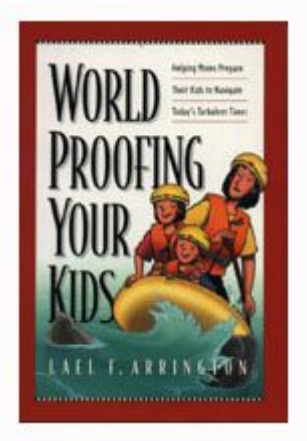
Worldproofing Our Kids



Lael Arrington has written a truly wonderful and exceptionally helpful book, *Worldproofing Your Kids*,{1} subtitled "Helping Moms Prepare Their Kids to Navigate Today's Turbulent Times." While she ostensibly wrote it for moms, any Christian parent who cares about helping his or her child develop a Christian worldview will enjoy it . . . and probably learn a thing or two (or three) in the process.

Lael has raised five questions that Christian parents would be wise to keep in mind, so we can relate them to what happens in our kids' world and in the world at large. In teachable moments, we can help our kids to think through and then *own* their answers to these questions:

1. *Who makes the rules?*
2. *How do we know what is true?*
3. *Where did we come from?*
4. *What are we supposed to be doing here?*
5. *Where are we going?*

The first question truly is foundational, not just to the other questions but to a basic Christian worldview: Who makes the rules?

Who Makes the Rules?

As a nation, we used to believe that God makes the rules, and through special revelation He told us what they are. But there has been a shift in the culture, and now there are a great many people who "do not believe that moral truth is universal and final. They do not believe in special revelation from God that lays down what is morally right and wrong for all people for all time. They believe that . . . ultimately, *man makes the rules*."{2}

We need to talk with our children about the consequences of each answer. When man makes the rules, when "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25), there are dreadful consequences. Sometimes the strong and powerful lord it over the weak and defenseless. Sometimes, when man makes the rules, everything breaks down into chaos. In *Worldproofing Your Kids*, Lael Arrington provides some wonderful activities to help develop the elements of a Christian worldview. For example, she suggests we watch a video of *Alice in Wonderland* with our kids, and she provides some excellent discussion questions to bring out the consequences of what happens when anybody and everybody can make the rules.

The bottom line to communicate to our kids is that much of the pain and suffering in this life is the result of making our own rules and violating God's.

But when we agree that God has the right to make the rules, and we follow them, life works the way it was designed. That's because there are good reasons for the rules. We need to give our kids the "whys" behind God's commands. In his book *Right from Wrong,*{3} Josh McDowell explains that God's loving heart makes rules designed to do two things: *protect* and *provide* for us. Our kids need to talk with us about *why* God doesn't want us to have sex before marriage—because purity protects our hearts and bodies, and purity provides a better sexual relationship within marriage. We need to talk to our kids

about *why* God tells us not to cheat and lie: because He is truth, and He knows that honesty and truth telling protects us from the pain of lies and provides for a peace filled life.

The goal is not just to teach our kids that God makes the rules, but to choose to submit to those rules because it's the right thing to do . . . and because it will make life work better.

How Do We Know What Is True?

Truth has taken a beating.

The Christian view of truth is a belief in truth that is true for all people at all times: absolute truth. The western world used to believe that all truth was God's truth. After the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which produced the byword "Man is the measure of all things," truth became secular. People believed that there is a body of real truth "out there" that can discovered through our reason. God was no longer a part of it.

Now we've moved to the postmodern view of truth. There is no such thing as "true truth," nothing that is true for all people at all times. Truth is now what I make it. Truth is whatever works for me. I create truth based on my feelings and experience.

So when we say things like "The only way to heaven is by trusting Jesus Christ," we get responses like, "You narrow minded bigot!" and "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me." And the classic postmodern response to just about anything: "Whatever!"

How do we help our kids know what is true?

First, we start with the foundational truth of our lives: God's Word. Remember, it's not just a body of truth, it is

alive and *active* (Heb. 4:12). We teach them the Bible's strongest truth claims: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1); people are infinitely valuable (Isa. 43:4); we have a sin problem and we need a savior (Rom. 3:22-24); Jesus claims to be God (Mark 14:62, among others {4}). Our kids need to know the truth before they can spot a lie.

Second, we teach them not to be afraid of criticism from those who do not believe in truth. Those who trumpet a postmodern worldview don't *live* by it, because it doesn't match the real world we live in. People who sneer at Christians for insisting that there is such a thing as absolute truth still stop at red lights, and they expect everybody else to do the same. They may say they decide what is true for them, but they don't try to pay for their groceries with a one-dollar bill and insist that, for them, it's worth a hundred dollars.

Third, we can strengthen our kids' confidence in the truth by teaching them logic. Begin with the simplest rule of logic: A does not equal non-A. Two opposite ideas cannot both be true. One can be true, they can both be false, but they can't both be true. Teach them to recognize red herrings, ad hominem arguments, and begging the question. Get Philip Johnson's terrific book, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*,{5} which has a great chapter called "Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector." He covers several false arguments.

Make it a game: "Spot the lie." Help them identify songs, movies, TV shows, advertisements, and articles that contain errors in logic or which go against biblical truth. Encourage them to recognize when people make up private meaning for words. Postmodern people who believe they can create their own truth say things like "Well, that depends on what the meaning of the word *is* is."

Truth matters to God, because He is truth. We need to teach our kids that it should matter to us as well.

Where Did We Come From?

I especially appreciated the way Arrington explained the importance of addressing the worldview question, "Where did we come from?" and the closely related question, "Who are we?" She points out that the way we answer these questions will also determine how we deal with the issues of animal rights, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

The "Where did we come from?" question isn't about sex and the stork; it's about creation and evolution. There are really only two basic answers. Either God made us, or we are an accident of the universe, the unplanned product of matter plus chance plus time.

If God made us, then we are infinitely valuable and intrinsically significant because God personally called each of us into existence. And not only are we valuable and loved, but every other human on the planet is equally valuable and loved. If evolution is true—defining evolution as the mindless, impersonal chance process that produces the stuff of the universe—then there is no point to our existence. We have no value because there is no value giver. Honest evolutionists recognize this: Cornell professor William Provine has said, "If evolution is true then there is no such thing as life after death, there is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning for life; there is no free will."{6}

We come hard wired from the factory with a longing for transcendence, desperately wanting to be a part of a larger story where we are beloved and pursued. We long to know that there is meaning to the world and to our lives. We come equipped with an innate sense of fairness and justice, concepts that have no meaning in a world without a God who is absolutely just and moral.

As parents, we need to tap into these basic longings to teach our children that only the creation story adequately explains

our legitimate thirst for relationship and for significance, for fairness and for transcendence. Then we can explain how the creation story (and I define story as "the way things happened," not "wishful thinking") also helps us understand other issues. We can teach our kids that it is not murder to use the flesh of animals for food and the skin of animals for clothing because animals are not like humans; only human beings are made in the image of God. We need to be good stewards of the animals that God made, but not elevate them to the same level as mankind—or devaluate man to the level of animals.

With an understanding that the creation story makes human life sacred and holy, we can teach our kids why it is wrong to kill babies before they are born (abortion), and after they are born (infanticide). We can teach them why it is equally wrong to kill the sick and the infirm when it is inconvenient for us (euthanasia).

Lael writes, "The common thread between evolution, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is the devaluing of human life and the way our culture has responded with options for disposal."{7}

What Are We Supposed to be Doing Here?

This section of Lael Arrington's book is called "Work, Leisure, and the Richer Life: I'm tired of paddling! Are we there yet? I'm bored!"

If we were to get an honest answer to the questions, "What are you supposed to be doing here? What's your purpose in life?," many high school and college students would probably say, "To have as good a time as possible." Our culture has raised the expectation that everything is supposed to be fun and entertaining. When my mother managed the layaway department of a Wal-Mart a few years ago, she said it was frustrating to

deal with the young employees. They came in feeling entitled to a paycheck but didn't want to work for it. Work wasn't "fun."

One of the greatest gifts we as parents can give our children is to cast a vision for their part in the larger story of life, one that involves a planning and purpose for their life, a calling from God to play their specially designed part. Our innate longing for transcendence means that we need to teach our children that they are a specially chosen part of the cosmic story of creation, fall, and redemption.

First, we need to teach by word and example that work has dignity and value. Work isn't part of the curse; it is part of God's perfect design for us. God gave Adam and Eve the responsibility of stewarding the garden before the Fall (Gen. 2). Part of our purpose in life is to be a difference maker, and work is part of how we do that. Whether one's work is to be a student, a fast food counter person, a house cleaner, a computer programmer, a mechanic, an administrator, or the really super important roles of mother or father, we are called to make a difference in the world and in God's kingdom.

Second, we can be a cheerleader for our children's God given gifts and talents. We need to be students of our children so that we can understand and appreciate the unique package that God put together. It helps to explore the various personality styles to help our kids grow in understanding of themselves and others. John Trent has written a book for children using animal motifs called *The Treasure Tree.*{8} Tim LaHaye{9} and Ken Voges{10} have explored the temperaments in slightly different ways, but they're both very helpful.

As we discern how our children are gifted with natural talents and abilities, we need to acknowledge those gifts and encourage our kids to develop them. If our children have trusted Christ as Savior, they have received a whole new set of spiritual gifts for us to be on the alert for. Of course,

we need to have a working knowledge of the gifts and learn how to spot them. God gives personality gifts, talent and ability gifts, and spiritual gifts to equip our children for whatever He has planned for their lives. What a privilege we have as parents to help them discover that they are called to a special place of service with a special set of equipment to do whatever it is God has called them to!

Where Are We Going?

The last part of the book *Worldproofing Your Kids* deals with citizenship—especially our heavenly citizenship. Another way to inspire confidence that the Christian worldview is true is to celebrate the fact that the best part of life is still ahead.

If we want our kids to recognize the larger, cosmic story of creation, fall, and redemption, then we need to point them continually to their future (Lord willing) in heaven, where we will finally experience real life, real riches, and real intimacy with God. We need to remind them that their choices on earth, for good and for bad, are determining their future in heaven. This is an important part of our roles as parents, of course—to teach them the wisdom that comes from considering both the long term and short term consequences of their choices.

Lael Arrington urges us to take our children to biblical passages and good books that give them a glimpse of where we are going. Help them catch the vision of what C. S. Lewis was describing:

"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."{11}

And speaking of C. S. Lewis, please do yourself and your children the favor of reading *The Chronicles of Narnia,* which is a series of books for children of all ages which will capture their hearts for the world to come and make them fall in love with the Lord Jesus.

Lael writes, “Perhaps we are now qualifying for what degree of power and authority we will be granted when we reign with Christ. The New Testament assures us that those who endure, those who serve now, will reign later (2 Tim. 2:12, Rev. 5:10, 22:5). We can challenge our [children], ‘Are we making daily decisions to serve, to develop our gifts and talents so we will be best prepared to reign with Christ?'”{12}

I love the story of the godly old woman who knew she was about to die. When discussing her funeral plans with her pastor she told him she wanted to be buried with her Bible in one hand and a fork in the other.

She explained, “At those really nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server or maybe the hostess would come by to collect the dirty dishes. I can hear the words now. Sometimes, at the best ones, somebody would lean over my shoulder and whisper, ‘You can keep your fork.’ And do you know what that meant? Dessert was coming!

“It didn’t mean a cup of Jell-O or pudding or even a dish of ice cream. You don’t need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep my fork, I knew the best was yet to come!

“That’s exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice.

“But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and say, ‘Why the fork?’

“That’s what I want you to say. I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because the best is yet to come.”{13}

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous assistance of Lael Arrington in the preparation of this article.

Notes

1. Lael Arrington, *Worldproofing Your Kids* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997).
2. Ibid, 42.
3. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right From Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Word Books, 1994).
4. See also the Probe article “Jesus’ Claims to be God” on the Probe Web site (www.probe.org).
5. Phillip E. Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
6. William Provine and Philip Johnson, “Darwinism: Science or Naturalistic Philosophy?” (videotape of debate held at Stanford University, April 30, 1994). Available from Access Research Network (www.arn.org).
7. Arrington, 179.
8. John Trent, *The Treasure Tree,* rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998).
9. Tim LaHaye, *The Spirit-Controlled Temperament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993).
10. Ken Voges and Ron Braund (contributor), *Understanding How Others Misunderstand You* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).
11. C. S. Lewis, *A Weight of Glory* (New York, Macmillan Co., 1949), 1-2.
12. Lael Arrington, personal correspondence with the author, February 26, 2000.
13. Jack Canfield, ed., *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Edison, NJ: Health Communications, Inc., 1996).

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The Old Testament Apocrypha Controversy – The Canon of Scripture

Don Closson analyzes the controversial issue of the Apocrypha, weighing the evidence on the canonicity of these books, affirming their value, but agreeing with the Protestant tradition which does not regard them as inspired Scripture.

The Source of the Controversy

A fundamental issue that separates Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions is the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Catholics argue that the Apocrypha was an integral part of the early church and should be included in the list of inspired Old Testament books. Protestants believe that the books of the Apocrypha are valuable for understanding the events and culture of the inter-testamental period and for devotional reading, but are not inspired nor should they be included in the canon, the list of books included in the Bible. This disagreement about which books belong in the Bible points to other differences in Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs about canonicity itself and the interplay between the authority of the Bible and the authority of tradition as expressed in the institutional church. Catholics contend that God established the church and that the Church, the Roman Catholic Church, both gave us the Bible and verified its authenticity. Protestants believe that the Scriptures, the writings of the prophets and apostles, are the foundation upon which the church is built and are authenticated by the Holy Spirit, who has been and is active in church congregations and councils.

The books of the Apocrypha considered to be canonical by the Roman Catholic Church are first found in Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to Old Testament authority F. F. Bruce, Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek around 250 B.C. because the Jews in that region had given up the Hebrew language for Greek.{1} The resulting translation is called the Septuagint (or LXX) because of legend that claims that seventy Hebrew scholars finished their work in seventy days, indicating its divine origins.

The books or writings from the Apocrypha that the Roman Catholic Church claims are inspired are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna (Daniel 13), and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). Three other Apocryphal books in the Septuagint, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 & 2 Esdras, are not considered to be inspired or canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.

This disagreement over the canonicity of the Apocryphal books is significant if only for the size of the material being debated. By including it with the Old Testament one adds 152,185 words to the King James Bible. Considering that the King James New Testament has 181,253 words, one can see how including the books would greatly increase the influence of pre-Christian Jewish life and thought.

This issue is important for two other reasons as well. First, there are specific doctrines that are held by the Roman Catholic Church which are supported by the Apocryphal books. The selling of indulgences for forgiveness of sins and purgatory are two examples. Secondly, the issue of canonicity itself is reflected in the debate. Does the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, recognize what is already canonical, or does the church make a text canonical by its declarations?

As believers who have called upon the saving work of Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation, we all want to know what is from God and what is from man. The remainder of this article will defend the traditional Protestant position against the inclusion of the Apocrypha as inspired canon.

The Jewish Canon

As we are considering the debate over the canonicity of the Old Testament Apocrypha or what has been called the "Septuagint plus," we will first look at evidence that Alexandrian Jews accepted what has been called a wider canon.

As mentioned previously, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) hundreds of years before Christ. Because the earliest complete manuscripts we have of this version of the OT includes extra books called the Apocrypha, many believe that these books should be considered part of the OT canon even though they are not found in the Hebrew OT. In effect, some argue that we have two OT canons, the Hebrew canon of twenty-two books, often called the Palestinian canon, and the larger Greek or Alexandrian canon that includes the Apocrypha.

F. F. Bruce states there is no evidence that the Jews (neither Hebrew nor Greek speaking) ever accepted a wider canon than the twenty-two books of the Hebrew OT. He argues that when the Christian community took over the Greek OT they added the Apocrypha to it and "gave some measure of scriptural status to them also."{2}

Gleason Archer makes the point that other Jewish translations of the OT did not include the Apocryphal books. The Targums, the Aramaic translation of the OT, did not include them; neither did the earliest versions of the Syriac translation called the Peshitta. Only one Jewish translation, the Greek (Septuagint), and those translations later derived from it (the Italia, the Coptic, Ethiopic, and later Syriac) contained

the Apocrypha.{3}

Even the respected Greek Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria never quotes from the Apocrypha. One would think that if the Greek Jews had accepted the additional books, they would have used them as part of the canon. Josephus, who used the Septuagint and made references to 1 Esdras and 1 Maccabees writing about 90 A.D. states that the canon was closed in the time of Artaxerxes I whose reign ended in 423 B.C.{4} It is also important to note that Aquila's Greek version of the OT made about 128 A.D., which was adopted by the Alexandrian Jews, did not include the Apocrypha.

Advocates of the Apocrypha argue that it does not matter if the Jews ever accepted the extra books since they rejected Jesus as well. They contend that the only important opinion is that of the early church. However, even the Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint differ in their selection of included books. The three oldest complete copies we have of the Greek OT include different additional books. Codex Vaticanus (4th century) omits 1 and 2 Maccabees, which is canonical according to the Roman Catholic Church, and includes 1 Esdras, which they reject. Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) leaves out Baruch. which is supposed to be canonical, but includes 4 Maccabees, which they reject. Codex Alexandrinus (5th century) includes three non-canonical Apocryphal books, 1 Esdras and 3 and 4 Maccabees.{5} All of this points to the fact that although these books were included in these early Bibles, this alone does not guarantee their status as canon.

Although some may find it unimportant that the Jews rejected the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, Paul argues in Romans that the Jews have been entrusted with the "very words of God."{6} And as we will see, the early church was not unanimous regarding the appropriate use of the Apocrypha. But first, let's consider how Jesus and the apostles viewed the Apocrypha.

Jesus and the Apostles

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that both Jesus and his followers were familiar with the Greek OT called the Septuagint. They also argue that when the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, they are quoting from the Greek OT. Since the Septuagint included the additional books of the Apocrypha, Jesus and the apostles must have accepted the Apocrypha as inspired scripture. In other words, the acceptance of the Septuagint indicates acceptance of the Apocrypha as well. Finally, they contend that the New Testament is full of references to material found in the Apocrypha, further establishing its canonicity. A number of objections have been raised to these arguments.

First, the claim that the Septuagint of apostolic times included the Apocrypha is not certain. As we noted previously, the earliest manuscripts we have of the entire Septuagint are from the 4th century. If Jesus used the Septuagint, it may or may not have included the extra books. Also remember that although the 4th century copies do include the Apocryphal books, none include the same list of books. Second, F. F. Bruce argues that instead of using the Septuagint, which was probably available at the time, Jesus and his disciples actually used the Hebrew text during His ministry. Bruce writes, "When Jesus was about to read the second lesson in the Nazareth synagogue . . . it was most probably a Hebrew scroll that he received."{7} It was later, as the early church formed and the gospel was carried to the Greek-speaking world, that the Septuagint became the text often used by the growing church.

Bruce agrees that all the writers of the New Testament made use of the Septuagint. However, none of them gives us an exact list of what the canonical books are. While it is possible that New Testament writers like Paul allude to works in the Apocrypha, that alone does not give those works scriptural

status. The problem for those advocating a wider canon is that the New Testament writers allude to, or even quote many works that no one claims to be inspired. For instance, Paul may be thinking of the book of Wisdom when he wrote the first few chapters of Romans. But what of the much clearer reference in Jude 14 to 1 Enoch 1:9, which no one claims to be inspired? How about the possible use of a work called the *Assumption of Moses* that appears to be referenced in Jude 9? Should this work also be part of the canon? Then there is Paul's occasional use of Greek authors to make a point. In Acts 17 Paul quotes line five from Aratus' *Phaenomena*, and in 1 Corinthians he quotes from Menander's comedy, *Thais*. No one claims that these works are inspired.

Recognizing the fact that the Septuagint was probably available to both Jesus and his disciples, it becomes even more remarkable that there are no direct quotes from any of the Apocryphal books being championed for canonicity. Jesus makes clear reference to all but four Old Testament books from the Hebrew canon, but he never directly refers to the apocryphal books.

The Church Fathers

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that the early church Fathers accepted the books as Scripture. In reality, their support is anything but unanimous. Although many of the church Fathers held the books in high esteem, they often refused to include them in their list of inspired books.

In the Eastern Church, the home of the Septuagint, one would expect to find unanimous support for the canonicity of the "Septuagint plus," the Greek OT and the Apocrypha among the early Fathers. However, such is not the case. Although the well-known Justin Martyr rejected the Hebrew OT, accusing it of attempting to hide references to Christ, many others in the East accepted the Hebrew canon's shorter list of authoritative books. Melito of Sardis, the Bishop of Sardis in 170 A.D.,

listed the OT books in a letter to a friend. His list was identical to the Hebrew canon except for Esther. Another manuscript, written about the same time as Melito's by the Greek patriarchate in Jerusalem, listed the twenty- four (see footnote on how the books were counted) books of the Hebrew OT as the canon.{8}

Origen, who is considered to be the greatest Bible scholar among the Greek Fathers, limited the accepted OT scriptures to the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon. Although he defends the use of such books as the History of Susanna, he rejects their canonicity. Both Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus limited the OT canon to the books of the Hebrew tradition. Athanasius, the defender of the Trinitarian view at the Council of Nicea, wrote in his thirty-ninth festal letter (which announced the date of Easter in 367) of his concern about the introduction of "apocryphal" works into the list of holy scripture. Although he agreed that there are other books "to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion," his list of OT agrees with the Hebrew canon. Gregory of Nazianzus is known for arranging the books of the Bible in verse form for memorization. He did not include the "Septuagint plus" books in his list. Eventually, in the 1600's, the Eastern Church did officially accept the Septuagint with its extra books as canon, along with its claim that the Septuagint is the divinely inspired version of the OT.

In the Latin West, Tertullian was typical of church leaders up until Jerome. Tertullian accepted the entire "Septuagint plus" as canon and was willing to open the list even wider. He wanted to include 1 Enoch because of its mention in Jude. He also argued for the divine nature of the *Sibylline Oracles* as a parallel revelation to the Bible.{9}

However, Jerome is a pivotal person for understanding the relationship between the early church and the OT canon. Having mastered both Greek and eventually Hebrew, Jerome realized

that the only satisfactory way to translate the OT is to abandon the Septuagint and work from the original Hebrew. Eventually, he separated the Apocryphal books from the rest of the Hebrew OT saying that "Whatever falls outside these (Hebrew texts) . . . are not in the canon."{10} He added that the books may be read for edification, but not for ecclesiastical dogmas.

Although Augustine included the "Septuagint plus" books in his list of the canon, he didn't know Hebrew. Jerome later convinced him of the inspired nature of the Hebrew OT, but Augustine never dropped his support for the Apocrypha. The early church Fathers were anything but unanimous in their support for the inspiration of the Apocrypha.

The Question of Canonicity

The relationship between the church and the Bible is a complex one. The question of canonicity is often framed in an either/or setting. Either the infallible Roman Catholic Church, having absolute authority, decides the issue, or we have absolute chaos with no possible guidance whatsoever regarding the limits of what is inspired and what isn't.

In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it."{11} Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles."{12} However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from

error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."{13}

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deutero-canon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?"{14} If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic.{15} Others contain extensive factual errors.{16} Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.{17}

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 43.
2. Ibid., 45.
3. Gleason L Archer., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 73.
4. Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p 99.
5. Archer, 73.
6. Romans 3:2 (NIV)
7. Bruce, 49.
8. Ibid., 72. Ezra and Nehemiah were often combined into one book, as were Lamentations and Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets.
9. Ibid., 87.
10. Ibid., 90.
11. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 187.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1999) 85.
15. Ibid., 32.
16. Unger, 109-111.
17. Geisler, 31

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The Uniqueness of Jesus

Is Jesus the only way to heaven? The Gospels lead to one of three conclusions about Jesus Christ: He was either a liar, a lunatic, or truly Lord.

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

A serious study of the Gospels leads a person to one of three conclusions about Jesus: He was (1) an evil lying villain, (2) a preposterously deluded madman, or (3) the Messiah, the Son of God. It is ludicrous for anyone who has studied His life to take the position that He was simply a good teacher. Only one of the three conclusions is a logical possibility.

Jesus made some outrageous claims no ordinary person would dare to make. First, He claimed to be God. His statements of equality with God meant He believed that He possessed the authority, attributes, and adoration belonging to God. He proclaimed authority over creation, forgiveness of sins, and life and death. He declared to possess the attributes of God. He emphatically stated that He was the source of truth and the only way to eternal life. Only Jesus among the significant leaders of history made such claims.

Here are a few of His outrageous claims. When “Philip said, Lord, show us the Father.’ Jesus answered. . . .Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'” (John 14:8-9). Once, when the Pharisees were disparaging Jesus and challenging Him, Jesus responded, ” I and the Father are one.’ Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’ We are not stoning you for any of these,’ replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man,

claim to be God'" (John 10:30-33). It is clear in these two statements, Jesus claimed to be God. His opponents clearly understood His declaration of equality with God.

When challenged by the scholars on His authority over Abraham, the father of the Jews, Jesus replied, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews said to Him, You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!' I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!'" (John 8:56-58). Jesus clearly believed He had existed two thousand years earlier and knew Abraham.

On the issue of life and death Jesus stated, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). Here He believed He had authority over life and death.

Finally, Jesus accepted and encouraged others to worship Him. Throughout the Gospels the disciples worshiped Jesus as seen in Matthew 14:33 and John 9:38. Jesus states in John 5:22-23, "Moreover, the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him." Jesus knew the Old Testament command "Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Matt. 4:10). Despite this, Jesus encouraged others to worship Him. Either He was mad (insane), or He was who He claimed to be and deserves our worship as God incarnate.

After reading such claims, it is impossible for anyone to say He was merely a good teacher. A man making claims like these must either be a diabolical liar, insane, or God incarnate. For the remainder of this essay we will be discussing which of these conclusions is most plausible.

A Villain, A Madman, or God Incarnate?

We have established at this point that Jesus made some astounding claims about himself. He presumed to be God, claimed the authority and attributes of God, and encouraged others to worship Him as God. If, however, Jesus was a liar, then He knew His message was false but was willing to deceive thousands with claims He knew were untrue. That is, Jesus knew that He was not God, He did not know the way to eternal life, and He died and sent thousands to their deaths for a message He knew was a lie. This would make Jesus history's greatest villain (and perhaps, a demon) for teaching this wicked lie. He would have also been history's greatest fool for it was these claims that lead Him to His death.

Few, if any, seriously hold to this position. Even the skeptics unanimously agree that He was at least a great moral teacher. William Lecky, one of Britain's most respected historians and an opponent of Christianity writes, "It was reserved for Christianity to present the world an ideal character which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love."{1}

However, it would be inconsistent and illogical to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher if some of those teachings contained immoral lies about himself. He would have to be a stupendous hypocrite to teach others honesty and virtue and all the while preach the lie that He was God. It is inconceivable to think that such deceitful, selfish, and depraved acts could have issued forth from the same being who otherwise maintained from the beginning to the end the purest and noblest character known in history.

Since the liar conclusion is not logical, let us assume He really believed He was God but was mistaken. If He truly believed He had created the world, had seen Abraham two thousand years before, and had authority over death, and yet none of this was true, we can only conclude that He was mad or

insane.

However, when you study the life of Jesus, He clearly does not display the characteristics of insanity. The abnormality and imbalance we find in a deranged person are not there. His teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, remain one of the greatest works ever recorded. Jesus was continually challenged by the Pharisees and lawyers, highly educated men whose modern day equivalent would be our university professors. They were fluent in several languages and were known for their scholarship of the Old Testament and Jewish law. They challenged Jesus with some of the most profound questions of their day and Jesus' quick answers amazed and silenced them. In the face of tremendous pressure, we find He exemplified the greatest composure.

For these reasons, the lunatic argument is not consistent. If both the liar and the lunatic options are not consistent with the facts, we must take a serious look at the third option: that Jesus was really God. The next question is, does He prove to have the credentials of God? Let us investigate this possibility.

Messianic Prophecy

Thus far we have learned that Jesus is unique among all men for the profound statements He made about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements, He must be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we will begin looking at the third alternative, that He really is God. First, we must see if He had the credentials for these claims.

One of the most incredible types of evidence is the testimony of prophecy. The Old Testament contains a number of messianic prophecies made centuries before Christ appeared on the earth. The fact that He fulfilled each one is powerful testimony that

He was no ordinary man. Allow me to illustrate this point using eight prophecies.

- *Genesis 12:1-3 states the Messiah would come from the seed of Abraham.*
- *Genesis 49:10 states that He would be of the tribe of Judah.*
- *2 Samuel 7:12 states that Messiah would be of the line of King David.*
- *Micah 5:2 states that He would be born in the city of Bethlehem.*
- *Daniel 9:24 states He would die or be "cut off" exactly 483 years after the declaration to reconstruct the temple in 444 B.C.*
- *Isaiah 53 states that the Messiah would die with thieves, then be buried in a richman's tomb.*
- *Psalm 22:16 states upon His death His hands and His feet would be pierced. This is quite significant since Roman crucifixion had not been invented at the time the Psalmist was writing.*
- *Isaiah 49:7 states that Messiah would be known and hated by the entire nation. Not many men become known by their entire nation, and even less are despised by the entire nation.*

Now calculate the possibility of someone fulfilling these by coincidence. Let us suppose you estimate there is a one in a hundred chance a man could fulfill just one of these prophecies by chance. That would mean when all eight are put together there is a 1/10 to the 16th power probability that they were fulfilled by chance. Mathematician Peter Stoner estimates 1/10 to the 17th power possibility that these prophecies were fulfilled by chance.{2} Mathematicians have

estimated that the possibility of sixteen of these prophecies being fulfilled by chance are about 1/10 to the 45th power.{3} That's a decimal point followed by 44 zeroes and a 1! These figures show it is extremely improbable that these prophecies could have been fulfilled by accident. The figures for fulfillment of the 109 major prophecies are staggering.{4}

Skeptics have objected to the testimony of prophecy, stating they were written after the times of Jesus and therefore fulfill themselves. However, the evidence overwhelmingly shows these prophecies were clearly written centuries before Christ. It is an established fact even by liberal scholars that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was completed in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in 250 B.C. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 contained the books of the Old Testament. Prophetic books like Isaiah were dated by paleographers to be written in 100 B.C.{5} Once again, these prophecies were confirmed to have been written centuries before Christ, and no religious leader has fulfilled anything close to the number of prophecies Jesus has fulfilled.

Confirmation of Miracles

Jesus made some profound statements about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements we must conclude Him to be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we began looking at the third alternative. If this is true, we must see if He has the credentials for His claims.

If a person claimed to be God, we would expect supernatural confirmations. We've already discovered the phenomenal record of prophecy. We would also expect Him to demonstrate authority over nature, sickness, truth, sin, and death. Jesus demonstrated such authority. One line of evidence is seen in His miraculous deeds.

Jesus' miracles demonstrated His power over creation, sickness, and death. He demonstrated His authority over nature in such miracles as walking on water (Matt. 14:25), multiplying bread (Matt. 14:15-21), and calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41). He demonstrated authority over sickness with His instantaneous healings over terminal diseases. His healings did not take weeks or days but were instantaneous. He healed blindness (John 9), paralysis (Mark 2), leprosy (Luke 17), and deafness (Mark 7). Such miracles cannot be attributed to psychosomatic healing but to one who rules over creation. Jesus displayed authority over death by raising the dead as recorded in Luke 7 and Matthew 9.

Some doubt whether these miracles occurred. Several view the miracle accounts as fictitious legends developed after the death of Christ. Philosopher David Hume argued that human nature tends to gossip and exaggerate the truth. Others argue that the miracle accounts were propagated in distant lands by the followers of Christ well after the events so that the miracle accounts could not have been verified due to distance and time.

There are several arguments against these attacks. First, the Bible has proven to be a historically reliable document. For more information on this, see the Authority of the Bible article. Second, legends and exaggerations develop when followers travel to distant lands well after the time of the events and tell of stories which cannot be confirmed. Legends usually develop generations after the death of the figure at which time it is impossible to verify any of the accounts since all available witnesses are not available. However, the miracle accounts of Jesus were being told in the very cities in which they occurred during the lifetime of Jesus and to those who witnessed the event(s). Those who witnessed the miracles were followers of Christ and His enemies. These eye witnesses were questioned carefully by those in authority. If any claims were exaggerated or distorted, it could have easily

been refuted. The New Testament with its miracle accounts could not have survived had not the accounts been true.

German scholar Dr. Carsten Theide and British scholar Dr. Matthew D'Ancona in their book *Eyewitness to Jesus* state their conclusion after a scientific investigation of a fragment from the Gospel of Matthew. The scientific evidence revealed that the book was written before A.D. 70, possibly as early as A.D. 30.{6} This reveals the fact that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, who were then able to judge the accuracy of such accounts, and they were unable to refute Jesus' miracles. None of the world's religious leaders performed the miracles Jesus did.

Authority Over Death

A study of the claims of Jesus make it clear that He was professing to be God. It is then impossible to conclude that He was merely a good teacher. In light of these claims, one must conclude that He is a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. We investigated to see if His claim to be God was substantiated. Clearly the record of prophecy proved there was something unique about Him. The miracles He performed remain unequaled by anyone, but Jesus' greatest demonstration of authority is revealed in His power over sin and death.

There are many religions and religious leaders who claim to know what lies beyond the grave. The problem is, no one has demonstrated authority over the grave or confirmed their belief of what happens after death. Only Jesus demonstrated authority over death. All men have died, but Jesus is alive.

During His three-year ministry, Jesus exercised His authority over death by raising several people from the grave. Most notable is the account of Lazarus found in John 11. Here even in the face of His enemies, Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. If this were not a historical account, this story would not have survived since it was recorded and propagated in the

very city where it occurred, in the lifetime of the witnesses, both followers and enemies of Christ. The enemies of Christianity could have easily refuted the account if it were not true. The fact is they could not refute it.

In regard to His own death and resurrection, the Old Testament predicted the death of the Messiah in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. However, it also predicts the resurrection in Psalm 16:8 11 and refers to the eternal reign of the Messiah. The only way to reconcile these verses is a resurrected Messiah.

Jesus himself made these predictions in regard to His resurrection: "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up" (John 2:19). In Mark 8:31 Jesus taught "that the son of Man must suffer many things . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again." In John 10:18 Jesus states, "I have authority to lay it (My life) down, and I have authority to take it up again." In these passages, Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection. Either Jesus was mad, or He really had the authority over death.

Jesus' resurrection proved His authority over sin and death. For a more detailed defense of the historicity of the Resurrection, check the Probe perspective on the Resurrection titled, Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

At the beginning of this study we examined the claims of Christ. We realized only three conclusions were possible: liar, lunatic, or Lord. Since the first two were inconceivable, we needed to see if Christ could further confirm His credentials of being God. We discovered that His claims were confirmed by the record of prophecy, His miracles, and the Resurrection.

Jesus proves himself to be unique among all men.

> *Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and*

all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this "One Solitary Life."{7}

Notes

1. William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1903), p. 8.
2. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), p. 167.
3. Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, Ill.:Victor Press, 1990), p. 116.
4. Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Books, 1996), p. 176.
5. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 365-66.
6. Peter Carsten Theide and Matthew D'Ancona, *Eyewitness to Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 163.
7. Anonymous, "One Solitary Life," quoted in Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?*, p. 68.

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God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

Introducing Open Theism

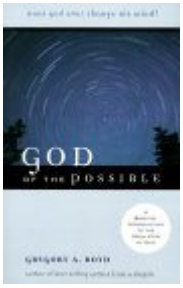
What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped

out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.{1}

Boyd asks the question: "Does God ever change His mind?" He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he

believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. "The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it," says Boyd.{2}

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we'll consider Boyd's ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we'll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

The Classical View of God's Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate

an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.{4}

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.{5} Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.{6} Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.{7} So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.{8}

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be

three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."{9} Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."{10} If God *did* know everything in advance, then our

decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.{11}

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."{12}

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."{13} Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold, unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."{14} If God doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.{15}

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences Himself.{16} Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.{17}

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between

persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

Notes

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

2. Ibid., 31.

3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. Emergence, 52-55.

4. Boyd, 32.

5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology: A Compendium (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.

6. Boyd, 127.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 120.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 126.

12. Ibid., 125.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 44.

15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.

16. Erickson, 206-209.

17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

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What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,{1} both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract

principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."{2}

When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

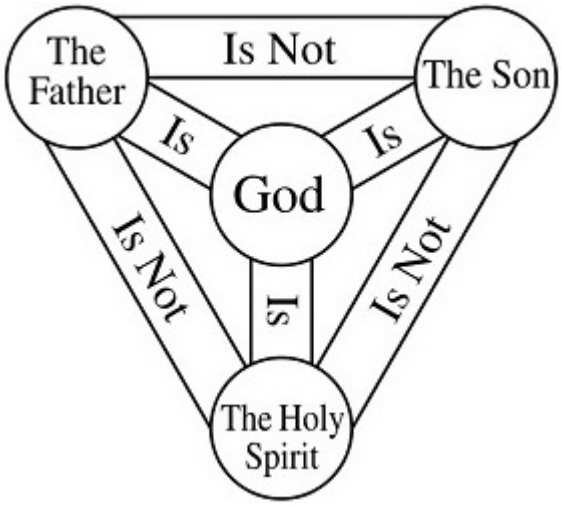
In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the "secret handshake" of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that's a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, "It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is."{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful

to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." Another handy definition is this, "Although not itself a biblical term, 'the Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three 'persons' who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God."{5}



Even though it's short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let's settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?{6} As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this "god with a small g" has always

existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, "When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level."{7}

The pantheist's commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. "Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning."{8}

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, "Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God."{9}

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it's the only view that adequately describes God's work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of "God in one person" suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of

God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, “God is love,” (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, “In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not ‘big enough’ to be God.”{10}

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God’s mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, “a sacrifice of atonement” (NIV) and God the Father who is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, “[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God’s judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious.”{11}

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus’ words, “when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He “works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God’s absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe.”{12}

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than

amazing.

The Trinity and the "Everydayness" of Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

> *Entire sections of the modern church are functionally "non-Trinitarian." I did not say "anti-Trinitarian," for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship.{13}*

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the

opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He writes, "Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?"{14} Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name" (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you" (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney's words, "Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son's merits, influence, and reputation"{15}—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14).{16}

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let's consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally

sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”{17} The foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it’s important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. “Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father.”{18}

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It’s only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God’s revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, “Loving the Trinity,” *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, “Trinity” in *Evangelical Dictionary of*

Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see Worldviews by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview* (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, God: *Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.
18. Ibid.

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A Conversation with an Atheist

Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

About Our Dialogue

The Conversation Begins

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a program I'd written titled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.{1} She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.{2} Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to do that. "I think that if I had faith it would be like his," she says, "but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky."

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There's no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, "What is it about Christianity

that turns you off to it?" And she replied, "I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea." Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me "to explain more personally His relevance." What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

Basic Elements of Stephanie's Atheism

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie's atheism. The first is *reason,* which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as "aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love." It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, "I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded."{3}

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, "I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind."

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science,* which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us "objective, investigable knowledge," she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge "scientistic." There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science

to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."{4}

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

Insufficient Evidences

The Evidentialist Objection

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection." She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19th century scholar who wrote,

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."{5} Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.{6} But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."{7} If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for

God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary. By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: "It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon's interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated."{8} Science can't tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can't tell whether there *are* ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist's paintbrush and pigments and canvas, it can't measure beauty. *Clifford's Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford's maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe¾and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it

leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of "properly basic" beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.{9} Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact, the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn't an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don't require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford's maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).{10} Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under

appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're wrong.

Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

> Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can

> struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

> You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her

response was, “That’s OK. . . . I’m not looking for universal or eternal meaning.”

It’s hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer’s advice and “take the roof off;”{11} in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn’t a nihilist (one who believes that everything is thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an “optimistic humanist” to use J. P. Moreland’s term.{12} She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot¾adult versions of children’s fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.{13} Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who

acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that it's true God doesn't *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, "I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that's a natural development." She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don't, "they are absurd."

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn't direct me to. The golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that's* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn't change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping

with the progress of revelation{14}), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn't necessarily stand behind Stephanie's chosen morality, but God—and the universe¾stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, "I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.' . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair." I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that "atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards." I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I noted earlier, Stephanie doesn't want to "champion naturalism." She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with "a frail pragmatism" and even "a certain moral relativism" because she doesn't have "the absolute word of God to fall back upon." She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I'll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let's turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, "I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, 'an impersonal universe offers no rewards,' but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and

fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean." Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientistic approach. Heaven isn't something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in "the vagaries of the Christian Heaven," I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one's life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn't lie, and the resurrection of Jesus. We also have the witness of "eternity set in our hearts." (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn't a "cross your fingers" kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ's kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called "fruit that remains" (John 15:16), or the work which is "revealed with fire." (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We're still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don't want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called "methodological naturalism" is risky.{15} That's the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is

of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn't necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of "junk DNA" and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really "junk"? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, "We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose." Finally, Dembski says, "An object that is designed functions within certain constraints." So, for example, "If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us. Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer."{16}

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

Moral Problems with Theism

It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered

prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of "the inefficacy of prayer." She has concluded that "hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!"

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to 1jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin."{17}

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be

fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is.* But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

> The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel by Joseph Heller, "While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation." . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?{18}

So, while it's true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

Biblical Morality

Moral Character of God

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The "Old Testament God" is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.{19} The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie's favorite biblical enigma. She asked

if I would take a knife to my son's throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn't worthy of being called good.

Let's look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."{20} In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "*we* will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites

destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

> They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God's part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). "Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way." They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). "Thus God waited for the 'cup of iniquity' to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, 'might know that He was the Lord.'"{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that "the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God." In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften

that command at all. But when in God's own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn't change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn't leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

Its Harmful Effects on Us

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can't trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, "The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one's] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That's where the real harm to society can creep in." She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding it own rightness encourages "excesses," such as "holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for their own good." She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. "Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it," she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like "terrorism" bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some "excesses" to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God's goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It's also wrong to let religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."{23} What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no

such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can "see" God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we'll wait to see what happens.

Notes

1. Rick Wade, *The Relevance of Christianity* (Probe Ministries, 1998).

2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.

3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.

4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

5. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.

6. Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," in *Faith and*

Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.

7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind,* rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, S*caling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html.

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil? (Probe Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

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Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion

Christianity: Religion of Hate?

In the last decade, it has become increasingly common to hear the accusation that Christians are hateful. In the United States, this type of comment has become the mantra of homosexual rights groups who are outraged that Christians would claim that homosexuality is a sin. With the murder of homosexual Matthew Shepherd in 1999, Christians were blamed for creating a hostile environment and provoking violence against homosexuals by claiming that homosexuality is immoral. Homosexuals often scoff at Christians who say, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," insinuating that the two cannot be separated. Consequently it has become increasingly difficult to dialogue with these individuals due to their suspicion that Christians, in spite of their expressions of love, actually *hate* homosexuals.

Of course, accusations of hatred against Christians are nothing new. This charge was leveled at the first century church as a preamble to the state sanctioned persecution that occurred off and on throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth century. But today many of those who accuse Christians of hate take their marching orders from their understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche, who called Christian priests "the truly great haters in world history . . . likewise the most ingenious haters."{1} Nietzsche was absolutely contemptuous of Christians and pulled no punches when it came to his polemic against them. He is infamous for his announcement of the death of God in his writings and was known to be Hitler's favorite philosopher. Consequently, Christians typically distance themselves from Nietzsche due to his hostility to the Christian worldview.

But while Nietzsche's writings are often blasphemous, this does not mean that Christians should ignore his insights. Rather than dismissing his critique, we should ask ourselves if he may have something to say to the church. Perhaps we need

to be reminded that Jesus' harshest words were directed toward those who put on an impressive outward show of religiosity, but whose hearts were not right with God. We need only read Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three to see that some of His most severe rebuke is found there, directed towards His own. Unfortunately, one major school of interpretation has determined that the seven churches represent different ages of church history, of which the first five have already transpired. This interpretation tends to distance us from the Lord's rebuke, as if evangelicals are the praised church of Philadelphia, and the lukewarm Loadiceans are the apostate church of the end-times. It is no wonder that we reject the blistering critique of someone like Nietzsche when we comfort ourselves by assuming that the "gentle" Jesus would never speak harshly to us!

Just as Jesus spoke out against those who hid behind the façade of religion, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is based on the assertion that Christianity is not motivated by love, but rather by a hateful envy, driven by the need for power over others. And since Nietzsche is the inspiration for many today who call Christianity hateful, it would seem that listening to Nietzsche's critique is especially important. By understanding Nietzsche, we can be better equipped to respond to the accusations of hatred against Christians that have become common today. Furthermore, we may find that Nietzsche, rather than being just a cranky despiser of religion, actually has a prophetic message for contemporary Christians.

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota made headlines by claiming that religion is for weak-minded people who are incapable of getting through life without some sort of crutch. The governor quickly apologized for any offense he may have caused, but his claim that religion is just a crutch for the weak is certainly not new. Karl Marx said essentially the same thing by calling

religion the opiate of the masses. However, no one has been more creative than Nietzsche when it comes to a critique of Christianity. His contention is not just that Christians are weak, but that Christianity itself was the vehicle by which the weakest members of society were able to overcome the dominance of those more powerful than them. Thus the very basis of Christianity is said to be hatred for, and envy of, the rich and the powerful.

It is important to recognize that Nietzsche was a trained linguist with a deep interest in the history of words. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche claims that the concept of *good* originally was a synonym for nobility and therefore referenced the noble aristocrats of ancient times. At the same time, those who belonged to the lower strata of society, those who were originally referred to as plain and simple, were designated as *bad*.{2} Nietzsche's point in all this is that when we look at the original sense of the words *good* and *bad* they were descriptive of one's social status, rather than being a moral evaluation.

However, it is Nietzsche's contention that this all changed when priestly religions such as Judaism and Christianity were able to attain power in society. He suggests that not only did they transform the conceptions of good and bad to include a moral dimension, but that they went even further by creating the concept of evil as well. Out of their hatred and envy for the ruling elite, and their desire for power, the priests transformed the word *good* to refer to the poor and lowly members of society and had the audacity to refer to the rich and the powerful as evil! When we read the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see how Nietzsche indicts Christianity for this reversal. It is not the rich and the powerful who are blessed, but the weak and the poor! Nietzsche believed that Christ's praise of the powerless was an act of subversion, an attempt by the weak to exact revenge against the elites of society for their natural superiority. As far as

Nietzsche was concerned, there was no other way to account for how Christianity had become a major world religion than to suggest that Christianity created concepts such as sin and guilt to cut the rich and powerful down to size.

It was Nietzsche's suspicion that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others. He found Christianity to be especially insidious because, rather than admitting that it desires power over the minds of all humanity, it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. But in fact, Scripture tells us that Christ willingly became powerless so that human beings might know the power of God. Christ set aside the prerogatives of deity to become a servant; He became poor that we might become rich. Perhaps Nietzsche is correct in arguing that human relationships are often governed by the desire for power. However, it is clear that in the encounter between God and man, it is the infinite God who submits Himself to the limitations of humanity.

Sin and Guilt as Human Conventions

One of most disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is the nihilistic worldview of many of our youth. The horrible assault on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 revealed how deeply alienated many young people are from society. It is apparent that Harris and Kleybold felt entirely justified in killing their classmates out of a sense of outrage at how they had been treated by the more popular students at school. Incredibly, they were convinced that their heinous act would be glorified in Hollywood and entertained themselves by asking who would portray them in the blockbuster movies that would follow their killing spree. What is especially disturbing is the question of how such sociopathic tendencies arise in a prosperous Colorado suburb.

According to Scripture, human beings are sinners in need of redemption. All of us stand guilty before a holy God and only the shed blood of the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can

cleanse us from the power and penalty of our sin. Therefore, a guilty conscience can be a positive thing in that it enables us to respond to the gospel message. But in contemporary culture, as Senator Daniel Moynahan has stated, there has been a tendency to "define deviancy down." Acts that were considered immoral or even criminal in the recent past have been accepted as normal, so that our threshold of what is morally acceptable continues to lower. Additionally, in our therapeutic society anything that makes a person feel better about herself is exalted, while feelings of guilt and shame are discouraged. In a certain sense, this thinking is part of the heritage of Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche, human beings developed a sense of guilt out of the]financial relationship between a creditor and a debtor.{3} Nietzsche maintained that the similarity between the German words for *guilt* and *debt* were indications that financial obligations were the original source of a sense of obligation toward others. Of course, a debtor is obligated to his creditor, and in ancient times the debtor would pledge some form of collateral in case he were unable to repay the debt. This of course gave the creditor power over the debtor, even to the extent that he could inflict cruelty upon the debtor to extract his "pound of flesh." According to Nietzsche, this gave rise to the idea that suffering could balance out our debts and is the basis for the biblical account of Christ's work of the cross.{4} The problem arose when human beings somehow internalized the original sense of financial obligation, so that what had previously been simply a matter of external punishment evolved into the guilty conscience.

Nietzsche's contention was that a feeling of guilt is destructive and prevents us from acting in accordance with our noble instincts. But the question is, How can human beings be noble without acknowledging their own limitations? The denial of a sense of guilt, the denial of conscience, inevitably

leads to pride and the arrogant assumption that we are accountable to no one. While it would be unjust to suggest that Nietzsche encouraged acts such as the Columbine shootings, it is also clear that Nietzsche recognized that a sense of guilt leads us to conclude that we are accountable to someone else for our actions. Wanting to insure that human beings did not conclude that they were accountable to God for their actions, his only option was to conclude that the guilty conscience is a figment of our imaginations. Unfortunately, incidents such as Columbine are not.

God is Dead! Now We Can Really Live!

Who can forget the famous cover of *Time* magazine, which asked the question "Is God Dead?" Many people may have dismissed such an absurd question, as if it makes sense to say that the eternal God could pass away. But that is precisely the point. In Nietzsche, the announcement of God's death is simply to force people to acknowledge that they no longer care about God. He has been removed from His throne by the advancements of science and technology and has little to say to modern man. According to Nietzsche, God choked to death on pity.{5}

On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that *we* have killed God. It is not that these statements are contradictory, but that Nietzsche viewed "God" as a concept, not as a person. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra setting out to deliver the startling news that God is dead, but his first words are directed to the sun. While to the casual reader this may seem absurd, this is actually a vivid reference to the philosophy of Plato. And according to Nietzsche, Christianity is nothing more than Plato's philosophy dressed up as a religion. The whole point of Nietzsche's philosophy is to deliver us from the teachings of Christianity, which he called the "Platonism of the people." Nietzsche believed that both Plato and Christianity overemphasized the distinction between human existence and the

realm of eternity; in order to effectively demolish Christianity, he felt it necessary to destroy the foundations of Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato lived in an era that was concerned about the implications of change. Because Plato denied that we can truly know anything that is changeable, he conceived of an ideal world populated by what he called "forms." The forms were eternal and unchanging models for the objects that we experience every day, and Plato's concern was with how we can come to know these forms. Part of his answer to that question was his conception of the ultimate form, the form of the Good. The form of the Good is what illumines the soul's understanding, so Plato utilized the sun as the most fitting symbol for this form. Later, some Christian theologians baptized Plato's philosophy by claiming that the forms were ideas in the mind of God, but what critics like Nietzsche find so disturbing is that both Plato and Christianity seem to place more emphasis on an afterlife than on day-to-day existence. It was his desire that we recognize the value and pleasures of this life, but to do so he completely rejected a transcendent world. The question is whether he is justified in claiming that Christianity denies the validity of this life by focusing solely on a heavenly afterlife.

While it is true that a variety of movements within Christianity, such as the monastics, have devalued earthly existence as a mere prelude to the afterlife, this is a far cry from claiming that Christianity *itself* is the religious equivalent of Plato's other-worldly philosophy. St. Augustine, who was a devoted student of Plato, claimed that Plato was a valuable tool that helped lead him to Christianity. But the one thing that he found lacking in the Platonists was the teaching of Scripture that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh. God himself has come to live amongst us! The incarnation of God in Christ means that human existence is vitally important. God himself lived as a man. Rather than

devaluing life, Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Nietzsche the Prophet?

As we close our examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking and its consequences for Christian faith we should note his conviction that terms such as *sin, morality,* and *God* are simply human conventions with no reality supporting them. He hoped to overcome these concepts by taking us back in history to discover how we came to these "erroneous" beliefs. According to Nietzsche, the concept of a God who rewards believers with eternal life has devalued human existence. Consequently, he attempted to devalue any belief associated with a transcendent being or an afterlife and emphasized overcoming Christian standards for morality. His ideal was the *overman*, unique individuals who were not restrained by what society conceived as right or wrong. The problem is that, when taken to its extreme, his philosophy has been utilized to justify a wide variety of crimes. In 1924, two students at the University of Chicago justified their murder of a twelve-year-old boy by quoting from Nietzsche. And of course, Hitler assumed that Nietzsche's philosophy called for world domination by Germany and the ruthless elimination of all its enemies. Many therefore assume that Nietzsche was some type of proto-Nazi.

Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for Hitler and was not an anti-Semite as some have claimed. These accusations are common, but cannot be the result of actually reading his works. What we can say is that Nietzsche attempted to replace the good news of Jesus Christ with a pseudo-gospel based on the assertion that Christianity was a fabrication that has hindered mankind for centuries. The Bible tells us that Christ has set us free through His atoning work on the cross; Nietzsche insists that such a story is what has placed us in bondage. Like many utopians, Nietzsche denied the inherent

sinfulness of the human heart and insisted that the idea of God was what had prevented mankind from reaching its highest potential. Obviously, evangelical Christianity and Nietzsche are in severe disagreement on most subjects.

Still, Nietzsche does have a message for the Christian community. Considering Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity, that would seem to rule him out as a mouthpiece for God. However, we also note that pagan kings such as Cyrus of Persia (Ezra 1:1-4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-35) were spokesman for God in particular instances. So to paraphrase John 1:46, "Can anything good come out of Nietzsche?"

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of reading Nietzsche is his emphasis on our motives. Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees for disguising their hardened hearts with outward acts of service and sacrifice, Nietzsche demonstrates keen awareness of the subtle ways we can deceive even ourselves. One of Nietzsche's favorite accusations is that Christians can speak about loving their enemies, but they have also been known to comfort themselves with thoughts of those same enemies roasting in eternal hell-fire. Perhaps then one of the reasons Christians avoid reading Nietzsche is that he can make us feel so uncomfortable. Do we give to the Church out of love for God or perhaps simply for the tax deduction? What about our service in the church? Are we motivated by the applause of man, or by our love for God? The Christian cannot read Nietzsche without feeling challenged on these questions. Rather than simply dismissing his radical critique of Christianity, the church would be well-served to understand how Nietzsche has influenced modern culture, and in turn to reflect on how we can demonstrate the love of God to a dying world.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1967), 33.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 27-28.
3. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 62.
4. Ibid., 65.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

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Putting Beliefs Into Practice

Rick Wade uncovers and analyzes three major ingredients to help students produce a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God: convictions, character, community.

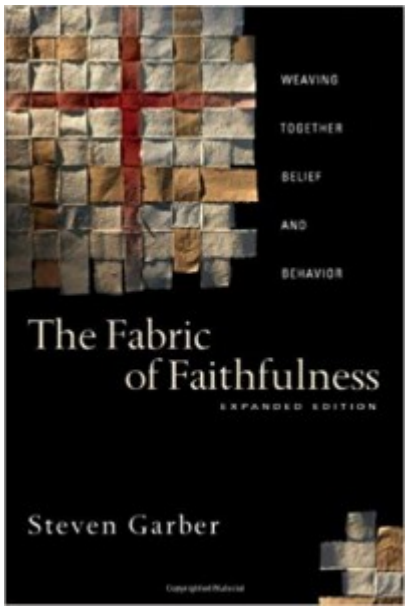
Why Do You Get Up in the Morning?

"Why do you get up in the morning?"

That's a question Steven Garber likes to ask college students. It might sound like a rather silly question at first. We get up in the morning because there are things to be done that won't get done if we lie in bed all day. But Garber wants to know something more important. What are the things that lie ahead of us that make it worth getting out of bed? What do we intend to accomplish? Are our ambitions for the day worthy ones? More importantly, How do they fit with our view of life, or our worldview?

Wait a minute. This is getting rather heavy. Should the activities of our day—routine and non-routine—be tied somehow to a worldview? This implies that our basic beliefs are

significant for the way we live, and, conversely, that what we do with our days reflects what we really believe.



Steven Garber believes both are true. Garber is on the faculty of the American Studies Program in Washington, D.C. In 1996 he published a book titled *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years.* {1} The purpose of this book is to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By *moral meaning* he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. What do our lives mean on a moral level? "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life? This question and its answer are the heart of this book." {2}

In this article we will look at the three significant factors to which Garber draws attention, factors that form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community. {3}

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable." {4} College students no longer have Mom and Dad looking over their shoulders; their youth pastors are back home; their friends and other significant adults are not around to keep those boundaries in place that once defined their lives. They are on their own, for the most part. *In loco parentis* was the place the university once held in students' lives: "In the place of the parents." No more. One writer says tongue in cheek that the new philosophy is *non sum mater tua*: "I'm not your mama."{5}

Even worse for Christian students, when they are on campus they don't find themselves on their own in a perfectly innocuous environment that seeks to continue in the students' lives what their parents began. Professor J. Budziszewski, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, says that "The modern university is profoundly alienated from God and hostile to Christian faith." {6} Thus it is that in the college environment Christian students are really put to the test. Given the loss of the support group at home, on the one hand, and the input of new ideas and activities that are antithetical to their faith, on the other, how will they not only stand firm in their faith, but actively move forward in developing a life that is consistent with what they believe?

Before considering what Garber says about convictions, character, and community, let's think about beliefs and practice in general.

Telos and *Praxis*

Many students think of the college years as their chance to finally break loose of the constraints of home and have a good time—a *really* good time—before settling down into the hum-drum routine of adult life. They see education simply as a means for getting good jobs. Thus, academics are too often governed by the marketplace. Students who try to discuss ideas and issues outside the classroom are often put down by their peers. The attitude seems to be to do just enough to get the grades, and let the party begin! {7}

Is this why we send our children to college? Just to get good grades to get good jobs? For the Christian student this question is ever so vital.

Hear how Jacques Ellul expands the message of Ecclesiastes chapter 12:

> Remember your Creator during your youth: when all

> possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! Then it is not too late for your salvation, but too late for you to serve as the presence of God in the midst of the world and the creation. You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you. {8}

Students don't understand the pressures that will come with career and marriage and family and all the other ingredients of adult life. The time to think, choose, and begin acting is when the possibilities still lie open before them.

Steven Garber uses two Greek words to identify the two aspects of life which must be united: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the Greek word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It isn't just the end in the sense of the final moment in time; it is the goal, the culmination, the final form that gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal that defines all human life is the time when Christ will return and reign forever and believers will be conformed to His image completely. This *telos* or goal should govern our actions. In fact, the adjectival form of the word, *teleios*, is the word Paul and James use when they call us to be perfect or complete (Col. 1:28; James 1:4).

Garber's second word, *praxis*, means action or deed. {9} In Matthew 16:27, for example, Jesus speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is whether we are ordering our *praxis* in keeping with our *telos*. Does the end toward which we are heading as children of God define the activities of our lives?

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there *is* no *telos*, no end toward which

everything is moving. Westerners no longer even look for the perfection of man, as in modernism. College students are told in so many different ways that their lives are either completely open—the "freedom" of existentialism, or completely determined—in which case freedom is an illusion. So either there is nothing bigger than us to which we might aspire, or we're just being carried along by forces we can't control. In either case, how are students to make any sense of their lives in general or their studies in particular? Emotivism and pragmatism rule. We choose based upon our own feelings or desires—which can change frequentlyor in accordance with what works or both. And what "works" is what gives them the best chance in the marketplace. Is there anything bigger that should give students a focus for their studies and their lives?

Convictions—The Foundation of Basic Beliefs

Foundational to how we live is the body of basic beliefs we hold. I noted earlier Garber's use the words *telos* and *praxis* to refer to the end toward which we are moving and the practice or deeds of our lives. The matter of *telos* or end points to the content of our faith, or our worldview, which forms our basic convictions. Let's look more closely at the importance of convictions.

When we think of our end in Christ we're thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Here's how J. B. Lightfoot puts it. It speaks of "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ." {10} It is the *telos* or end of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

This isn't mere philosophical or theological speculation, however, for we have the reality of the historical presence of God in Christ on earth which gave evidence of the truth of these beliefs of a sort we can grasp. This is so important in our day of religious pluralism, an approach to religion that abstracts ideas from various religions in the search for ultimate truth. Christianity isn't an abstract set of beliefs; it is true religion grounded in objective, historical events. Historical events and revealed meanings provide the objective ground for our convictions. And these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live.

It is critical, then, for students to understand Christian doctrine thoroughly and its meaning and application to the various facets of life.

This whole matter of doctrine grounded in historical fact is troublesome in itself today because there has been a rift created between fact and value. Facts are those things that can be measured scientifically. All else, especially religion and morality, is considered value; it is subjective and varies according to personal preference, culture, etc. Students are told that their most basic beliefs are "noncognitive emotional responses or private subjective preferences." {11} They are told that it doesn't matter whether what they believe is objectively true; all that matters is whether it is meaningful to them. But as Garber notes, "What is real?' informs What is true?' which informs What is right?'" {12} Our beliefs and actions find their ultimate meaning—apart from how we might feel about them—in the fact that they are based on reality.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who, among other things, served on President Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach was raised in a Christian home, but sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says:

> Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true. {13}

Likewise, when some of Jesus' disciples left Him, He asked those who remained if they would leave also. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). It was what Peter believed that kept him close to Jesus when circumstances called for retreat.

What we believe gives meaning to our existence; it provides an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and it gives broad direction for our lives. For a student to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know what Christianity is, and be convinced that it is "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put it: the really true.

Character—Living One's Beliefs

So convictions grounded in reality are significant for the way we live. But convictions alone aren't enough in the Christian life. They need to be matched by character that is worthy of the One who redeemed us, the One whom we represent on earth. It can be hard for students, though, to feel encouraged to develop Christ-like character given the attitudes of people all around them.

Steven Garber sees the TV show *Beavis and . . .* (well, that other guy) as symptomatic of the attitude of many young people today. He quotes a Harvard student who described the show this way: "Two teenaged losers . . . mindlessly watch videos, and they snicker. . . . [They] help us understand what the next century will be like. The founding principle will be nihilism. Rampant disregard for other living things . . . will be in.

Taking responsibility for one's actions will be out. . . . It's proof that there is a whole new generation out there that completely understands all of this society's foibles. And can only snicker." {14}

How shall we inspire our students to develop character in keeping with their convictions so they don't end up "getting all A's but flunking life," in Walker Percy's words? {15} How can we turn them away from the destructiveness of a nihilistic worldview in which nothing has meaning?

Having abandoned the Christian *telos* our society is characterized by "an ethic of emotivism, one which asserts that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference.'" {16} This goes back to the split between fact and value I spoke of earlier. Values are person-centered; they have no force beyond the individual's power to live them out and impose them on others. They aren't grounded in anything more ultimate than an individual or at best a particular society.

What has this gotten us? We're free to construct our reality any way we wish now that God is supposedly dead. But what have we done with our freedom? Henry Grunwald, former ambassador to Austria and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc., said this:

> Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed¾the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing. {17}

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A

universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a "cosmos without purpose," says Garber, "is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world." {18} It provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways, and who will call us to give an account in the end.

Bob Kramer was a campus leader for student protest at Harvard in the '60s. He wanted to bring about social change, but when he discovered in his classes that his basic beliefs about right and wrong, truth and justice were wrong, he dropped out. "There was no real foundation for what I believed," he says, "beyond that I believed it." {19}

If we accept that Christianity does indeed provide direction and firm foundations for the development of character in the individual, still we must ask how that development comes about. Can we expect students to just read the Bible and go out and live Christianly? For Steven Garber, this leads us to consider the importance of a mentor, a person under whom the student can learn how to live as a person of high moral character.

Garber tells the story of Grace Tazelaar who graduated from Wheaton College and then went into nursing. She then taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, "This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service. At the core of her teacher's life, Grace recalls, I saw much love amidst trauma.'" "Those lessons," says Garber, "cannot be taught from a textbook; they have to be learned from a life." {20}

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that, "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." {21} Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

The development of moral character was once an integral part of education. Christians must once again seek the development of the whole person in education. That means, on the one hand, finding adults who are willing to become mentors for students, and, on the other, drawing students out and interesting them in forming significant relationships with adults, whether they be relatives, professors, pastors, or perhaps professionals in their fields of interest. This involves more than teaching students how to have quiet times. The kind of pietistic Christianity which pulls into itself to simply develop one's own spiritual experience won't do if we're to have an impact on our world. Students need to be shown how to apply the "do not's" in Scripture, but also how to find the "do's" and . . . well, do them. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves in Jesus' name to a world in need using their own gifts and personalities.

Community—Finding and Giving Support

If convictions provide our foundations and our instructions, mentors can be our guides as we see in them how those convictions take shape in someone's life. Community, the third element, then provides a context within which to practice . . . our practice!

Garber notes that "community is the context for the growth of convictions and character. What we believe about life and the world becomes plausible as we see it lived out all around us. This is not an abstraction, though. Its reality is seen in

time and space, in the histories and circumstances of real people living real lives." Working together with other believers "allows for young people to make stumbling and fumbling choices toward a *telos* whose character is not altogether known at the time; it also allows for grace, which is always a surprise." {22}

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? When Donald Guthrie, who has worked with the Coalition for Christian Outreach, was asked what makes it hard to connect beliefs with life's experience, he replied, "The cynical nature of our culture, as it permeates the lives of people around me—and me. And only community can stand against that." {23} "We discover who we are," he continued, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning." {24} Bob Kramer, whom we spoke of earlier, said he and his wife believed it was important to surround themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He says, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you live than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself." {25} "My best friend's teachers were my best friends. We were all trying to figure this out together." {26}

The Christian community, if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self- sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid.

During the university years, if they care about the course of their lives, students will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. "Choices about

meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about." {27} Says the Preacher, "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth."

Convictions, character, community. Three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God. Students who would put together *telos* and *praxis*, the goal of life and the practice of life, must know what they believe and determine to live in accordance with those beliefs. They should consider finding a mentor and learning from that person how one weaves faith and life. And they should embed themselves in a group of Christians equally committed to living the Christian life fully. "Somewhere, deep in the mysteries of how we learn to see and hear, and what we learn to care for and about, there is a place where presupposition meets practice, where belief becomes behavior," says Steven Garber. {28}

Let me encourage you to get a copy of Steven Garber's book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, both to read yourself and to give to your students. It's published by InterVarsity Press. You might also want to consider how to apply what it says in your church. Let's make it our common aim to help our young people be and live the way God intended.

Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.

5. David Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community: In Place of In Loco Parentis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 1994), 140, cited in William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.
6. J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999), 25.
7. For an alarming look at the attitude of students and especially the importance of alcohol on campus, see Willimon and Naylor, chaps. 1 and 2.
8. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.
9. Colin Brown, s.v. "Work," by H.C. Hahn.
10. Colin Brown, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown.
11. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1983), 18, quoted in Garber, 53.
12. Garber, 56.
13. Ibid., 122.
14. Joe Matthews, "Beavis, Butthead & Budding Nihilists: Will Western Civilization Survive?" *Washington Post*, October 3, 1993, p. C1, quoted in Garber, 40-41.
15. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 32, 93, quoted in Garber, 43.
16. Alister McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11-12, quoted in Garber, 50-51.
17. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75, quoted in Garber, 54.
18. Garber, 59.
19. Ibid., 61.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Inge Jens, ed. *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), xi, quoted in Garber, 167.

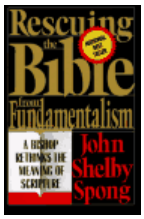
22. Garber, 146.
23. Ibid., 147.
24. Ibid., 147.
25. Ibid., 149.
26. Ibid., 152.
27. Ibid., 175.
28. Ibid., 174.

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Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.

	Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.{1} The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to "be all that one can be."{2} Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without "religion." In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of "religious" sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

Bishop Spong's View of Scripture

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong's view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there

is “no such thing as ‘objective history’.”{3} The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, “The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God.”{4} In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that “We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us.”{5} He adds that “We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . .”{6}

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-nine pages of Spong’s “rescuing” focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, “Why bother?” If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what’s in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God’s supernatural interaction or

intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

A Sex Driven Gospel

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.{7} Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a

religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system."{8} Spong writes, "So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed." In other words, we are to ignore what Paul actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong's liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."{9} When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring "I'm not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . ." Spong's reply doesn't seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

Who Is Jesus?

Let's turn our focus to Spong's view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ's authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God's only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that "the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated."{10} All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and

eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul "quite obviously was not a trinitarian."{11} Christ is "the hero of a thousand faces" and "many things to many people."{12} "All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ."{13} He adds that, "A Christianity that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying."{14} What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spongs finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is remarkably predictable. He writes, ". . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ."{15} This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God's wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a "terrifying, barrier- free love."{16}

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus' life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong's views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is "self-realization."{17}

Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.{18} Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."{19} It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is

really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the Jesus Seminar and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."{20} Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFranscisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.
19. Ibid.
20. Spong, 4.

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See Also *Probe Answers Our Email*:

"Bishop Spong is a Hero!"

Soren Kierkegaard and the Supremacy of Faith

Kierkegaard—The Radical Reformer

One of the most difficult barriers to evangelism today is the difficulty in defining what it *is* to be a Christian. Some consider attendance in a Christian church to be sufficient, while a vast number of people simply associate "Christian" with being a good, moral person. And in a country such as the U.S., there are even those who assume American citizenship is

an adequate basis for being a Christian. This is what happens when people reject the Bible for its understanding of divine truth.

However, this predicament is not unique to the 21st century. In the mid-nineteenth century, one of the great defenders of Christianity confronted this very problem in his native Denmark. Disturbed by the culture's definition of Christianity, Sören Kierkegaard dedicated his life to a defense of Christianity that was truly a way of life rather than simply the acceptance of a church creed. Kierkegaard was especially disturbed that the Danish church had accepted its definition of Christianity from the famous German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. For Hegel, rationality was the supreme virtue, and Christianity was the ultimate religion because the doctrine of the Trinity was in accordance with his own understanding of logic: God the Father and Jesus Christ are identical since each is God, and yet they are different from one another since they are distinct individuals. This apparent "difference" is then reconciled by the fact that God has made Himself known through the Holy Spirit's birthing of the church. Hegel found this definition of the Trinity to be the mirror image of his own understanding of logic, in which opposites are to be synthesized in order to come to a fuller understanding of reality.

Hegel's reference to Christianity as the ultimate religion led many to assume that he was a strong advocate of Christianity. However, for Hegel, "reality" was only what could be experienced in the here and now. He rejected any suggestion that there was an afterlife or otherworldly existence. And while he referred to Christianity as the ultimate religion, he also declared that religion was subordinate to his own philosophy. Because Christianity is based on faith, Hegel taught that to be rational we must go beyond religion and turn to Hegel's own philosophy if we are to understand ultimate reality.

It was Kierkegaard's self-appointed task to confront Hegel's thinking and to present the supremacy of the Christian faith to the Danish people. His brilliant apologetic effort was so ridiculed, however, that for years after his death Danish parents admonished their children "don't be a Sören" in order to warn them about foolish behavior. In order to understand why, it will be necessary first to examine Kierkegaard's life and strategy, after which we will discuss his well-known works.

Kierkegaard and His Pseudonyms

Few people today know the story of Morris Childs. Childs, who as a young man was a high ranking official in the American communist party, became an informant for the FBI against communism in the early fifties. Because of his background, Childs moved easily among communist leaders, both in the United States and abroad, for nearly thirty years. And yet, due to the highly secretive nature of his mission, very few of his fellow American citizens realized that Morris Childs was a true patriot. Instead, he was considered by many to be a communist, a traitor. Far from being a traitor, Childs had risked his life in order to pass on highly sensitive information to his American spy-masters.

Like Childs in the political realm, Sören Kierkegaard has been misunderstood by many of his fellow Christians. Partly due to the influence of Francis Schaeffer, who blamed Kierkegaard for the modern trend toward irrationalism, there are those who assume that Kierkegaard was a secularist. However, part of the genius of Kierkegaard was his desire to present the truth of Christianity from the perspective of a non-Christian. Consequently, many of his books were written under various pseudonyms.

When reading Kierkegaard under one of these pseudonyms, you can never assume that everything Kierkegaard is writing is his own belief. Instead, he typically introduces himself to the

reader as a non-believer who, for whatever reason, is interested in religious questions. It was Kierkegaard's belief that the most important religious and ethical questions could not be communicated directly. He therefore developed a method famously known as "indirect communication" in which he hoped to establish common ground with the non-believer. By not introducing himself as a Christian, he sought an audience for the gospel that he would not have gained otherwise.

Another aspect of Kierkegaard's life that must be taken into account is his tragic relationship with a young woman named Regina Olsen. Kierkegaard deeply loved Regina, and for a short period of time they were engaged to be married. But Kierkegaard forced himself to break off the engagement. And the fact that they never married was, for Kierkegaard, the true proof of his love for her. Much of his motivation for the break-up was based on the melancholy nature he had received from his father. Kierkegaard's father, Michael, had cursed God as a young boy due to his miserable working conditions and was haunted all his life by the suspicion that he had committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. Not only did Kierkegaard hope to spare Regina from his own depression, he also attempted to demonstrate in his writings that his rejection of Regina was motivated by love, just as God's love for us was revealed through His rejection of His own beloved Son.

Kierkegaard on the Incarnation

The Weigh-Down Workshop, a weight loss program developed by Gwen Shamblin, is based on the admirable thesis that those who would like to lose weight should replace their excessive hunger for food with hunger for God. But recently it became evident that Shamblin's Christian beliefs are unorthodox. According to Shamblin, the doctrine of the Trinity is a "man-made" formula that arose in a polytheistic society in order to "make sure no one mistakenly believed that Christians

worshipped several gods." Shamblin is under the mistaken belief that trinitarian teaching suggests that Jesus and God are the same person, when in fact the biblical teaching is that Jesus (the Son) and God (the Father) are distinctive persons, identical in their divine essence.

In one of Kierkegaard's more famous works, *The Philosophical Fragments,* it is suggested that the doctrine of the Incarnation is indeed the ultimate paradox: How can it make sense that God became man? But Kierkegaard wrote this work under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus. Johannes Climacus does not claim to be a Christian, but he is at odds with the philosophy of Hegel, who sees faith as a stepping-stone to the ultimacy of reason. Climacus is intent on demonstrating that, if Hegel is right, then Christianity is completely wrong. But, if Hegel is wrong, then it is possible to understand that doctrines such as the Incarnation reveal the logical superiority of Christian faith.

Climacus begins by asking if the truth can be learned. He therefore questions what kind of teacher would be capable of bringing the truth to human beings who do not know the truth. Since all people are created by God, it must have been God who made it possible for human beings to know the truth. But since people don't know the truth, then only a divine being could teach human beings the truth. And what is it that prevents people from knowing the truth? It is sin. And since the teacher must bring people out of this sinful condition in order for them to understand truth, this teacher should also be seen as a savior, a deliverer. But, to be a savior for humans, this divine being must also become human as well, which is illogical to those who have not received the truth. All this is to suggest, however, that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is perfectly consistent for the person of faith.

Yet, since Climacus is writing in response to the philosophy of Hegel, he points out that God becoming a man is absurd, a

paradox beyond human comprehension. For this reason many readers assume that Kierkegaard *himself* thought that the Incarnation was absurd, when in fact he was emphasizing that mere human reason was insufficient to be a Christian. For Kierkegaard, biblical faith takes us beyond what human reason can possibly conceive.

Kierkegaard on Abraham

Mohammed Ali was one of the greatest fighters of all time. After he began calling himself "The Greatest," that title quickly became associated with Ali. We often debate about the greatness of athletes and politicians, but rarely in our pluralistic society do we present our position on the greatness of religious figures. And yet that is exactly what Kierkegaard did in his work, *Fear and Trembling,* written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio. Johannes is fascinated by Abraham and desires to understand how anyone could be as great as Abraham.

Johannes is intrigued by a seeming paradox: How is it that Abraham is routinely recognized to be one of the greatest figures in all of Scripture, the father of faith, and yet at the same time we must admit that he was a split-second away from murdering his own son? If anyone were to emulate Abraham in modern times, we would do our best to prevent such a heinous act. Yet, at the same time preachers routinely preach on the greatness of Abraham. Johannes concludes that what made Abraham so amazing was his belief that he would receive Isaac back in *this* life, rather than just in the life everlasting. Still, this leads to the conclusion that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac. How, then, can we exalt Abraham as a great man?

Johannes proceeds to examine the purpose behind Abraham's action. This is where, once again, Kierkegaard is intent on skewering the philosophy of Hegel. According to Hegel, the individual was to subordinate his own desires for the broader good of the institutions of family, civil society, and the

state. Consequently, it would have been Hegel's position that Abraham's actions were both ludicrous and evil since they did not conform with the ethical standards of a civilized people. As a result, Johannes forces us to ask whether the philosophy of Hegel or the teaching of Scripture is to take priority.

Johannes' own unique answer is that, in order to understand Abraham's relationship to God, there must be what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." *Teleology* is the idea that everything has a purpose. For Hegel, the ultimate purpose of ethics was for the members of a state to share the same moral virtue, under which circumstances a nation can be joined together with a common bond. But for Johannes, the individual takes priority over the state. Abraham's actions were guided by a higher purpose than simply conforming to the ethical norms of society. His faith enabled him to obey God to the point of becoming a murderer, while believing that God would raise his beloved son from the dead. Who then is greater? Hegel, or Abraham? Human reason gives one answer, but Christian faith another.

Kierkegaard and Truth

"What is truth?" The famous question of Pilate to Jesus has become even more pertinent today, as truth has become more a matter of pragmatic concerns rather than having any correlation with reality. Biblical Christianity is grounded on the truths of God's Word, and the loss of truth in a postmodern society has had a devastating effect on the influence of the gospel. Thus, on first glance it can be disturbing that Kierkegaard claimed that all truth is subjectivity. To conclude this article, I want to explore exactly what he means by this phrase.

We must be very careful when reading someone as elusive as Kierkegaard. Once again, it is Johannes Climacus who is the spokesman for the claim that all truth is subjectivity. Climacus is again attacking the philosophy of Hegel, who

claimed that it was possible for human beings to possess absolute knowledge through carefully analyzing human existence. Climacus questions how it is possible to have absolute certainty in this life, especially when we consider the wide variance between philosophers since ancient times. More importantly, the claim of absolute knowledge seems to mean that, for the Christian, knowing is more important than believing. Since faith, as in the case of Abraham, often times requires patience and endurance before reaching its fulfillment, there is a qualitative difference between faith and knowledge. According to Climacus, only God can have absolute knowledge. This is important to consider when pondering the assertion that all truth is subjective, for Climacus is making a major distinction between the human realm and the divine realm.

One of Kierkegaard's major emphases in his writings was that the Christian life is more than simply believing in orthodox doctrine. He himself was passionate about his relationship with Christ, and was disgusted by the apathetic attitude of many church-goers. Consequently, when Climacus claims that all truth is subjectivity he is claiming that human beings must appropriate the truth of whatever they believe if it is truly to take hold of their lives. There can be no such thing as a passive, disinterested Christian. Neither should the Christian confuse knowledge, which can never be complete in this life, with the life of faith. The Christian must make a leap of faith, in the sense that faith always involves risk. Climacus therefore hoped to contrast the willingness to believe and *live out* the truths of Christianity against the acceptance of philosophical systems that did not require any personal commitment. This, for Climacus, is the difference between subjective and objective truth.

As we have seen, it is very easy to construe Kierkegaard as a non-Christian if we do not take into consideration his strategy of indirect communication. Hopefully this brief

introduction to Kierkegaard’s thought will stimulate many to a fuller appreciation for this important Christian thinker.

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