. We learn about the overall project of God (redemption), and we see how *we* can model a redemptive love in our world today.

The desires of our heart

Another source for obtaining guidance is the desires of our heart.{15} Are you surprised? Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." Delighting in Him involves wanting what He wants, molding our desires to His. This comes through walking closely with Him.

God gives us talents and abilities for a reason! If these things are honorable and useful for God's kingdom, they aren't

to be rejected simply out of fear that God might not like us to do something we enjoy! As one man put it, we can "love God and do what we please" when we walk close to Him, because we know Him and the kinds of things He desires.

Prayer and meditation

Walking closely with God can only happen through constant prayer. This is another significant element of decision making. Through prayer, we force ourselves to stay attuned to God. Our prayer is fed by a knowledge of and meditation upon His Word. Sometimes wise decisions become clear when distractions are put away and our minds are allowed to focus and do their work uninterrupted. We pray about particular issues, but we also pray for understanding in general. Paul prayed that the Colossians would learn God's will "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." (Col. 1:9) To all who ask believing, as James says, such wisdom will be given "generously and without reproach." (1:5)

One very important element of knowing God's mind and will is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. His presence within us is one of the major differences between us and Old Testament saints. This, I think, is significant with respect to knowing God's will.

One way the Spirit helps us in knowing God's will is what we call illumination, the means by which He helps us understand the deeper significance of Scripture. Another way is through bringing things to our attention. J. I. Packer speaks of "nudges" of the Spirit, or a "focusing of concern." (See Acts 17:16) "When we say we have a 'vision' or 'burden' about something," he says, "we are referring to an impression. When our concern is biblically proper, we are right to regard our impression as a nudge from the Holy Spirit."{16}

Sometimes Christians say the Lord has "told" them to do

something. While we cannot – and do not wish to – define the limits of how God can guide us, we can learn from Scripture what we might expect. Those who say God gives special revelations of His will sometimes refer to instances such as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, or Peter's on Simon the Tanner's roof where he learned that a change in dietary laws was being made. But notice that such special revelations came without being asked for; they didn't come in response to a desire to know God's will. Bruce Waltke notes that, "There is no place in the New Testament where we are taught to seek a special revelation" from God.{17} Paul spends a good amount of time teaching the church how to do the will of God. One might expect at least *some* attention given to seeking God's will through a direct word of the Spirit to individuals if that's how God typically works. But it isn't there. Again, the question isn't whether God *can* speak this way, for surely He can. We're speaking here of the norm, of what we can expect from God in the normal course of life.

What should we do if we believe the Spirit is speaking directly to us? Packer believes (and I agree) "that impressions must be rigorously tested by biblical wisdom—the corporate wisdom of the believing community as well as personal wisdom. If this is not done," he continues, "impressions that are rooted in egoism, pride, headstrong unrealism, the fancy that irrationality glorifies God, a sense that some human being is infallible, or similar misconceptions will be allowed to masquerade as Spirit-given."{18}

The church

Speaking of corporate wisdom, the counsel of others is an important element in making decisions. "Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory," we read in Proverbs 11:14. Such counsel is to be found primarily in the church, for it is the church that is

responsible to do the will of God on earth. Sometimes we can find good counsel on some matters from non-Christians. But when we're thinking of the major decisions of life we look to the church where we should be able to find those who share our Christian beliefs, who have the mind of Christ, and who are mature in godly wisdom. "Personal guidance," says Packer, "that we believe we have received by inner nudge from the Lord needs to be checked with believers who are capable of recognizing unrealism, delusion, and folly when they see it."{19}

Not only can we find guidance for dealing with ideas we have, but also the church is a channel for the Spirit calling us to do something new. Through the church, the Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. (Acts 13:2,3){20} In the fellowship of believers we have a place to discover the abilities we have and to put them to use, and to be drawn into places we never thought we could go.

Providence

The providence of God is another element of the decision making process. This is God's direct dealing in His world in general and in our lives in particular – His sovereign governance of the world.{21} By God's providence the stars stay in their orbits and the rain waters the earth. By His *special* providence "God's hand is 'visible' in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way."{22}

Often, things seem to just happen in our lives by chance. More often than not it is in hindsight that we see the Lord at work. By "chance" you meet someone who turns out to be a valuable resource for some project you're working on. Without thinking anything about it you say something encouraging to someone who was that very day going to quit her job out of a

sense of hopelessness, and she reconsiders. Just a week or so ago a pastor told me about a certain speaker that he was going to have come to his church next year. I told him about some things that the man had written that he might not know about, which could prove the speaker a poor choice. After I told him, he said our conversation was providential. He researched the matter himself and agreed with me.

A note of caution must be sounded here. It is possible to misinterpret the events of our lives, leading us to think God is doing one thing when it is really something else He's up to. As with the other elements of decision making, our interpretations need to be considered in light of the other elements.

Because God's sovereign plan *will* be done, it isn't up to us to consciously bring it about. However, by being aware of how God is at work, we have clues about how to make decisions. We also grow in our faith as we see plans fall together that we have presented to Him, and we learn to relax in His control in our lives.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a major element of decision making that operates throughout the whole process. Garry Friesen calls his understanding of biblical decision making "the way of wisdom." Paul wrote, "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise." (Eph. 5:15)

Wisdom is fundamentally a character trait. One writer notes that "the major thrust of wisdom in the Old Testament was a code of moral conduct . . . a way of thinking and conduct that is orderly, socially sensitive, and morally upright."{23} This theme is continued in the New Testament, for example, in Paul's prayer that we gain "spiritual wisdom and understanding," so we "may live a life worthy of the Lord and

may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work." (Col. 1:9,10) We might define wisdom as "a right ordering of life in keeping with the nature and will of God."

James tells us if we ask for wisdom believing, we will receive it. (1:5-8) But note that "wisdom" isn't the same as "wise answer." We won't have to grow in wisdom if God tells us everything to do. We would always like children need to be led. If we understand the character of God and walk closely with Him, learning to think with the mind of Christ, we will grow in our ability to make wise choices.

Faith

Finally, we come to faith, an element that is essential in all areas of the Christian life. All things the Christian does are to be done in faith. Paul says that whatever isn't of faith is sin. (Rom. 14:23) Recall that James said we must ask for wisdom *in faith* (1:6). Faith allows us to rest, to not be anxious, to believe God cares and is in control.

We learn and live the Christian life, walking near to God, growing in wisdom. In times of decision, wisdom chooses the best course while faith rests on God's promises to guide us and be with us. We decide a course of action, and faith carries us through.

Summary

To sum up, then, knowing God's will means fundamentally knowing Him and what pleases Him. Although on occasion there could be an unusually clear leading of God, for the most part we make decisions based on the input we gain through the normal course of discipleship, pulled together in spiritual wisdom, trusting God to accomplish His will, and resting in

that confidence.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, “Guidance: How God Leads Us” in *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale Publishers, 1987), 105.
2. Packer, 106.
3. Friesen rejects this view. See his *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980).
4. Packer, 110, 116.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 7. “Most ancient texts still extant [nearly 80%] deal with divining the mind of God,” 26.
7. Waltke, 71.
8. As an aid to this, Waltke suggest we talk about the guidance of God rather than the will of God when making decisions. Cf. Waltke, 169.
9. Cf. Friesen, 179.
10. Waltke, 12.
11. Waltke, 54-55.
12. Waltke, 53. The word translated “show us” isn’t used again in the New Testament after Pentecost. It is only used elsewhere in Luke 10:1 referring to when Jesus appointed or “showed” the seventy disciples whom He sent out.
13. Waltke, 16.
14. Waltke believes there is an important order to the steps (see Waltke, p. 59), but I disagree. I do see a certain order of priority with respect to the weight of particular elements, however.
15. Waltke, 86.
16. Packer, 128.
17. Waltke, 19.
18. Packer, 129.
19. Packer, 122.
20. Cf. Waltke, 109.
21. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the*

Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), s.v. “Providence,” by Walter Elwell.
22. Rick Wade, “Miracles.” Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Internet at www.probe.org/miracles/.
23. Elwell, s.v. “Wisdom,” by C. Hassell Bullock.

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Eastern Orthodoxy

Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

In a previous article I spoke of the conversation now going on between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics prompted by the culture war. A third tradition is participating in such talks as well, namely, the Eastern Orthodox Church. For many if not most of us, Eastern Orthodoxy is a real mystery. Images of bearded priests and candles, and the sounds of chanting come to mind. They are so far removed from us, it seems. Are we really part of the same church? Such a question would be absolutely preposterous to them, of course, for Orthodox are fond of pointing out that they stand closer to the ancient church than do Catholics or Protestants.

In this article I’d like to introduce you to the Eastern Orthodox Church. I will simply present some of Orthodoxy’s history and beliefs as an introduction without offering any critique.{1}

History

Orthodox Christians trace their lineage back to the apostolic church. The apostles, of course, founded only one church.

Since the founding of the church there have been three significant divisions. The first occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries when what are known as the Oriental Orthodox churches split off over theological issues. These include the churches in Iran and Iraq, sometimes called the "Nestorian" or "Chaldean" churches. Also included were the Syrian Church of Antioch and the Coptic Church of Egypt. The churches that were left comprise what we know of as the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are the churches that remain in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.{2}

The next division, typically dated in the eleventh century, was between the Eastern Church and the Western or Roman Catholic Church. Rome was one of the five main centers, or *sees*, of the Church. Although it was the most important of the five, it was different from the others. For example, the Western Church based in Rome used Latin, whereas the Eastern Church used the languages of the people. Rome had more of a legal mindset in its theology, whereas the East was more mystical. In addition, various cultural and political issues set it apart. The barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in the West further separated the West from the East.

Such things as these set the stage for division. Two major issues brought it to a head. One was the power of the pope in Rome. The bishops of the Church had long been seen as generally equal; all the bishops had a vote in decisions affecting the whole Church. However, a few wielded more influence than others. The Roman See was at the top. Thus, the pope was considered the first among equals among the bishops of the Orthodox world. However, some of the popes came to desire universal supremacy. For example, Pope Nicholas wrote in 865 that he had authority "over all the earth, that is, over *every* Church."{3}

The other theological problem was that of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father. Does He proceed from the Father

only or both the Father and the Son? The Nicene Creed originally said that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father." A clause was added later by the Church in the West, without the agreement of the other bishops, to make it read, "proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*." Later I'll look at this a little more closely. For now we should note the importance of the clause for the unity of the Church.

The clause seems to have originated in Spain and was accepted by Charlemagne as part of the Creed. The seriousness of the matter can be seen in the antagonism it produced between East and West. For example, when the Greeks wouldn't include the phrase, writers in Charlemagne's court began accusing them of heresy. For another, in 867, Pope Nicholas' backing of the inclusion of the *Filioque* clause in opposition to the rest of the Church brought about his excommunication by Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, although communion was later restored.

The East resented its inclusion for two reasons. First, this act revealed the extent of power the Pope was trying to claim in allowing the addition on his own authority. Second, it was thought to be incorrect theologically. (I will return to these later.)

In the eleventh century relations between the East and the West worsened severely. Rome gained new power politically in the West, reviving the belief that it had universal jurisdiction. The Normans gained power in Italy and forced the Greeks there to conform to Latin methods of worship. In retaliation, the patriarch of Constantinople forced the Latin churches there to adopt Greek practices. After a few more events further heightened tensions, on July 16, 1054 some legates of the pope laid a Bull of Excommunication on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. This is the date commonly given for the great schism between the East and the West. It was a landmark occasion, but the end didn't finally come in fact until the early thirteenth century

following a few tragic events in the Crusades. Now there was the Roman Church and the Eastern Church, the one headed by the pope, the other headed by the patriarch of Constantinople.

The Godhead

Space does not permit a full description of the theology of the Orthodox Church. Let's touch briefly on its doctrine of God.

The Trinity

The Holy Trinity is of supreme importance in Orthodox theology and life. It "is not a piece of 'high theology' reserved for the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian." Because we're made in the image of God, we can't understand ourselves if we don't understand this doctrine. God's triune nature also makes clear that He is personal—that He experiences personal communion within the Godhead, and thus can commune with us as well.

The Father

Below I'll speak further about the role of the Father in the Trinity. Here I'll just touch on the Orthodox understanding of the knowability of God. Orthodox believe that God is unknowable to us in His essence for He is so much higher than we are: He is absolutely transcendent. For that reason we can only employ negative language when speaking of Him: we can say what He is *not* in His being, but not what He *is.*

However, God is not cut off from His creation. While God's *essence* is the core of His being and cannot be known, His *energies*, which permeate creation, enable us to experience Him. His energies "are God Himself in His action and

revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind."{4}

The Incarnate Son

The whole of the sacramental theology of Orthodoxy is grounded in the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation is so significant that Orthodox believe it would have occurred even if Adam and Eve hadn't fallen into sin. It was an act of love—God sending His Son to commune with us. Because of sin, however, it also became an act of salvation.

Orthodoxy seeks to give proper weight to both Christ's deity and His humanity. One must recall the weight given to the Nicene Creed and its clear declaration of both natures. He is "true God and true man, one person in two natures, without separation and without confusion: a single person, but endowed with two wills and two energies." The divinity of Christ is of utmost importance to Orthodox. "'Behind the veil of Christ's flesh, Christians behold the Triune God' . . . perhaps the most striking feature in the Orthodox approach to the Incarnate Christ [is] an overwhelming sense of His *divine glory.*"{5} He is the face of God for us. This revelation was seen most strikingly in the Transfiguration and the Resurrection.{6} On the other hand, the places where He lived and ministered and the Cross upon which He died are pointers to His humanity, and they are revered highly.

The Holy Spirit

The importance of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church can hardly be overstated. They believe, in fact, that it is one thing that sets the Eastern Church apart from the Western. Whereas the Western Church put greater emphasis on the power of theological understanding, Orthodox depend more on the

activity of the Spirit. St. Seraphim of Sarov said that such things as prayer and fasting and other Christian practices are not the aim of the Christian life. “The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.”{7} In the corporate setting, the Spirit is invoked repeatedly in Church worship. On the individual level, believers place themselves under His protection each morning in their prayers.

Earlier I talked about the split in the Church in the eleventh century. One of the key issues was the clause the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed, which said that the Spirit was sent by the Father *and by the Son*. This was called the *Filioque* clause. The Eastern Church rejected this addition because it was inserted without the support of the universal Church and because it was seen as incorrect theologically. For Orthodox theologians, the clause confused the roles of the Father and the Son in the economy of the Trinity. “The distinctive characteristic of the first person of the Trinity is Fatherhood,” says Timothy Ware. “He is the source in the Trinity. The distinctive character of the second person is Sonship; . . . [He] has His source and origin in the Father, . . . The distinctive character of the third person is Procession: like the Son, He has His source and origin in the Father; but His relationship to the Father is different from that of the Son, since He is not begotten but from all eternity He *proceeds* from the Father.”{8} To the Orthodox, then, to say the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the *Son* is to give those two persons the same function. They point out, too, the scriptural teaching that “the Spirit of truth . . . proceeds from the Father.” (Jn. 15:26)

Furthermore, the clause seemed to imply a subordination of the Spirit to the Son, which could result in a diminution of the Spirit in the Church. But the ministry of the Spirit and the Son are “complementary and reciprocal.” “From one point of view,” says Ware, “the whole ‘aim’ of the Incarnation is the

sending of the Spirit at Pentecost."{9}

The Church in Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that true belief and worship are maintained by the Orthodox Church. "Orthodoxy claims to be universal—not something exotic and oriental, but simply Christianity," says Orthodox bishop Timothy Ware.{10} They believe that Orthodoxy has maintained the teachings of the apostles and the early Church faithfully through the centuries.

Three Defining Characteristics

Something one notices soon after beginning an investigation of the Orthodox Church is its attempt to let its theology inform its practice in life and in worship.

The Orthodox Church can be described generally under three headings: Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological. Regarding the *Trinity*, beyond simply holding it as a correct understanding of God, the Church attempts to emulate the Trinity in its practices. As the Trinity is both one and many, the Church is thought of as both one and many—unity in diversity. This applies to both individuals and to local churches all taken together. Orthodoxy is made up of a number of independent *autocephalous* churches, as they are called. "Just as in the Trinity the three persons are equal," says Ware, "so in the Church no one bishop can claim to wield absolute power over all the rest; yet, just as in the Trinity the Father enjoys pre-eminence as source and fountainhead of the deity, so within the Church the Pope is 'first among equals'."{11}

Further, the Orthodox Church is *Christological.* It sees itself as "the extension of the Incarnation, the place where the Incarnation perpetuates itself." It is "the centre and organ

of Christ's redeeming work . . . it is nothing else than the continuation and extension of His prophetic, priestly, and kingly power . . . The Church is Christ with us."{12}

Finally, the Church is *Pneumatological*. It is the dwelling place of the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of power in the Church. In addition, He both unites the Church and ensures our diversity. We are separately given the Spirit, but so that we might come together. "Life in the Church does not mean the ironing out of human variety, nor the imposition of a rigid and uniform pattern upon all alike, but the exact opposite. The saints, so far from displaying a drab monotony, have developed the most vivid and distinctive personalities."{13}

Authority in the Church

The Orthodox Church is at once popular and hierarchical. It is popular in the sense that the focus is on the people, and authority resides in the Church, which is the people of God. However, the Church is represented in its leadership, and here one finds a strong hierarchy. Major decisions are made by the bishops with a special place of honor going to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. "Where Rome thinks in terms of the supremacy and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope," says Ware, "Orthodoxy thinks in terms of the five Patriarchs and of the Ecumenical Councils."{14}

While the decisions of bishops are binding in general, it is understood that they aren't infallible. The Church is infallible, but its bishops aren't. As Paul said, the *church* is "the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15)

For the Orthodox, the Church is the bearer and guardian of truth, which is passed on through *Tradition*. Included in Church Tradition are the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the early centuries, and the writings of the Fathers, the Canons or laws, the Icons—"in fact," says Timothy Ware, "the whole

system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages."{15} The Bible forms a *part* of this Tradition; it is seen as a product *of* the Church and derives its authority *from* the Church. "Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils."{16} As another writer says, "It is neither subordinate nor superior to tradition, not can there be any contradictions between them."{17}

When challenges were made to what had been taught by the Church from the beginning, answers were provided by various councils through the early centuries. The most important was the Council of Nicaea. Thus the Nicene Creed has preeminence, although the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creeds are also used. At these councils important doctrines of the faith were hammered out. Nicaea, for example, dealt with the person of Christ. Was He God or man or both? If both, how did the two natures relate in one person? The determinations of the councils, which were universally accepted, became authoritative for the Church.

The Church Fathers also provided authoritative teaching about Christian doctrine. Sometimes, however, they were in error. It became necessary, then, for the church to distinguish "patristic wheat . . . from patristic chaff."{18}

The Worship of the Church

A close look at the Orthodox Church reveals quickly the importance of the Church as a whole, as the functioning body of Christ. The priority of the Church in Orthodoxy—not the so-called "invisible" or universal Church, but the visible worshipping community—might seem a bit odd to evangelicals. In evangelicalism the emphasis is more upon the individual's

relationship to Christ, whereas in Orthodoxy, the Christian life revolves around the Church as the locus of the ministry of Christ and the Spirit.

The Church is thought of as a reflection of heaven on earth. This belief underlies the elaborate nature of the worship experience. This reflection is seen first of all through *beauty*. A peculiar gift of the Orthodox, it is said, "is this power of perceiving the beauty of the spiritual world, and expressing that celestial beauty in their worship."{19}

The worship service has supreme importance in Orthodoxy; it is more important than doctrine and the disciplines of the Christian life. "Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfillment in worship." The liturgy is the contents of the worship service including the readings, actions, music, and all else involved. Says Timothy Ware: "Into the Holy Liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience." It is what inspires "their best poetry, art, and music."{20} Further, the liturgy of worship attempts to embrace both worlds—heaven and earth. There is "one altar, one sacrifice, one presence" in both. It is in the Church that God dwells among humans.

Orthodoxy is thoroughly sacramental. Holding that God has graced the physical world through the Incarnation of Christ, Orthodox see the whole of the created order as somehow graced by God and usable for revealing Himself. For the life of the Church there are special sacraments that are channels of God's grace. Through particular physical means, such as through the elements of Communion or the water of Baptism, God extends His grace in a special way. The sacraments are "effectual signs of grace, ritual acts which both express and bring about a spiritual reality. Just as in the Incarnation the eternal Word of God was united with human nature in Jesus Christ, so in the sacraments spiritual gifts are communicated through tangible

realities."{21}

The Liturgy of worship reaches its highest point in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church; it is "a Eucharistic society, which only realizes its true nature when it celebrates the Supper of the Lord, receiving His Body and Blood in the sacrament."{22} "It is no coincidence," says Ware, "that the term 'Body of Christ' should mean both the Church and the sacrament." Where the Eucharist is, the Church is.{23}

There are other sacraments, too, in Orthodoxy, such as baptism, Chrismation (their equivalent roughly of Confirmation), Confession, and marriage. Customarily seven sacraments are listed, although there is no final word on the number. They aren't all equal in importance; some are more significant than others, Baptism and the Eucharist being the most important. But all serve to convey the grace of Christ to His Church.

The Orthodox concept of the Church is extremely rich. There are aspects of their worship that many Evangelicals would find odd or uncomfortable (such as standing throughout the service) or even objectionable. But the attempt to bring the fullness of the kingdom into the worship service creates a rich and meaningful experience for the participants. Orthodoxy is unabashedly mystical. The worship service works to bring believers closer to a kind of mystical union with God. Here, the believer is to experience the presence of God and through it to eventually partake of the nature of God.

Icons and Deification

Let's look at two beliefs of the Orthodox Church that are quite unusual to evangelicals.

I've already noted the importance of the Incarnation for the sacramental view of Christianity and of the world. It is also

important for understanding the Orthodox use of icons. An icon, Timothy Ware tells us, "is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world."{24} The use of icons reveals their view of matter, the created order. "God took a material body," says Ware, "thereby proving that matter can be redeemed. . . . God has 'deified' matter, making it 'spirit- bearing'; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then– though in a different way–can wood and paint. The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified."{25} Ware says that Nicolas Zernov's comments about the Russian Orthodox view of icons is true for Orthodoxy in general:

> *They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The colours and lines of the [icons] were not meant to imitate nature; the artists aimed at demonstrating that men, animals, and plants, and the whole cosmos, could be rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper 'Image.' The [icons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. . . . The artistic perfection of an icon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory–it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The icons were part of the transfigured world.{26}*

Orthodox don't worship icons, but rather venerate or reverence them. They are intended to remind the believer of God. Even those without theological training can learn from icons. But icons are more than a convenient teaching tool for Orthodox; they are thought to "safeguard a full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation." The Iconoclasts, it is thought (those who in the Orthodox Church fought *against* the use of icons), fell

into a kind of dualism between defiled matter and the spiritual realm. “Regarding matter as a defilement, they wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ’s humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must by saved and transfigured.”{27}

Deification

One of the oddest teachings of Orthodoxy to evangelicals is that of the *deification* of man or *theosis*. The central message of Christianity is the message of redemption in Christ. Orthodox take quite literally the apostle Paul’s teachings on *sharing* in the message of redemption. “Christ shared our poverty that we might share the riches of His divinity; ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich, (2 Corinthians viii, 9). . . . The Greek Fathers took these and similar texts in their literal sense, and dared to speak of humanity’s ‘deification’ (in Greek, *theosis*).” We are “called to become by grace what God is by nature.” For this to happen, of course, Christ had to be fully man as well as fully God. “A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the Incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once.”{28} Thus, “For Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification.”{29}

Underlying the idea of deification or divinization is the fact of our being made in “the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity. . . . Just as the three persons of the Trinity ‘dwell’ in one another in an unceasing movement of love, so we humans, made in the image of the Trinity, are called to ‘dwell’ in the Trinitarian God. Christ prays that we may share in the life of the Trinity, in the movement of love which

passes between the divine persons; He prays that we may be taken up into the Godhead."{30} Jesus prayed "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (Jn. 17:21) As Peter wrote: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Pet 1:4)

As the *image* of God, we are icons of God. There is a reflection of God in us by nature. However, we *grow* in the *likeness* of God, or "the assimilation to God through virtue." If we make proper use of our ability to have communion with God, "then we will become 'like' God, we will acquire the divine likeness. . . . To acquire the likeness is to be deified, it is to become a 'second god', a 'god by grace'." This is a goal we only acquire by degrees. "However sinful we may be, we never lose the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our 'virtue', and so it is destroyed by sin."{31}

But will we be fully like God ourselves? To understand this doctrine, we must understand the difference between God's essence and His energies. God's essence is the core of His being. His energies are those characteristics by which we experience Him. "They are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind." We cannot know His essence, but we can know His energies. Our deification consists in our "union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism." We do not become one being with God. Nor do we become separate gods in our very essence. "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation." We are thus created gods.{32}

This deification involves the body, too. We will be transformed as Christ was in the Transfiguration, but the full

transformation of our bodies will not come until the Last Day.

Several points can be made about the significance of deification. First, it is meant for all believers, not just a few. Second, the process doesn't mean we won't be conscious of sin in our lives. There is a continual repentance in the Christian life. Third, the means of attaining deification aren't extraordinary. They are simple: "go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments."{33} Fourth, it is a social process. The second most important commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't become divinized by ourselves. We realize the divine likeness as we live a common life with other believers such as that of the Trinity. "As the three persons of the Godhead 'dwell' in one another, so we must 'dwell' in our fellow humans."{34} Fifth, deification is very practical. It involves the hands on application of Christian love, such as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc. Sixth, it "presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments," for it is here that we commune with God. "Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby we may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness."{35}

Evangelicals who are used to emphasizing a rational understanding of doctrine grounded in Scripture might find all this too vague. How can we hold to a doctrine of deification without falling into polytheism or pantheism? Once again we must take note of Orthodox mystical theology. Significant doctrines aren't always clearly parsed and laid out for understanding. Orthodox have a very "face value" kind of theology: if Scripture says we are gods, then we are gods.

Concluding Remarks

This look at the Eastern Orthodox Church has been necessarily brief and rather surface. I have attempted to provide a simple introduction without adding an Evangelical critique. It is my

hope that listeners will seek to learn more about Orthodoxy, both for a better understanding of the history of the Christian church, and to prompt reflection on a different way of thinking about our faith. While we might have serious questions about certain doctrines and practices of Orthodoxy, we can't help but be enriched by others. The centrality of corporate worship as contrasted with our primary focus on the individual; the importance of beauty grounded in Christian beliefs contrasted with either the austerity of Protestant worship in the past or our present focus on personal tastes in aesthetics; the way fundamental doctrines such as that of the Trinity and the Incarnation weave their way throughout Christian belief and life in contrast to our more pragmatic way of thinking and living; these things and more make a study of the Orthodox Church an enriching experience. Even if one is simply challenged to rethink one's *own* beliefs, the effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, in the context of the current culture wars it can only help to get to know others in our society who claim Jesus as Lord and seek to live according to the will of the one true God.

Notes

1. The writer has attempted to represent Eastern Orthodoxy by remaining true to its stylistic preferences, such as capitalizing references to the universal church and the particular sacraments (Baptism, Communion, etc.).

2. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

3. Ware, 53.

4. Ware, 232.

5. Ware, 225. Quotation from Bishop Theophan the Recluse.

6. "In Orthodox worship and spirituality tremendous emphasis

in placed on both these events." Ware, 226. "The theme of the Resurrection of Christ binds together all theological concepts and realities in eastern Christianity and unites them in a harmonious whole." O. Rousseau, "Incarnation et anthropologie en orient et en occident," in Irnikon, vol. xxvi (1953), p. 373, quoted in Ware, 226.

7. Ware, 229-30.

8. Ware, 211.

9. Ware, 229-30.

10. Ware, 8.

11. Ware, 240.

12. Ware, 241.

13. Ware, 242-243.

14. Ware, 239.

15. Ware, 196.

16. Ware, 197.

17. Keith Crim, ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of Religions*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), s.v. "Orthodox Churches" by V. Kesich.

18. Ware, 204.

19. Ware, 265.

20. Ware, 266.

21. Keith Crim, ed. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), s.v. "Sacraments," by T.J. Talley.

22. Ware, 13.

23. Ware, 242.

24. Ware, 206.

25. Ware, 33-34.

26. Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (London, 1945), 107-08, quoted in Ware, 34.

27. Ware, 33.

28. Ware, 20-21.

29. Ware, 231.

30. Ware, 231.

31. Ware, 219.

32. Ware, 232.

33. Ware, 236.

34. Ware, 237.

35. Ware, 237-38.

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That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade

introduces the conversation.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I son realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural

circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission,* Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. "In front of abortion clinics," says Colson, "Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies." This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

> Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.{4}

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the "new ecumenism," a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus' Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.{5}

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.{6} Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it is very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.{7} At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In 1966 at theWorld Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. "Thereafter the ideological radicals increased," says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn "toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics."{8} It tried to form alliances around the "edges" of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church's role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won't last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity's critic. Oden says that, "We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined."{9}

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of

picking and choosing one's truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they're really *true.* This isn't the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.{10}

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to

the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early ’90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.”{11} In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

> As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: “May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,{12} Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled “The Gift of Salvation,” which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,{13} the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn’t find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working

something *in* us which becomes part of our justification(the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?{14}

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.{15} Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was "to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age."{16} An important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: "The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united."{17}

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don't. The first is the culture war. Some are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural

importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."{18} There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.
- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the endless joy of heaven."{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

> How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with it maintenance of the authority of Scripture and with it acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that

has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority. Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.{22} If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now.

That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even *be* Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."{23} Having read some Catholic expositions of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I'm reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren't Christians at all. Again, this isn't to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one's understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don't know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, "Well, he's Catholic so he can't be saved."

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the

day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled "Ecumenical Jihad," in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.{24}

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is on Jesus' prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren't acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity "is a 'costly act' involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches."{25} Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families."{26} The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don't with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

> Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to

> accept the valuable help of their elucidation?{27}

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the "Decree on Ecumenism." Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. "The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals." He says:

> It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}
>
> Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues

to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.

- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.
- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ."{31} It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous?)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent,* sess. 7, canon 8)."{32} *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent,* sess. 6, chap. 7).{33} Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise."{34}

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles' Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we're talking about different religions altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be "brothers and sisters in Christ"?{35}

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed "An Appeal to

Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: "The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake." This doesn't preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.{36}

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: “However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable.”{37} A simple recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus’ prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural crisis “is a recultivation of conscience.”{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? “At root, every issue that divides the American people,” Colson says, “is religious in essence.”{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn’t a unity of convenience, but a

unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.
2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective, " in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.
7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the

conference “Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain,” Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.
8. Tom Oden, “The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society,” Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” First Things 43 (May 1994) 15-22.
12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in “Why I Signed It,” *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.
13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, “Getting Justification Right,” *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.
15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.
16. James S. Cutsinger, “Introduction: Finding the Center, in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.
17. Neuhaus, “A New Thing,” 57.
18. Oden, “The New Ecumenism.”
19. J.I. Packer, “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology,” in Cutsinger, 156.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.
21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I’ll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to

the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.
22. Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 251.
23. Packer, “On from Orr,” 174.
24. Peter Kreeft, “Ecumenical Jihad,” Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.
25. Avery Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism and the Future (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.
28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” 137-38.
29. Dulles, “Unity,” 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I’ve included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics,* xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone,* 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of “substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . .” and to “the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone.” See “Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT,” available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic

and Evangelical Dialogue," drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.html.
36. "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue." See also "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not "kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism." He believes that "Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul, it must not be deemed insurmountable." See his comments in "Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response," in *Christianity Today,* Oct. 7, 1996.
38. Packer, "On from Orr," 157.
39. Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 13.
40. Ibid., 14.

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Does the Future Need Us? The Future of Humanity and Technology

The voices of some educated, thoughtful people are starting to raise questions about just how human we can remain in the face of developing technology. Don Closson examines those concerns

and provides a Christian response.

In April of 2000, Bill Joy ignited a heated discussion concerning the role of technology in modern society. His article in *Wired* magazine became the focus of a growing concern that technological advances are coming so quickly and are so dramatic that they threaten the future existence of humanity itself. It is relatively easy for baby-boomers to discount such apocalyptic language since we grew up being entertained by countless movies and books warning of the dire consequences from uncontrolled scientific experimentation. We tend to lump cries of impending doom from technology with fringe lunatics like Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Kaczynski killed three people and injured others in a seventeen-year attempt to scare away or kill researchers who were close to creating technologies that he felt might have unintended consequences.

But Bill Joy is no Ted Kaczynski. He is the chief scientist for Sun Microsystems, a major player in computer technology and the Internet. He played an important role in the founding of Sun Microsystems and has been instrumental in making UNIX (operating system) the backbone of the Internet. So it is a surprise to find him warning us that some types of knowledge, some technologies should remain unexplored. Joy is calling for a new set of ethics that will guide our quest for knowledge away from dangerous research.

Another voice with a similar warning is that of Francis Fukuyama, professor of political economy at Johns Hopkins University. His book *Our Posthuman Future* asks disturbing questions about the potential unintended results from the current revolution in biotechnology. He writes, “the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a “posthuman” stage of history.” Once human nature is disrupted, the belief that we are created equal might no longer be tenable causing both civil and economic strife.

There is also a Christian tradition that questions modernity's unrestrained quest for technological power. C. S. Lewis warned us of a society that has explained away every mystery, and the danger of what he calls "man-molders." He states that "the man-molders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omni-competent state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please."{1} In his book *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul argues that we have come to the place where rationally arrived-at methods and absolute efficiency are all that really matters.{2}

Let's consider the many voices warning us of the unintended consequences of modern technology.

Three Dangerous Technologies

Bill Joy argues that humanity is in danger from technologies that he believes are just around the corner. His concern is that robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology present risks unlike anything we have created in the past. The key to understanding these new risks is the fact that these technologies share one remarkable potential; that is, self-replication. With all the present talk of weapons of mass destruction, Joy is more concerned about weapons of knowledge-enabled mass destruction. Joy writes:

> I think it is no exaggeration to say that we are on the cusp of the further perfection of extreme evil, an evil whose possibility spreads well beyond that which weapons of mass destruction bequeathed to the nation-states, on to a surprising and terrible empowerment of extreme individuals.{3}

Joy believes that we will have intelligent robots by 2030, nano-replicators by 2020, and that the genetic revolution is already upon us. We all have a picture of what an intelligent

robot might look like. Hollywood has given us many stories of that kind of technology gone wrong; the Terminator series for example.

The big debate today is whether or not true artificial intelligence is possible. Some like Danny Hillis, co-founder of Thinking Machines Corporation, believe that humans will probably merge with computers at some point. He says, “I’m as fond of my body as anyone, but if I can be 200 with a body of silicon, I’ll take it.”{4} The human brain would provide the intelligence that computer science has yet to create for smart robots. The combination of human and silicon could make self-replicating robots a reality and challenge the existence of mankind, as we know it today.

Nanotechnology is used to construct very small machines. IBM recently announced that it has succeeded in creating a computer circuit composed of individual carbon monoxide atoms, a remarkable breakthrough. Although dreamed about since the 1950’s, nanotechnology has recently made significant progress towards the construction of molecular-level “assemblers” that could solve a myriad of problems for humanity. They could construct low cost solar power materials, cures for diseases, inexpensive pocket supercomputers, and almost any product of which one could dream. However, they could also be made into weapons, self-replicating weapons. Some have called this the “gray goo” problem. For example, picture molecular sized machines that destroy all edible plant life over a large geographic area.

Surprisingly, Bill Joy concludes “The only realistic alternative I see is relinquishment: to limit development of the technologies that are too dangerous by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge.”

The End of Humanity?

History is filled with people who believed that they were

racially superior to others; Nazi Germany is one obvious example. An aspect of America's uniqueness is the belief that all people are created equal and have rights endowed to them by their Creator that cannot easily be taken away. But what if it became overtly obvious that people are not equal, that some, because they could afford new genetic therapy, could have children that were brighter, stronger, and generally more capable than everyone else? This is the question being asked by Francis Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future*. The answer he comes up with is not comforting.

He contends that technology is at hand to separate humans into distinct genetic camps and that we will not hesitate to use it.

Fukuyama gives us three possible scenarios for the near future. First, he points to the rapid acceptance and widespread use of psychotropic drugs like Prozac and Ritalin as an indication that future mind altering drugs will find a receptive market. What if neuropharmacology continues to advance to the point where psychotropic drugs can be tailored to an individual's genetic makeup in order to make everyone "happy," without the side effects of the current drugs? It might even become possible to adopt different personalities on different days, extroverted and gregarious on Friday, reserve and contemplative for classes or work on Monday.

Next, advances in stem cell research might soon allow us to regenerate any tissue in the body. The immediate result would be to dramatically extend normal human life expectancy, which could have a number of unpleasant social and economic implications. Finally, the feasibility of wealthy parents being able to screen embryos before they are placed in the womb is almost upon us. It would be hard to imagine parents denying their offspring the benefit of genetically enhanced intelligence, or the prospect of living longer lives free from genetic disease.

What will happen to civil rights within democratic nations if these predictions come true? Will we end up with a society split into subspecies with different native abilities and opportunities? What if Europe, for instance, is populated with relatively old, healthy, rich people and Africa continues to suffer economic deprivation with a far younger population ravaged by AIDS and other preventable diseases? Interestingly, Fukuyama believes that the greatest reason not to employ some of these new technologies is that they would alter what it means to be human, and with that our notions of human dignity.

The Christian basis for human dignity is the *imago Dei*, the image of God placed within us by our Creator. Many are questioning the wisdom of chemical and genetic manipulation of humanity, even if it seems like a good idea now.

Early Warnings

There is a long Christian tradition of looking at the surrounding world with suspicion. Whether it's Tertullian asking the question "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem," or the Mennonite's promotion of simplicity and separation, Christians everywhere have had to struggle with the admonition to be in the world but not of it. Recent advances in science and technology are not making this struggle any easier.

In his work *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis argued that humanity's so-called power over nature "turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument."{5} His concern is that the modern omni-competent state combined with irresistible scientific techniques will result in Conditioners who have full control over the future of humankind. He feared that modernism and its ability to explain away everything but "nature" would leave us emptied of humanity. All that would be left is our animal instincts. The choice we have is to see humanity as a complex combination of both material and spiritual components or else to be reduced to machines made of meat ruled by other machines with nothing

other than natural impulses to guide them.

Lewis writes:

> For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are reading to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious.

The issue of technique and its standardizing effects was central to the thinking of sociologist Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society*. Ellul argues that as a society becomes more technological it also becomes less interested in human beings. As he puts it, the technical world is the world of material things. When it does show an interest in mankind, it does so by converting him into a material object. Ellul warns that as technological capabilities grow, they result in greater and greater means to accomplish tasks than ever before, and he believes that the line between good and evil slowly disappears as this power grows.

Ellul worries that the more dependent we become on technology and technique, the more it conforms our behavior to its requirements rather than vise versa. Whether in corporate headquarters or on military bases much has been written about the de-humanizing effect of the employment of modern technique.

Primarily, he fears that even the church might become enamored with the results of technique. The result would be depending less on the power of God to work through Spirit-filled believers and more on our modern organization and technological skills.

Summary

Without a doubt, technology can help to make a society more productive, and growing productivity is a major predictor for future increases in standards of living. Likewise, technology results in greater opportunities to amass wealth both as a society and for individuals. Communication technology can help to unify a society as well as equalize access to information and thus promote social mobility.

On the other hand, technology can cause harm to both the environment and individuals. The Chernobyl nuclear power disaster in Russia and the Bhopal industrial gas tragedy in India resulted in thousands of deaths due to technological negligence. The widespread access to pornography over the Internet is damaging untold numbers of marriages and relationships. Terrorists have a growing number of inexpensive technologies available to use against civilians including anthrax and so-called radioactive dirty bombs that depend on recent technological advances.

However, it must be said that most Christians do not view technology itself as evil. Technology has remarkable potential for expanding the outreach of ministries and individuals. Probe's Web site is accessed by close to 100,000 people every month from over one hundred different countries. Modern communications technology makes it possible to broadcast the Gospel to virtually any place on the planet around the clock.

However, in our use of technology, Christians need to keep two principles in mind. First, we cannot give in to the modern tendency to define every problem and solution in scientific or technological terms. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a temptation to think naturalistically, reducing human nature and the rest of Creation to its materialistic component. The Bible speaks clearly of an unseen spiritual world and that we fight against these unseen forces when we work to build God's kingdom on earth. Ephesians tells us "our struggle is not

against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."{6} Scientific techniques alone will not further God's kingdom. We must acknowledge that prayer and the spiritual disciplines are necessary to counter the adversary.

Second, we need to remember the power that sin has to tempt us and to mar our thinking. The types of technologies and their uses should be limited and controlled by biblical ethics, not by our desires for more power or wealth. We are to have dominion over the earth as God's stewards, not as autonomous tyrants seeking greater pleasure and comfort.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), 73.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society,* (Vintage Books, 1964), p. xxv.
3. Bill Joy, "Why The Future Doesn't Need Us," *Wired*, April 2000.
4. Ibid.
5. Lewis, 69.
6. NIV, Ephesians 6:11-12.

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Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem of Evil

Dr. Ray Bohlin explores the problem of evil in light of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

Why Didn’t God Prevent the Terrible Attacks?

The events of September 11th are indelibly etched in our hearts and minds. The horrible memories of personal tragedy and suffering will never really go away. As well they shouldn’t. As Christians we were all gratified to see so many of our national, state, and local leaders openly participate in prayer services and calling upon people of faith to pray for victims’ families and injured survivors.

What was lost underneath the appearance of a religious revival was the clear cry of many that wondered if our prayers were justified. After all, if we pray to God in the aftermath and expect God to answer, where was He as countless individuals cried out to Him from the planes, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? The skeptical voices were drowned out because of the fervent religious outcry seeking comfort and relief. But make no mistake; the question was there all the time. Where was God on September 11th? Surely He could have diverted those planes from their appointed destinations. Why couldn’t the hijackers have been intercepted at the airports or their plots discovered long before their designed execution?

Why so many innocent people? Why should so many suffer so much? It all seems so senseless. How could a loving God allow it?

It is important to realize also that the suffering of those initial weeks is only the tip of the iceberg. There will be military deaths and casualties. The war on terrorism will be a long one with mounting personal and economic costs. The clean up will also continue to take its ever-mounting toll in dollars, lives, and emotional breakdowns.

Former pastor Gordon MacDonald spent time with the Salvation Army in caring for people and removing debris and bodies from the rubble of the World Trade Center. He relates this

encounter from his journal of September 21 in *Christianity Today:*{1}

> "Later in the night, I wandered over to the first-line medical tent, which is staffed by military personnel who are schooled in battlefield casualties. The head of the team, a physician, and I got into a conversation.
>
> "He was scared for the men in the pit, he said, because he knew what was coming 'downstream.' He predicted an unusual spike in the suicide rate and a serious outbreak of manic depression. . . . Many of the men will be unable to live with these losses at the WTC. It's going to take an unspeakable toll on them."

So why would God allow so much suffering? This is an ancient question. The problem of reconciling an all-powerful, all-loving God with evil is the number one reason that people reject God. I will try to clarify the question, provide some understanding, and make some comparisons of other explanations.

Psalm 73 and Asaph's Answer

The Bible answers the question of where God was on September 11 in many passages, but I would like to begin with the answer from Asaph in Psalm 73. My discussion will flow from the excellent discussion of the problem of evil found in Dr Robert Pyne's 1999 book, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity.*{2}

In Psalm 73, Asaph begins by declaring that God is good. Without that assumption, nothing more need be said. He goes on in verses 2-12 to lament the excess and success of the wicked. In verses six and seven he says, "Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits." (Psalm 73:6-7). From this point Asaph

lets his feelings be known by crying out that this isn't fair when he says in verse 13, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."

The wicked seem to snub their noses at God with no apparent judgment, while Asaph strives to follow the Lord to no benefit. We have all experienced this in one form or another. Some things in this world simply aren't fair. In the last ten verses of the psalm, Asaph recognizes that the wicked will indeed realize their punishment in the future. God's judgment will come. He also realizes that God is always with him and that is sufficient.

18th century philosopher David Hume stated the classical problem of evil by saying that if God were indeed all powerful He would do something about evil, and that if He were all-loving He would want to do something about evil. Since evil exists, God must either not be able or not want to do anything about it. This makes God either malevolent or impotent or both. But Hume chooses to leave out the option, as Asaph resolves, that God is patient. Hume, like many before him and after him, grows weary with a God who is patient towards evil.

We long for immediate justice. But before we pray too earnestly for immediate justice, we'd better reflect on what that would be like. What would instant justice look like? Immediate justice would have to be applied across the board. That means that every sin would be proportionately and immediately punished. We soon realize that immediate justice is fine if applied to everybody else. Dr. Pyne quotes D. A. Carson as saying, "The world would become a searing pain; the world would become hell. Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell."{3} I think we're all quite comfortable with a God that does not apply immediate justice.

Evil and the Sovereignty of God

Next, I want to focus on God's sovereignty. We understand that God knew what He was doing in creating people with the ability to choose to love Him or hate Him. In order for our love for Him to be real, our choice needed to be real and that means creating creatures that could turn from Him as well as love Him. In order to have creatures with moral freedom, God risked evil choices.

Some would go so far as to say that God couldn't intervene in our evil choices. But in Psalm 155:3, Psalm 135:6, and in Nebuchadnezzar's words of praise in Daniel 4:34-37 we're told it is God who does whatever He pleases. However, God does perform acts of deliverance and sometimes He chooses not to. We are still left with the question "Why?" In the book of Job, Job basically proclaims his innocence and essentially asks why? God doesn't really give Job an answer, but simply reminds him who is in charge. (Job 38:2-4) "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" the Lord asks Job.

The parameters are clearly set. God in His power is always capable of intervening in human affairs, but sometimes He doesn't and we aren't always given a reason why. There is tension here that we must learn to accept, because the alternative is to blaspheme by assigning to God evil or malevolent actions. As Asaph declared, God is good!

This brings us to the hidden purposes of God. For although we can't always see God's purpose, we believe He has one in everything that occurs, even seemingly senseless acts of cruelty and evil. Here is where Jesus' sufferings serve as a model. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. (Hebrews 12:1-3) So then, we should bear our cross for the eternal joy set before us. (Hebrews 12:11, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) But knowing this doesn't always make us feel better.

When Jesus was dying on the cross all His disciples but John deserted Him. From their perspective, all that they had learned and prepared for over the last three years was over, finished. How could Jesus let them crucify Him? It didn't make any sense at all. Yet as we well know now, the most important work in history was being accomplished and the disciples thought God was absent. How shortsighted our perspective can be.

The Danger of a Nice Explanation

But with this truth comes the danger of a nice explanation. Even though we know and trust that there is a purpose to God's discipline and His patience towards ultimate judgment, that doesn't mean we should somehow regard evil as an expression of God's goodness. In addition, we can be tempted to think that if God has a purpose to evil and suffering, then my own sin can be assigned not to me but to someone else, namely God Himself because He had a purpose in it.

Dr. Robert Pyne puts it this way.

> We may not be able to fully resolve the problem of evil, and we may not be able to explain the origin of sin, but we can see the boundaries that must be maintained when addressing these issues. We share in Adam's guilt, but we cannot blame Him for our sin. God is sovereign, and He exercises His providential control over all things, but we cannot blame Him either. God permits injustice to continue, but He neither causes it nor delights in it.{4}

Another danger lies in becoming too comfortable with evil. When we trust in God's ultimate purpose and patience with evil we shouldn't think that we have somehow solved the problem and therefore grow comfortable in its presence. We should never be at peace with sin, suffering, and evil.

The prophet Habakkuk sparred with God in the first few verses

of chapter 1 of the book bearing his name by recounting all the evil in Israel. The Lord responds in verses 6-11 that indeed the Babylonians are coming and sin will be judged. Habakkuk further complains about God's choice of the godless Babylonians, to which God reminds him that they too will receive judgment. Yet the coming judgment still left Habakkuk with fear and dread. "I heard and my inward parts trembled: at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. . . . Yet, I will exult in the Lord." (Habakkuk 3:16-19.) Habakkuk believes that God knows what He is doing. That does not bring a smile to his face. But he can face the day.

"We are not supposed to live at peace with evil and sin, but we are supposed to live at peace with God. We continue to trust in His goodness, His sovereignty, His mercy, and we continue to confess our own responsibility for sin."{5}

He Was There!

Though we have come to a better understanding of the problem of evil, we are still left with our original question. Where was God on September 11th?

While the Christian answer may not seem a perfect answer, it is the only one which offers truth, hope, and comfort. Naturalism or deism offers no real answers. Things just happen. There is no good and no evil. Make the best of it! Pantheism says the physical world is irrelevant or an illusion. It doesn't really matter. Good and evil are the same.

To answer the question we need to understand that God does, in fact, notice when every sparrow falls and grieve over every evil and every suffering. Jesus is with us in all of our suffering, feeling all of our pain. That's what compassion means, to suffer with another. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable.

> “The answer is, how could you not love this being who went the extra mile, who practiced more than He preached, who entered into our world, who suffered our pains, who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows?”{6}

We must remember that Jesus’ entire time on earth was a time of sacrifice and suffering, not just His trial and crucifixion. Jesus was tempted in the manner of all men and He bore upon Himself all our sin and suffering. So the answer is quite simple. He was there!

He was on the 110th floor as one called home. He was at the other end of the line as his wife realized her husband was not coming home. He was on the planes, at the Pentagon, in the stairwells answering those who called out to Him and calling to those who didn’t.

He saw every face, knew every name, even though some did not know Him. Some met Him for the first time, some ignored Him for the last time. He is there now.

Let me share with you one more story from Gordon MacDonald’s experience with the Salvation Army during the initial clean up at the World Trade Center.

> “There is a man whose job it is to record the trucks as they leave the pit with their load of rubble. He is from Jamaica, and he has one of the most radiant smiles I’ve ever seen. He brings a kind of spiritual sunshine to the entire intersection. “I watch him—with his red, white, and blue hard hat—talking to each truck driver as they wait their turn to go in and get a load. He brightens men up. In the midst of those smells, the dust, the clashing sounds, he brings a civilizing influence to the moment.
>
> “Occasionally I go out to where he stands and bring him some water. At other times, he comes over and chats with us. We always laugh when we engage. “I said to him last night, ‘You’re a follower of the Lord, aren’t you?’ He gave me an

enthusiastic ‘Yes! Jesus is with me all the time!’ “Somehow this guy represents to me the quintessential picture of the ideal follower of Christ: out in the middle of the chaos, doing his job, pressing a bit of joy into a wild situation.” {7}

Notes

1. “Blood Sweat and Prayers,” *Christianity Today,* Nov. 12,2001, p. 76.
2. Robert Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity,* pp. 193-209.
3. Pyne, p. 197.
4. Pyne, p. 204.
5. Pyne, p. 206.
6. Peter Kreeft, quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, 2000, p. 45-46.
7. “Blood Sweat and Prayers,” *Christianity Today*, p. 76.

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The Enlightenment and Belief in God

The skepticism and relativism seen in our society today didn’t just pop up out of nowhere. They received new life during the era of the Enlightenment. Rick Wade provides an overview of this important period.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

We are often tempted to think of our own day as truly unique, as presenting challenges that others have not known. Among

other challenges, Christians in the West today have to deal with a foundational philosophical matter: namely, the question of the possibility of knowing truth. The mindset in our society today is either one of skepticism or of relativism. Skepticism says there is truth but we can't know it; relativism says there *is* no fixed truth. These mindsets affect all claims to truth, of course, but they are especially significant for Christians as we seek to proclaim the Gospel to others and hold onto it ourselves in these days of uncertainty.

Is the challenge of the loss of truth new? Not at all. There have been periods of skepticism throughout the history of the West. In this article we'll take a look at the era known as the Enlightenment, that period in the history of the West extending from the late 17th through the 18th centuries. What we'll see is that the very issues we're dealing with today were problems three centuries ago. Of particular concern to us will be the knowledge of God.{1}

Before looking at the Enlightenment itself, let's take a brief look at the mindset preceding this extraordinary era.

Prior to the Enlightenment, believing in God in the West was like believing in the sunrise; the answer to all the big questions of life *was* God (whether a given individual was inclined to *obey* God was another matter). The Bible was the source of knowledge about Him, especially the Old Testament, for there one could learn, among other things, the history of humankind and the divine purposes. Even political questions were to be solved by the Old Testament.

Everything was understood to work according to God's plan. The events of history were not chance occurrences, but events that served to carry out God's will. The universe was fairly young, having been created by God about 4000 years before Christ, and it was kept in operation through God's immediate involvement. The earth was at the physical center of the universe; since

man was the highest level of creation, clearly God's purposes were centered on him.

For some people this picture of the world made for a comfortable home: nice and neat and orderly. However, the world was a mysterious and sometimes frightening place. This, along with the generally held belief in "that Last Judgment where many would be called but few chosen,"{2}

produced in some a pessimistic outlook. "'Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh,' said Sir Thomas Browne, 'nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity.'"{3}

Although the various major landmasses of the earth were known, other civilizations were not. Europeans knew little about other cultures. It was easy to believe that theirs was the highest civilization.

With the rise of science and the discovery of other civilizations came a new way of thinking about "God, man, and the world." Let's look at these briefly.

A Shift in Thinking

Science

In the Renaissance era, the world started getting bigger for Europeans. Knowledge increased rapidly, and from it followed major changes in life. The various strands of change merged in the Enlightenment, culminating in a new way of looking at the world.

A major shift took place in the world of science with the development of the ideas of such people as Francis Bacon (1561-1627). Bacon, an English philosopher and statesman, abandoned the classical deductive way of understanding nature handed down from Aristotle, championing instead an experimental, inductive approach. He rejected the authority of

tradition, and provided “a method of experiment and induction that seemed to offer an infallible means of distinguishing truth and error.”{4}

Although science was later to become the source of confidence for people in the West, in the early days scientific discoveries were unsettling. For example, the invention of the telescope resulted in the overturning of Aristotle’s theory of the universe in which the earth, and hence man himself, was the center. Aristotle taught that the universe was a series of concentric spheres, one outside the other. “Copernicus and his successors shattered this world,” says historian James Turner.{5}Now man was understood to live on a tiny planet flung out into a space that had no center. It was a time of great confusion. In the words of poet John Donne, “‘Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence [sic] gone.'”{6}The discovery that we aren’t at the center of the universe made people wonder if we are truly significant at all.

More disturbing than this, however, were geological discoveries.{7} It appeared that the earth was older than the current understanding of the Old Testament, which seemed to some to say the world was created about 4,000 years before Christ. The Bible had long been the authority on such matters. Could it be wrong? To question the Bible was to question Christianity itself. Because Christianity provided Europeans’ their basic worldview, such questions were extremely troubling. *Exploration*

Voyages of discovery had a profound impact on Europeans’ view of their place in the world and of their Christian beliefs. Discoveries of other civilizations made Europeans wonder if their Christian civilization was truly any better than any others. China was a particular problem. It apparently predated European civilization, and possibly even the Flood! Like the Europeans, the Chinese saw *themselves* as the center of the

world. And China wasn't Christian!

Other more primitive societies presented their own difficulties. For example, reports of how gentle and loving American Indians were made people wonder about the doctrine of "original sin." They wondered, too, if it could be that God would destroy such people as these in a Flood.

Furthermore, if other civilizations were able to function without Christian beliefs, maybe Christianity itself wasn't so significant, at least on the cultural level. Maybe it was just one religion among many.{8} Norman Hampson concludes that "The intellectual challenge of non-European societies [were] a much more direct and fundamental challenge to traditional Christian beliefs than any which seemed likely to come from the scientists."{9}

Thus, the discoveries of science and of voyages first disrupted Europeans' orderly world, and then made people doubt the significance of their religion itself.

The New Cast of Mind

Shift in Knowledge Let's look more closely at changes in thinking that developed during the Enlightenment.

In the early 17th century, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) formulated a very rationalistic philosophy. His primary goal was to produce a logically certain argument for the existence of God. To do so, he employed what has come to be known as the *method of doubt*. Descartes believed we were to doubt any idea that wasn't "clear and distinct." The only idea he could hold in such a manner was that he himself existed. Hence the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." From there Descartes developed his philosophy in a logical, rational manner. He even approached nature from a deductive, rationalistic perspective. Beginning with general principles and known facts of nature, Descartes would deduce what the

rest of nature should be like.

Although Descartes' way of looking at the world was overthrown by the experimental approach, his philosophy in general had a profound impact. He is considered by some to be the first modernist philosopher, for he looked for certainty in knowledge within the individual, not from an outside authority. Reason became more important than revelation.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was an immensely significant figure in the developing world of science. His discovery of the law of gravity showed that nature could be understood by man. Man would no longer be at the mercy of an unknown world. Newton's work was so significant for understanding nature that Alexander Pope was prompted to write, "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."{10}

John Locke (1632-1704) was another major thinker in the Enlightenment era. Historian Norman Hampson says, "the new currents of thought all seemed to flow together in [him]".{11} Locke believed that knowledge by experience is superior to that which is accepted by belief and trust – "the floating of other men's opinions in our brains," as he called it.{12} He rejected the theory of innate ideas taught by Descartes, believing instead that our minds begin as blank slates to which is added knowledge by experience. Locke carried this approach into the realm of human nature and morality. He believed that "moral values arose from sensations of pleasure and pain, the mind calling 'good' what experience showed to be productive of pleasure."{13} Although Locke was a Christian, he set the stage for a naturalistic understanding of morality.

New Optimism

This new way of looking at the world, of listening first to experience rather than to tradition and the church, was a major characteristic of the Enlightenment. James Turner calls

this a “new cast of mind.” No longer were people to be dependent upon the Church to tell them about their world. Now they could learn about it in other ways.

In time the unsettling first wrought by scientific discovery was replaced by an “unprecedented optimism” based on the confidence in man’s ability to “shape his material and social environment.”{14} There was “a gradual and complex shift in the intellectual climate,” Norman Hampson says. “As science seemed to establish itself on an impregnable basis of experimentally verified fact, doubt and confusion eventually gave way to self-confidence, the belief that the unknown was merely the undiscovered, and the general assumption—unprecedented in the Christian era—that man was to a great extent the master of his own destiny.”{15}

Secularization and the Church

The findings of science had profound effects on people’s thinking about God and their religion during the Enlightenment. However, science wasn’t alone in this. Other forces were at work pushing Europe into a new secularism.

The Beginnings of Secularization

As temporal rulers consolidated their power in Europe, the political power of the Church waned. Fragmented feudal kingdoms began to merge together into nation-states and assumed more power over the people. The Reformation sped up the secularization of politics as governments distanced themselves from the warring churches to maintain peace.

Capitalism and technology furthered the separation as they weakened the hold the Church had on the populace. Before the printing press was invented, for instance, the Church heavily influenced the flow of information in society. But now “the printing press effectively ended church regulation of learning.”{16} Other secular institutions arose taking up more

of people's lives in areas not governed by the Church. Trade, for example and all it involved– travel, the establishment of businesses, banks and stock exchanges- -added more institutions that were outside the control of the Church. As James Turner says, "The church's words, though still formidable, competed with a widening range of alluring voices that . . . did not have the church's vested commitment to defend Christianity."{17}

Secularization didn't *necessarily* undermine Christianity, however. People might actually have developed a firmer faith as a result of being able to read about and discuss the faith. It could be that "with worldly ambitions curtailed and legal powers short, the churches exercised deeper spiritual influence."{18} Nonetheless, in society the voice of the Church grew weaker.

The Church

The new experimental cast of mind had profound effects on religion and the Church. Religion now came under the same scrutiny as other areas of thought. Doctrine drew greater attention since it suited the new concern with rational and orderly thought. Mystery was downplayed, and tradition lost significance. The new intellectual mood called for individuals to think matters through for themselves, and as a result, people began to divide over doctrinal differences. If "clear and distinct" ideas were what should be believed, as Descartes taught, then the individual person took on an authority previously held by tradition or the Church.

The Protestant Reformation played a major role in the fracturing of the Church and its loss of power. According to Norman Hampson, rival claims to leadership in the Church contributed most to the decline of its intellectual authority in society. If church leaders couldn't agree on what was true, who could? Although cutting edge thinkers were satisfied that traditional attitudes and assumptions should no longer

prevail, they were not able to come up with clear alternatives. “The picture,” says Hampson, “was one of a confused *mêlée*.”{19}

Church leaders began “revising belief to fit the new intellectual style. . . . The very meanings of ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ began subtly to change . . . during the Middle Ages religion involved not so much assent to doctrines . . . as participation in devotion, particularly communal ritual. Religion was more a collective than an individual affair and collectively it came closer to a system of practice than a parcel of tenets, while individually it meant more a person’s devoutness than his adherence to a creed.”{20} In the Enlightenment, however, doctrines became more important than practice for some, and the result of doctrinal debates was the breakup of the Protestant Church into multiple denominations.

The Bible itself was subjected to the new way of thinking. First, since all texts of antiquity were now open to question, the Bible too became subject to rational scrutiny. Which parts were to be accepted as historically accurate and which rejected? Second, since scriptural teachings were no longer to be accepted simply on the basis of authority, specific matters were brought up for debate – for example, the matter of the reality of hell.

Frenchman Richard Simon (1638-1712) subjected the Old Testament to such scrutiny. His book, *Critical History of the Old Testament,* was the first to examine the Bible as a literary product. He treated “the Old Testament as a document with a history, put together over time by a variety of authors with a variety of motives and interests, rather than a divinely-revealed unity.”{21} Although his work was condemned across many Christian denominations, the die was cast, and others continued the same kind of analysis.

Political separation from the Church, new means of learning, the loss of tradition, dissension in the churches, doubts

about Scripture—these things and more served to turn attention more to the secular than to the sacred.

Belief in God

Nature and God

All of this – the findings of science and exploration and the new experimental way of thinking, along with doubts about the validity and significance of Church teaching – took its toll on belief in God.

One concern was the relationship of God to nature. Newton believed God had to be actively involved in nature because the laws he discovered didn't seem to work uniformly throughout the universe. God had to keep things working properly.{22} For those like Newton, the findings of science were exhilarating; they saw them as God's means of ordering His world. "Even those few minds who had entirely given the universe over to orderly natural law," says Turner, "still needed to assume God's existence. For natural laws themselves presupposed a divine Lawgiver."{23}

Nonetheless, a distance developed between God and nature since nature was now understood in terms of natural laws that were comprehensible to men. René Descartes had believed that nature was to be understood in terms of ultimate realities. Thus, he kept science, theology, and metaphysics together. The new experimentalism of Bacon and Newton, however, separated them. "The modern conception of the natural world, understood as clearly distinguished from and even opposed to an impalpable spiritual world, was being invented," says Turner.{24} God was withdrawn more and more "as nature came to be understood . . . as governed by God through secondary causes."{25} He didn't disappear; He just adopted a new mode of operation. A mechanistic strain in science suggested a more impersonal Deity. God began to be thought of as a "divine Engineer."{26} Thus, scientists stopped concerning themselves with

metaphysical answers. They looked to nature to explain itself.{27}

Now that God didn't seem to be necessary to the operation of the world, some began to doubt His reality altogether. Prior to the Enlightenment, atheism was a "bizarre aberration" for well over a thousand years in the West. One writer said that, "As late as the sixteenth century, disbelief in God was literally a cultural impossibility."{28} One couldn't explain the world without God. Growing vegetation, intellectual coherence, the orbits of the planets, the existence of life itself, morality—these and other issues all found their roots in God. With science now able to explain how the world worked, however, doubts about God began to rise. Belief in His existence now rested more on the idea of Providence, the beneficial acts of God on our behalf. It was believed that the earth was made for man's happiness, that there was a morally meaningful order to things, and there had to be a God to explain this.

However, with time there developed a more pessimistic view of nature, which lessened the force of Providence. Nature produced poisonous plants and dangerous animals as well as good things. In the words of the poet William Blake:

> Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?{29}

While there was obviously no wholesale abandonment of belief in God, the foundations for belief seemed to be eroding. And when God's existence became debatable, says Turner, "the center fell out of Western intellectual life. If divine purpose did not undergird the cosmos, then whole structures of meaning collapsed and new ones had to be built up, brick by precarious brick."{30}

Natural Religion—Deism

Norman Hampson notes that, with the splintering of the Church in the Reformation, and with the pressure of looking at everything in terms of the new cast of mind, churches began making concessions in their teachings. "When the churches were prepared for so many concessions, and seemed encumbered rather than sustained by such dogma as they retained, there was a tendency for the educated to drift by easy stages from Christianity to natural religion."{31} Natural religion, or Deism, was religion divorced from the supposed "superstition" of revealed religion such as Christianity. Human reason unaided by revelation, it was thought, could lead thinking men to the truth of God. Deism was a very basic, not highly elaborated theistic belief. God was "a kind of highest common denominator of the revealed religions." In fact, some thought all the major religions worship the same God!{32} Natural religion was the religion of all mankind. It was centered on man, and it bound all men to a common moral law. Living right counted more than right doctrine. As Pope said,

> For Modes of Faith let graceless zealots fight;
> He can't be wrong whose life is in the right.{33}

Apologetics

The need to prove the truth of Christianity would scarcely have crossed the mind of a medieval preacher.{34} "The known unbelievers of Europe and America before the French Revolution," says Turner, "numbered fewer than a dozen or two."{35} Now the possibility of an intellectually grounded atheism was very real. Fear of unbelief prodded Christian apologists into action.

There were four possible responses to problems created for belief by the many new ideas: to be ignorant of them, to firmly reject new ideas, to accept the new thinking but keep religion autonomous, and to recast Christian beliefs in terms

of the new ideas. The latter was the route Deists and others took. “Reason and observation gave always the most certain knowledge of any reality that lay outside our minds,” says Turner. “Belief for its own good must therefore be fitted to the new cast of mind.”{36}

Some, like the Quakers, believed that belief in God eluded rationality. “On the contrary, the rationalizers insisted, belief in God was entirely reasonable and plausible,” says Turner. “And they trimmed it accordingly where its reasonableness seemed shaky. They played down creeds in general and mysterious doctrines in particular. Truth could not be obscure. They repudiated the metaphysical flights of scholasticism, both Catholic and Protestant, in favor of common-sense arguments grounded in palpable reality. Truth must be plain to see. . . . The use of science soon became a phenomenally popular apologetic tool.”{37}

Morality assumed greater importance as a test of the truth of the faith. As secularization pushed religion more to the private sphere, “emphasis fell increasingly on inner religiousness rather than externalities of ritual. Cultivation of a clean conscience, then, seems to have become a more common test of inward sanctity, a measure of how close one stood to God.”{38} Religion grew more preoccupied with everyday behavior.

This was important in apologetics, because it allowed an escape from concerns about divisive doctrinal concerns and the uncertainties of new philosophy. It had universal appeal. Human nature and conscience worked like natural law: they revealed the moral law in us as natural laws showed God’s rational wisdom in nature. Turner comments:

> Ethics and physics confuted the atheist and confirmed the reasonableness of Christianity. The rational man demonstrated God and everything essential to religion . . . through the marks that Deity had left in this world, ready

> for reason and observation to discover. Only the fool stumbled into the pit of atheism or the mumbo-jumbo of mystery. . . . Good morals and a small clutch of plain, rational beliefs kept the Christian safe from unbelief and guided him to eternal reward.{39}

This attitude shaped the thinking of subsequent generations of apologists. Perhaps they did stave off atheism for a while. Turner tells us, "These believers . . . had come to terms with modernity and had refitted belief to sail in its waters. With much of the incomprehensibility and mysterious taken out of it, belief in God was now based more solidly in morality and rationality; that is, in tangible human experience and demonstrable human knowledge. Confusion and uncertainty, apologists might rationally hope, would now give way to a new confidence in reasonable and moral religion."{40}

Conclusion

In the Enlightenment, people were shaken by a new way of thinking that challenged the simple acceptance of tradition and religious authority, but their confidence was restored through science and technology. Today, people are shaken by the loss of *this* confidence. We are seeing now that putting our confidence in our own ability to understand our world and fix it provides a shaky foundation. The need today is for both a reminder that truth *can* be known—ultimately through God's revelation in Christ- -and modesty in our knowledge, which recognizes that we do not now, and never will, know everything.

Notes

1. For an overview of the shift in thought from the premodern to the postmodern, see Todd Kappelman, "The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge," Probe Ministries, 1998, available on Probe's Web site at www.probe.org/the-breakdown-of-religious-knowledge/.

2. Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (New York; Penguin, 1968), 21.
3. Quoted in Hampson, 21.
4. Hampson, 36.
5. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 14.
6. John Donne in Turner, 15.
7. Hampson, 25.
8. Cf. James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 15-16.
9. Hampson, 27.
10. Pope, quoted in Hampson, 38.
11. Hampson, 38.
12. Locke, quoted in Hampson, 40.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Ibid., 23.
15. Ibid., 35.
16. Turner, 11.
17. Ibid., 13.
18. Ibid., 12.
19. Hampson, 31.
20. Turner, 23.
21. Byrne, 11.
22. Hampson, 77.
23. Turner, 27.
24. Ibid., 38.
25. Ibid., 37.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Hampson, 76.
28. Turner, 2.
29. William Blake, quoted in Hampson, 94.
30. Turner, xii.
31. Hampson, 103.
32. Ibid., 104.
33. Alexander Pope, quoted in Hampson, 105.

34. Turner, 8.
35. Ibid., 44.
36. Ibid., 29.
37. Ibid., 29-30.
38. Ibid., 31.
39. Ibid., 32,33.
40. Ibid., 34.

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The Clash of Two Worldviews

November 4, 2001

The image of a plane slamming into the World Trade Center is indelibly imprinted in our minds. It was more than just an evil act—it was a horribly accurate illustration of the crash of two worldviews.

America works because it was built on the foundation of the Christian worldview, and because we have been richly blessed by God. But for the Arab world, much of it living a seventh-century lifestyle, trying to enter the modern world hasn't worked. Importing the goodies of America's prosperity—things like jet planes, e-mail and McDonald's—is easy. Importing what it takes to produce these things isn't. America is blessed with things we take for granted—a free market, accountability in our political systems, and the rule of law. These things work because they are based on a Christian worldview.

The founding fathers embraced the Christian beliefs in both the intrinsic value of the individual as God's image-bearer and the sinfulness of fallen man living in a fallen world. So they wisely set up checks and balances that allowed self-

expression and self-government to flourish while at the same time setting limits to restrain the sin nature. Our political system splits power between the executive, judicial and legislative branches. Our free market system results in the benefits of competition. America's political and economic systems work because they are based on a Christian worldview. The Islamic worldview doesn't see man as fallen and sinful, just weak, misled and forgetful of God. There is no room for individual freedom or expression, and we see this in the lack of development of Islamic science or technology or creativity.

The rule of law is such a part of America that many of us don't know what it is. It means we are a nation of laws rather than men; we are governed by laws rather than by individuals. It means no man is above the law. This comes from a biblical worldview that teaches all men are fallen creatures who cannot be trusted to govern well unless they submit to a transcendent authority. In an Islamic worldview, where there is no concept of separation of church and state, political leaders can and do demand submission to themselves. They ARE the law.

Many Muslim leaders hate the West because the decadent pleasures of Western culture are luring the faithful away from Islam. Of course, many Christians share this abhorrence for the culture's indulgence in immorality, pornography, sexual perversion and divorce. But regardless of whether it's the positive strengths that are a result of our foundational Christian worldview, or the negative worldly pleasures that result from abandoning it, our current war on terrorism is the result of a clash of worldviews. Which is why it won't be solved easily or anytime soon, and we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

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