

The Christian Canon

Don Closson provides a summary of the process through which the books of the New Testament were selected by the early church fathers and brought down to modern times. Understanding how the books of the Bible were determined according to important criteria of authorship, wide acceptance and relevance, help give us an appreciation for the wonder of God's word to us.

The Early Church Fathers

Some Christians are unnerved by the fact that nowhere does God itemize the sixty-six books that are to be included in the Bible. Many believers have at best a vague notion of how the church arrived at what we call the Canon of Scripture. Even after becoming more aware, some believers are uncomfortable with the process by which the New Testament Canon was determined. For many, it was what appears to be a haphazard process that took far too long.

Furthermore, whether talking with a Jehovah's Witness, a liberal theologian, or a New Ager, Christians are very likely to run into questions concerning the extent, adequacy, and accuracy of the Bible as God's revealed Word.

In this essay, therefore, we will consider the development of the doctrine of the Scriptures in the Church Age. Just how did the church decide on the books for inclusion in the New Testament? This discussion will include both how the Canon was established and the various ways theologians have viewed the Bible since the Canon was established.

The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been

disciples of the Apostle John. Doctrinal authority during this period rested on two sources, the Old Testament (O.T.) and the notion of Apostolic succession, being able to trace a direct association to one of the Apostles and thus to Christ. Although the New Testament (N.T.) Canon was written, it was not yet seen as a separate body of books equivalent to the O.T. Six church leaders are commonly referred to: Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 37). Although these men lacked the technical sophistication of today's theologians, their correspondence confirmed the teachings of the Apostles and provides a doctrinal link to the N.T. Canon itself. Christianity was as yet a fairly small movement. These Church Fathers, often elders and bishops in the early Church, were consumed by the practical aspects of Christian life among the new converts. Therefore, when Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the early church did not have a technical theology of the Trinity, they are basically right. There had been neither time nor necessity to focus on the issue. On the other hand these men clearly believed that Jesus was God as was the Holy Spirit, but they had yet to clarify in writing the problems that might occur when attempting to explain this truth.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt about the authority of the O.T., often prefacing their quotes with "For thus saith God" and other notations. As a result they tended to be rather moralistic and even legalistic on some issues. Because the N.T. Canon was not yet settled, they respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. The books of Hermas, Barnabas, Didache, and 1 and 2 Clement were all regarded highly (Hannah, *Lecture Notes for the History of Doctrine*, 2.2). As Berkhof writes concerning these early Church leaders, "For them Christianity was not in the first place a knowledge to be acquired, but the principle of a new obedience to God" (Berkhof, *History of the Christian Church*, 39).

Although these early Church Fathers may seem rather ill-prepared to hand down all the subtle implications of the Christian faith to the coming generations, they form a doctrinal link to the Apostles (and thus to our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as a witness to the growing commitment to the Canon of Scripture that would become the N.T. As Clement of Rome said in first century, "Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 11).

The Apologists

After the early Church Fathers comes the era of the Apologists and Theologians, roughly including the second, third, and fourth centuries. It is during this period that the Church takes the initial steps toward establishing a "rule of faith" or Canon.

During this period both internal and external forces caused the church to begin to systematize both its doctrines and its view of revelation. Much of the systemization came about as a defense against the heresies that challenged the faith of the Apostles. Ebionitism humanized Jesus and rejected the writings of Paul, resulting in a more Jewish than Christian faith. Gnosticism attempted to blend oriental theosophy, Hellenistic philosophy, and Christianity into a new religion that saw the physical creation as evil and Christ as a celestial being with secret knowledge to teach us. It often portrayed the God of the O.T. as inferior to the God of the N.T. Marcion and his movement also separated the God of the Old and New Testaments, accepting Paul and Luke as the only writers who really understood the Gospel of Christ (Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 54). Montanus, responding to the gnostics, ended up claiming that he and two others were new prophets offering the highest and most accurate revelation from God. Although they were basically orthodox, they exalted martyrdom and a legalistic asceticism that led to their rejection by the

Church.

Although the term *canon* was not used in reference to the N.T. texts until the fourth century by Athanasius, there were earlier attempts to list the acceptable books. The Muratorian Canon listed all the books of the Bible except for 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, and James around A.D. 180 (Hannah, Notes, 2.5). Irenaeus, as bishop of Lyon, mentions all of the books except Jude, 2 Peter, James, Philemon, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. The Syriac Version of the Canon, from the third century, leaves out Revelation.

It should be noted that although these early Church leaders differed on which books should be included in the Canon, they were quite sure that the books were inspired by God. Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, argues that, "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God [Christ] and His Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 12). By the fourth century many books previously held in high regard began to disappear from use and the apocryphal writings were seen as less than inspired.

It was during the fourth century that concentrated attempts were made both in the East and the West to establish the authoritative collection of the Canon. In 365, Athanasius of Alexandria listed the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament which he regarded as the "only source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the religion of the Gospel" (Hannah, Notes, 2.6). While Athanasius stands out in the Eastern Church, Jerome is his counterpart in the West. Jerome wrote a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola in 394 listing just 39 O.T. books and our current 27 N.T. ones. It was in 382 that Bishop Damasus had Jerome work on a Latin text to standardize the Scripture. The resulting Vulgate was used throughout the Christian world. The Synods of Carthage in 397 and 418 both confirmed our current twenty-seven books of the NT.

The criteria used for determining the canonicity of the books

included the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in general, and specifically Apostolic origin or sanction, usage by the Church, intrinsic content, spiritual and moral effect, and the attitude of the early church.

The Medieval and Reformation Church

In the fourth century Augustine voiced his belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the N.T. text, as did Justin Martyr in the second. This meant that every part of the Scriptures, down to the individual word, was chosen by God to be written by the human writers. But still, the issue of what should be included in the Canon was not entirely settled. Augustine included the Book of Wisdom as part of the Canon and held that the Septuagint or Greek text of the O.T. was inspired, not the Hebrew original. The Church Fathers were sure that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were still not in agreement as to which texts should be included.

As late as the seventh and eighth centuries there were church leaders who added to or subtracted from the list of texts. Gregory the Great added Tobias and Wisdom and mentioned 15 Pauline epistles, not 14. John of Damascus, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete systematic theology, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitution and 1 and 2 Clement to the N.T. One historian notes that "things were no further advanced at the end of the fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.3). This same historian notes that although we would be horrified at such a state today, the Catholicism of the day rested far more on ecclesiastical authority and tradition than on an authoritative Canon. Thus Roman Catholicism did not find the issue to be a critical one.

The issue of canonical authority finally is addressed within the bigger battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. In 1545 the Council of Trent was called as a

response to the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church. As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself. It proposed that all the books found in Jerome's Vulgate were of equal canonical value (even though Jerome himself separated the Apocrypha from the rest) and that the Vulgate would become the official text of the Church. The council then established the Scriptures as equivalent to the authority of tradition.

The reformers were also forced to face the Canon issue. Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Luther was troubled by four books, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, and though he placed them in a secondary position relative to the rest, he did not exclude them. John Calvin also argued for the witness of the Spirit (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.7). In other words, it is God Himself, via the Holy Spirit who assures the transmission of the text down through the ages, not the human efforts of the Catholic Church or any other group. Calvin rests the authority of the Scripture on the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote in his Institutes,

Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.

He goes on to say, "We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and

judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate.”

Modern Views

Although the early church, up until the Reformation, was not yet united as to which books belonged in the Canon, they were certain that the books were inspired by God and contained the Gospel message that He desired to communicate to a fallen world. After the Reformation, the books of the Canon were widely agreed upon, but now the question was, Were they inspired? Were they God breathed as Paul declared in 2 Timothy 3:16?

What led to this new controversy? A great change began to occur in the way that learned men and women thought about the nature of the universe, God, and man's relationship to both. Thinking in the post-Reformation world began to shift from a Christian theistic worldview to a pantheistic or naturalistic one. As men like Galileo and Francis Bacon began to lay the foundation for modern science, their successes led others to apply their empirical methodology to answering philosophical and theological questions.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), although a believer, began his search for knowledge from a position of doubt, assuming only that he exists because he is able to ask the question. Although he ends up affirming God, he is able to do this only by assuming God's existence, not via rational discovery (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.2). Others that followed built upon his system and came to different conclusions. Spinoza (1633-77) arrived at pantheism, a belief that all is god, and Leibnitz (1646-1716) concluded that it is impossible to acquire religious knowledge from a study of history.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) took another step away from the notion of revealed truth. He attempted to build a philosophy using only reason and sense perception; he rejected the idea

that God might have imprinted the human mind with knowledge of Himself. Another big step was taken by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Attempting to protect Christian thinking from the attacks of science and reason, he separated knowledge of God or spirit and knowledge of the phenomenal world. The first was unknowable, the second was knowable. Christianity was reduced to a set of morals, the source of which was unknowable by humanity.

The 1800s brought with it the fruit of Kant's separation of truth from theology. German theologians built upon Kant's foundation resulting in man becoming the source of meaning and God fading into obscurity. Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) replaced revelation with religious feeling, and salvation by grace with self-analysis. The Scriptures have authority over us only if we have a religious feeling about them first. The faith that leads to this religious feeling may come from a source completely independent of the Scriptures.

David Strauss (1808-74) completely breaks from the earlier high view of Scripture. He affirms a naturalistic worldview by denying the reality of a supernatural dimension. In his book, *Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus"), he completely denies any supernatural events traditionally associated with Jesus and His apostles, and calls the Resurrection of Christ "nothing other than a myth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.5). Strauss goes on to claim that if Jesus had really spoken of Himself as the N.T. records, He must have been out of His mind. In the end, Strauss argues that the story we have of Christ is a fabrication constructed by the disciples who added to the life of Christ what they needed to in order for Him to become the Messiah. Strauss's work would be the foundation for numerous attacks on the accuracy and authenticity of the N.T. writers, and of the ongoing attempt, even today, to demythologize the text and find the so-called "real Jesus of history."

What Now?

As one reviews the unfolding story of how the Canon of Christian Scriptures has been formed and then interpreted, we can get a fairly accurate picture of the changes that have taken place in the thinking of Western civilization. Two thousand years ago men walked with Christ and experienced His deity first hand. God, through the Holy Spirit, led many of these men to compose an inspired account of their experiences which revealed to the following generations what God had done to save a fallen world. This text along with the notion of Apostolic succession was accepted as authoritative by the emerging Christian population, and would eventually come to dominate much of Western thought. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation rejected the role of tradition, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, when it had begun to supersede the authority of Scripture. Later, the Enlightenment began the process of removing the possibility of revelation by elevating man's reason and limiting our knowledge to what science could acquire. This was the birth of Modernism, attempting to answer all the questions of life without God.

The wars and horrors of the twentieth century have crushed many thinkers' trust in mankind's ability to implement a neutral, detached scientific mind to our problems and its ability to determine truth. As a result, many have rejected modernism and the scientific mind and have embraced a postmodernist position which denies anyone's ability to be a neutral collector of truth, which might be true for everyone, everywhere. This has left us with individual experience and personal truth. Which really means that truth no longer exists. What does this mean for the theologian who has accepted the conclusions of postmodern thinking? One theologian writes, "At the present, however, there is no general agreement even as to what theology is, much less how to get on with the task of systematics. . . . We are, for the most part, uncertain even as to what the options are" (Robert

H. King, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 1-2).

This same theologian argues that Christian theology can no longer rest upon metaphysics or history. In other words, neither man's attempt to explain the causes or nature of reality nor the historical record of any texts, including the Bible can give us a sure foundation for doing theology. We have the remarkable situation of modern theologians attempting to do theology without any knowledge of God and His dealings with His creation. It is not surprising that modern theologians are seeing Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhism, along with other Eastern traditions, as possibilities for integration with Christian thought or at least Christian ethics. These traditions are not rooted in historical events and often deny any basis in rational thinking, even to the point of questioning the reality of the self (King, *Christian Theology*, 27).

Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation. History has shown us that it rarely takes more than a generation for this kind of religion to lose its significance within a culture. How then do we know that Christianity is true? William Lane Craig, in his book *Reasonable Faith*, makes an important point. As believers, we know that the Scriptures are inspired, and that the Gospel message is true, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent. We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools. However, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that softens hearts and calls men and women to believe in the God of the Bible.

The Jesus Seminar

Jimmy Williams provides analysis of the Jesus Seminar findings in light of five critical areas: Identify purpose of the Jesus Fellows, Presuppositisms, Canonical Gospels, Chronology and Christological differences.

Introduction

- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all.”*
- *“Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised from the dead.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was born of a virgin.”*
- *“Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired.”*

So says Robert W. Funk, Architect and Founder of the Jesus Seminar, in a Keynote Address to the Jesus Seminar Fellows in the spring of 1994.(1) The Jesus Seminar has been receiving extensive coverage lately in such periodicals as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as on network

television.

Biographical

The Jesus Seminar Fellows

The Jesus Seminar is a group of New Testament scholars who have been meeting periodically since 1985. The initial two hundred has now dwindled to about seventy-four active members. They initially focused on the sayings of Jesus within the four Gospels to determine the probability of His actually having said the things attributed to Him in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each scholar offered his/her opinion on each “Jesus” statement by voting with different colored beads:

- *Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.*
- *Pink: Jesus probably or might have said something like this.*
- *Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to His own.*
- *Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition.*

Their voting conclusions: Over 80% of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, by voting consensus, either gray or black. This means that only 20% of Jesus’ statements are likely to have been spoken by Him. The other 80% are most assuredly, they say, unlikely to have ever been uttered by Jesus.

Their conclusions were published in 1993 in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The primary author of the book, Robert W. Funk, also the Founder and Chair of the Jesus Seminar, crafted the results of their deliberations in a slick, color-coded format with charts, graphics, appendices, and copious footnotes. (The

Gospel of Thomas is to be included with the traditional four gospels, they say.)

Who are these scholars, and what are their credentials? Robert W. Funk, former professor of the New Testament at the University of Montana is the most prominent leader. He is joined by two other major contributors, John Dominic Crossan, of DePaul University, Chicago, who has authored several books including *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, *The Essential Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and Marcus Borg of Oregon State University, also the author of several books including: *Jesus: A New Vision* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*.

Of the remaining active participants, only fourteen are well-known scholars in New Testament studies. Another twenty are recognizable within the narrow confines of the discipline, but they are not widely published beyond a few journal articles or dissertations. The remaining forty are virtually unknowns, and most of them are either at Harvard, Vanderbilt, or Claremont College, three universities widely considered among the most liberal in the field.

The public, exposed by the mass of publicity and attention given to the Jesus Seminar by the media has been inclined to assume that the theories of these scholars represent the "cutting edge," the mainstream of current New Testament thought. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nearly all of these scholars are American. European scholarship is nearly non-existent and, that being the case, it would be inaccurate, if not deceiving for the Jesus Seminar participants to present themselves, their work, and their conclusions as a broad, representative consensus of worldwide New Testament scholarship.

While the media and the general public may tend to be gullible

and naive about the authority and findings of the Jesus Seminar, Christians need not be intimidated.

Philosophical

Why is this movement important? Should Christians be concerned with this? Haven't the gospel traditions had their skeptics and critics for centuries? What is different about the Jesus Seminar?

Scholars since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century have questioned such things as the miracles, the prophecies, and the extraordinary claims of Christ in the Gospels.

Beginning in Germany, a separation began to occur between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Faith"; that is, it came to be popularly believed that a man named Jesus really lived, but that fantastic myths grew up around Him and about His powers and claims, and thus He became for many the "Christ of Faith" in story, symbol, and worship. Scholars promoting this separation conclude that biblical history is not what is important; but rather, one's personal experience, one's search for meaning and timeless truths. Those are of primary importance to an individual.

The Jesus Seminar stands in this tradition. But what is most significant about their work is that it has widened the circle of awareness (i.e., the general public) to New Testament studies and criticism, and a focus upon issues which up until now have been primarily restricted to academic discussions among New Testament scholars.

This group has brought into question the very authenticity and validity of the gospels which lie at the center of Christianity's credibility. If what the Jesus Seminar espouses is historically accurate, the sooner the naive Christian community can be educated to these facts the better, according to these scholars.

A major presupposition of the Jesus Seminar, therefore, is philosophical naturalistic worldview which categorically denies the supernatural. Therefore they say one must be wary of the following in the Gospels:

- **Prophetic statements.** *Predictions by Jesus of such things as the destruction of the Temple, or of Jerusalem, or His own resurrection are later literary additions or interpolations. How do we know this? Because no one can predict the future. So they MUST have been added later by zealous followers.*

- **Miracles.** *Since miracles are not possible, every recorded miracle in the Gospels must be a later elaboration by an admiring disciple or follower, or must be explained on the basis of some physical or natural cause (i.e., the Feeding of the 5,000: Jesus gave the signal, and all those present reached beneath their cloaks, pulled out their own "sack lunches," and ate together!).*

- **Claims of Jesus.** *Christ claimed to be God, Savior, Messiah, Judge, Forgiver of sin, sacrificial Lamb of God, etc. All of these, say the Jesus Fellows, are the later work of His devoted followers. The historical Jesus never claimed these things for Himself, as Funk infers in his above-mentioned statements. Reality isn't like this. It couldn't be true.*

Therefore the Jesus Fellows assert that the Gospels could not have been written by eyewitnesses in the mid-first century. On the basis of this philosophical presupposition, the Jesus Seminar considers itself personally and collectively free to select or discard any statement of the Gospels which is philosophically repugnant.

There is nothing new about this approach in New Testament scholarship. Thomas Jefferson, a great American patriot and president did the same thing in the late 1700s with almost identical results. He admired Jesus as a moral man, but like the Jesus Fellows, he assumed all supernatural and

extraordinary elements in the Gospels were unreliable and could not be true. With scissors and paste, Jefferson cut out of the Gospels any and everything which contravened the laws of nature and his own reason.

When he had finished his project, only 82 columns of the four Gospels out of his King James Bible remained from an original 700. The other nine-tenths lay on the cutting room floor. Jefferson entitled his creation *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, and his book ended with the words, "There laid they Jesus . . . and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher and departed." (2)

Jefferson and the Jesus Fellows, like all skeptics, prefer their own reason and biases over the possibility that the Gospels are accurate in what they say about miracles, prophecy, and the claims of Christ. They are like the man who visited the psychiatrist and informed him of a grave problem: "I think I'm dead!" The psychiatrist said, "That is a serious problem. May I ask you a question? Do you believe that dead men bleed?" The man quickly answered, "Of course not. Dead men don't bleed." The psychiatrist reached forward, and taking a hat pin, he pricked the man's finger. The man looked down at his bleeding finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

Canonical

The Jesus Fellows, on the basis of their naturalistic bias, conclude that at least the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) could not have been written at the time tradition and many New Testament scholars assume they were. The "Priority of Mark" as the earliest gospel written has strong (but not universal) support. And yet Mark 13 records Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, something that did not actually occur until A.D. 70.

Since the Jesus Fellows do not believe prophecy is possible,

they judge Mark, the “earliest” of the Gospels, to have been written after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. If Mark was written in the early 70s, still later dates are then required for Matthew and Luke, to say nothing of the Book of Acts which must follow them with an even later date.

Now, this gives the Jesus Scholars a “window” of about 40 years from the time of Jesus’ death (a A.D. 32.) to the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) to look for earlier sources devoid of miracles and extraordinary claims. They think they have found two such primary sources which fit their assumptions. The first of these is the “Q” source, or “Quelle.”

Synoptics/Quelle

It has long been observed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have had some kind of symbiotic relationship, as if they were aware of one another, or used the same sources, or some of the same sources. The prevailing theory is that Mark (the shortest of the three) was written first, and was later substantially incorporated into both Matthew and Luke. There is a high, but not total agreement, in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke where the two reflect the book of Mark.

But Matthew and Luke have additional material, some 250 verses (i.e., the Christmas stories, greater elaboration on the resurrection events, etc.). And there are some verses which are common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Thus many scholars conclude there was some other document or source available to Matthew and Luke which explains why they contain these additional 250 verses along with the corpus of Mark. The scholars have designated this material as “Q,” or “Quelle,” which is the German word for “Source.” Outside of the Synoptic gospels, there is no written documentary evidence to substantiate Quelle.

A number of New Testament scholars thus claim that Quelle must

have been an early, written document which preceded the writing of the Synoptic gospels and was incorporated into them. And they claim that in these 250 verses we only find a very “normal, human” Jesus who is more likely to have been the historical man.

The Gospel of Thomas

The second source given high priority and preference by the Jesus Seminar Fellows is the Gospel of Thomas. In fact, they value it so highly they have placed it alongside the four traditional ones, giving it equal, if not superior, value and historical authenticity.

A complete copy of The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the 1940s at an Egyptian site called Nag Hammadi, where archaeologists found an entire library of ancient texts including the Gospel of Thomas. It was dated around A.D. 400 and written in Coptic, the language of the ancient Egyptian church. This astonishing cache consisted of early Christian and Gnostic texts.

This Gospel of Thomas has now been studied for forty years, and the overwhelming conclusion of scholars worldwide has been that the document carries many of the identifying marks of a Gnostic literary genre, from a sect prominent in Egypt and the Nile Valley during the second, third, and fourth centuries.

It has been almost universally assumed that the parallels in Thomas to the New Testament Gospels and epistles were copied or paraphrased (not the reverse, as the Jesus Fellows claim) to suit Gnostic purposes, teachings which were opposed to all ideas about a supernatural God in the flesh Who could perform miracles, forgive sin, and rise from the dead. The Jesus Seminar Scholars have fit Thomas nicely together with “Q” to frame an historical portrait of Jesus based primarily upon these two sources.

The Jesus Scholars have declared that the Gospel of Thomas and the Q Source were written within the forty years between Jesus' death and the fall of Jerusalem, pushing forward the writing of the four canonical gospels (a necessity on their part to uphold their theory) to very late in the first century.

Chronological

Apart from completely ignoring Paul's epistles which were written between A.D. 45 and his martyrdom at the hands of Nero in A.D. 68, the Jesus Fellows have a critical problem in fitting their theory into first century chronology.

In the last chapter of the Book of Acts (28), Luke leaves us with the impression that Paul is in Rome, and still alive. Tradition tells us he died in A.D. 68. In Acts, Luke shows keen awareness of people, places and contemporary events, both within and without the church. And he records the martyrdoms of both Stephen and James. It is highly unlikely, if the deaths of Paul and Peter and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) had already occurred when Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, that he would have failed to record these most important events.

New Testament scholars are in strong agreement that whoever wrote Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke two volumes by one author, both addressed to a man named "Theophilus." And since Luke is supposed to have incorporated Mark and the Q Source material into the writing of his own Gospel, and Acts was written after Luke, but before Paul's death (A.D. 68) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), then Mark and Quelle must have been written by the mid 60s. The same difficulty in Luke exists with Mark, who is said to have written his gospel with Peter as his source, Peter having been martyred in Rome about the same time as Paul.

It is highly unlikely that these two obscure sources, Quelle

and the Gospel of Thomas, could have been circulating throughout the Christian community and having such impact that they overshadowed what Paul was at the very same time saying about Jesus in all of his epistles.

Real church history is not kind to the Jesus Fellows at this point. The church did not first flourish in the Nile Valley and spread elsewhere. The clear pattern of expansion from both biblical and the earliest patristic writings is from Jerusalem to Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome. Ironically, the earliest of the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 30 to ca. A.D. 100) writes from Rome at the end of the first century an epistle to the Corinthians (1 Clement) which is considered to be the oldest extant letter after the writings of the Apostles. It had such stature in the early church that it was initially considered by some to be a part of the Canon. All the other early church fathers (2nd century) are scattered around in cities within the areas mentioned above, with the exception of Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150 to c. A.D. 215) who reflects some Gnostic ideas in his teachings.

The more traditional and accepted chronology for the documents under consideration is as follows:

Dating/chronology of First Century Authorship

(All dates are A.D.)

Uncontested:

End of First Century: 100

Fall of Jerusalem: 70

Martyrdom of Paul and Peter: 68

Epistles of Paul: 45-68

Some Oral Tradition: 32-70

Crucifixion of Jesus: 32

Traditional:(3)

Clement of Rome: 96

Revelation (John): 96

Epistles of John: 90-94
Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 66-68
Matthew & Luke: 64-66
Gospel of Mark: 64-65

Jesus Seminar:(4)

Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 80-100
Gospel of Luke: 80-100
Gospel of Matthew: 80-90
Gospel of Mark: 70-80
Gospel of Thomas: 70-100

In comparing the two chronologies, it appears there simply is not enough time for the simple Jesus of history to evolve into the Christ of faith. Myths and legends need time to develop. There is none available in the first century to accommodate the Jesus Seminar's theory.

Christological

On the basis of the Gospel of Thomas and Qu'elle, the Jesus Fellows believe the historical Jesus was simply a sage, a spinner of one- liners, a teller of parables, an effective preacher. This is what He was historically according to these scholars. The "high Christology" (supernatural phenomena, the messianic claims, the miracles, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection) all came as a result of a persecuted church community which needed a more powerful God for encouragement and worship. His suffering, ardent followers are responsible for these embellishments which created the "Christ of Faith." The real Jesus was a winsome, bright, articulate peasant, sort of like Will Rogers.

Various other portraits of Jesus have proliferated among the Jesus Fellows, suggesting that he was a religious genius, a social revolutionary, an eschatological prophet. He was all of

these things, we would say, but offer that He was something more.

The Jesus Seminar assumes a “low christology” (Jesus as a peasant sage) preceded the “high christology” created later by the church. Is there anything that would suggest otherwise?

The Epistles of Paul

The Apostle Paul conducted his church-planting ministry between approximately 40 to the time of his death, A.D. 68. It was also during this time that he wrote all of his epistles. While some New Testament scholars question the authenticity of Paul’s authorship of a number of these epistles, virtually all, even the most liberal, will accept Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians as genuinely Pauline.

What kind of “Christology” do we find in these epistles? A high christology. The Jesus Seminar is asking us to believe that at the very same time the Gospel of Thomas and the Q source were alleged to have been written portraying Jesus as a wise, peasant sage, Paul was planting churches across the Mediterranean world and ascribing to Jesus the same high christology found later in the four gospels!

The Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 clearly indicates that Paul was aware of and connected to Jerusalem and its church leadership (Peter and James). After the Council Paul and Barnabas were given the express task of taking and distributing to the churches a written document of the Council’s instructions about how Gentiles were to be incorporated into the church.

The Jesus Seminar simply chooses to ignore this mass of clear, Pauline evidence almost universally accepted by New Testament scholars. The notion that a high christology (the Gospels and the epistles) evolved from a low christology (the Gospel of Thomas, Quelle) is unsupportable.

Jesus the Sage

If we accept the Jesus Seminar notion that the historical Jesus was a simple peasant later revered and deified, with what are we left? Jesus is so stripped down that He becomes the “Christian dummy” of the first century church! The community is more brilliant than the leader! Even Renan, the French skeptic said, “It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus.” Further, if Jesus was such a “regular guy,” why was He crucified? Crucifixion by the Romans was used only for deviants, malcontents, and political revolutionaries (like Barabbas). What did this simple peasant do to create such a stir that He would suffer such a death?

The Jesus Seminar portrayal of Jesus simply cannot explain the explosion of Christianity in the first and second centuries. With their view of Christ, they cannot create a cause monumental enough to explain the documented, historical effects that even they must accept.

Notes

1. Robert W. Funk, “The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels,” *The Fourth R* (November/December, 1993), p. 8.
2. Smithsonian.
3. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), Matthew, 470ff (Mt), 493 (Mk), 511 (Lk), 543 (Jn), 567 (Acts).
4. Robert J. Miller, Editor. *The Complete Gospels* (Harper San Francisco, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994). pp. 10 (Mk), 56 (Mt), 198 (Jn). Note: a date for Luke-Acts is not provided, but on the basis of the book’s date for Mark, we would assume 80 to 100 A.D.
5. James R. Edwards, “Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?” *Christianity Today*: March 4, 1996, p. 17.

False Guilt – Refusing Christ's Atonement

Kerby Anderson provides an insightful look at the important topic of false guilt. He helps us look at the sources of false guilt, its consequences and the cure in Jesus Christ. If we refuse to fully accept Christ's atonement we can be trapped in false guilt, instead we should embrace His atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us.

Introduction

Have you ever felt guilty? Of course you have, usually because you were indeed guilty. But what about those times when you have feelings of guilt even when you didn't do anything wrong? We would call this false guilt, and that is the subject of this essay.

False guilt usually comes from an overactive conscience. It's that badgering pushing voice that runs you and your self-image into the ground. It nags: "You call this acceptable? You think this is enough? Look at all you've not yet done! Look at all you have done that's not acceptable! Get going!"

You probably know the feeling. You start the day feeling like you are in a hole. You feel like you can never do enough. You have this overactive sense of duty and can never seem to rest. One person said he "felt more like a human doing than a human being." Your behavior is driven by a sense of guilt. That is what we will be talking about in these pages.

Much of the material for this discussion is taken from the book entitled *False Guilt* by Steve Shores. His goal is to help you determine if you (1) have an overactive conscience and (2)

are driven by false guilt. If these are problem areas for you, he provides practical solutions so you can break the cycle of false guilt. I recommend his book especially if you can recognize yourself in some of the material we cover in this essay.

In his book, Steve Shores poses three sets of questions, each with some explanation. An affirmative answer to any or all of these questions may indicate that you struggle with false guilt and an overactive conscience.

1. Do you ever feel like this: "Something is wrong with me. There is some stain on me, or something badly flawed that I can neither scrub out nor repair"? Does this feeling persist even though you have become a Christian?

2. Is Thanksgiving sort of a difficult time of year for you? Do you find it hard to muster up the Norman Rockwell spirit—you know... Mom and Dad and grandparents and kids all seated around mounds of food? Dad is carving the turkey with a sure and gentle expression on his face, and everyone looks so...well, so thankful? Do you find yourself, at any time of the year, dutifully thanking or praising God without much passion?

3. How big is your dance floor? What I mean is, How much freedom do you have? Do you feel confined by Christianity? To you, is it mainly a set of restrictions? Is it primarily a source of limits: don't do this, and don't do that? Does your Christianity have more to do with walls than with windows? Is it a place of narrowness or a place where light and air and liberty pour in?

Usually a person driven by false guilt is afraid of freedom because in every act of freedom is the possibility of offending someone. Offending someone is unacceptable. Other people are seen as pipelines of approval. If they're offended, the pipeline shuts down.

False guilt, along with an overactive conscience, is a hard

master. As we turn now to look at the causes and the cures for false guilt, we hope to explain how to break down the confining walls and tiresome chains that may have kept you or a loved one in bondage to false guilt.

The Source of False Guilt

Next, I would like to focus on the source of false guilt: an overactive conscience. What is an overactive conscience? How does it function? Steve Shores says, "The mission of a person's overactive conscience is to attract the expectations of others."

Imagine a light bulb glowing brightly on a warm summer's night. What do you see in your mind's eye? Bugs. Bugs of every variety are attracted to that light. The light bulb serves as a magnet for these insects. Imagine that light is an overactive conscience. The expectations of others are the "bugs" that are attracted to the "light" of an overactive conscience.

Now imagine a light bulb burning inside a screened porch. The bugs are still attracted, but they bounce off the screen. The overactive conscience has no screen. But it is more than that. The overactive conscience doesn't want a screen. The more "bugs" the better. Why? Because the whole purpose is to meet expectations in order to gain approval and fill up the emptiness of the soul. This is an overactive conscience, a light bulb with lots of bugs and no screen.

A key to understanding the overactive conscience is the word "active." Someone with false guilt has a conscience that is always on the go. False guilt makes a person restless, continually looking for a rule to be kept, a scruple to observe, an expectation to be fulfilled, or a way to be an asset to a person or a group.

The idea of being an asset is a crucial point. When I am an

asset, then I am a “good” person and life works pretty well. When I fear I’ve let someone down, then I am a liability. My life falls apart, and I will work hard to win my way back into the favor of others.

So an overactive conscience is like a magnet for expectations. These expectations come from oneself, parents (whether alive or not), friends, bosses, peers, God, or distorted images of God. False guilt makes the overactive conscience voracious for expectations. False guilt is always looking for people to please and rules to be kept.

An overactive conscience is also seeking to keep the “carrot” of acceptance just out of reach. This “carrot” includes self-acceptance and acceptance from others and from God. The guilt-ridden conscience continually says, “Your efforts are not good enough. You must keep trying because, even if your attempts don’t measure up, the trying itself counts as something.”

For that reason, an overactive conscience is not happy at rest. Though rest is the birthright of the Christian, relaxing is just too dangerous, i.e., relaxing might bring down my guard, and I might miss signs of rejection. Besides, acceptance is conditional, and I must continually prove my worthiness to others. I can never be a liability if I am to expect acceptance to continue. It is hard to relax because I must be ever fearful of letting someone down and must constantly work to gain acceptance.

In summary, a person with false guilt and an overactive conscience spends much of his or her life worn out. Unrelenting efforts to meet the expectations of others can have some very negative consequences.

The Consequences of False Guilt

Now I would like to focus on the consequences of false guilt. An overactive conscience can keep you in a state of constant

uncertainty. You never know if you measure up. You never know if you have arrived or not. You are always on the alert. According to Steve Shores there are a number of major consequences of false guilt.

The first consequence he calls "striving without arriving." In essence, there is no hope in the system set up by the overactive conscience. You must always try harder, but you never cross the finish line. You seem to merely go in circles. Or perhaps it would be better to say you go in a spiral, as in a downward spiral. Life is a perpetual treadmill. You work hard and strive, but you never arrive. Life is hard work and frustration with little or no satisfaction.

The second consequence is "constant vigilance." The overactive conscience produces constant self-monitoring. You are constantly asking if you are being an asset to other people and to God. You are constantly evaluating and even doubting your performance. And you never allow yourself to be a liability to the group or to any particular individual.

A third consequence is "taking the pack mule approach to life." An overactive conscience involves a lifelong ordeal in which you attempt to pass a demanding test and thus reveal your worth. The test consists of accumulating enough evidences of goodness to escape the accusation that you are worthless. For the guilt-ridden person, this test involves taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles. As the burdens pile higher and higher, you become a beast of burden, a "pack mule" who takes on more responsibility than is healthy or necessary.

Just as there is no forward progress (e.g., "striving without arriving"), so there is also an ever-increasing sense of burden. Each day demands a fresh validation of worthiness. There is never a time when you can honestly say, "that's enough."

Finally, the most devastating consequence of false guilt is

its effect not just on individuals but the body of Christ. Christians who struggle with an overactive conscience can produce weak, hollow, compliant believers in the church. They are long on conformity and short on passion and substance. They go to church not because they crave fellowship, but because they want to display compliance. They study God's word not so much out of a desire to grow spiritually, but because that is what good Christians are supposed to do. We do what we do in order to "fit in" or comply with the rules of Christianity.

Steve Shores says that the central question of church becomes, "Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?" Instead we should be asking, "Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the disruptive sacrifice of Christ?"

The Continuation of False Guilt

Next, I would like to talk about why people continue to feel false guilt even though they know they are forgiven. After all, if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, why do some Christians still have an overactive conscience and continue to feel guilt so acutely? Part of the compulsion comes from feeling the noose of false guilt tighten around our necks so that we panic and fail to think rationally about our situation.

Steve Shores uses the example of a death-row inmate who has just learned of an eleventh-hour stay of execution. He has just been pardoned, but his body and emotions don't feel like it. He has been "sitting in the electric chair, sweaty-palmed and nauseated, when the wall phone rings with the news of the reprieve." He may feel relief, but the feeling of relief is not total. He is only off the hook for awhile. He will still return to his cell.

The person with a overactive conscience lives in that death-row cell. The reprieve comes from responding to that guilt-driven voice in his conscience. For Bill it manifested itself in a compulsive need to serve others. If he were asked to teach AWANA or to teach a Sunday school class, he would have great difficulty saying "No." He had to say "Yes" or else he would feel the noose of false guilt tighten around his neck.

Bill's comments were sad but illuminating. He said: "I felt as though not teaching the class would confirm that I am a liability. The disappointment...would inflict shame I felt as a boy. Disappointing others always meant that there would be some sort of trial to decide whether I really belonged in the family."

He went on to tell of the time he made a "C" on his report card (the rest of the grades were "A's" and "B's"). His father lectured him unmercifully. At one point, his father declared that "it was Communist to bring home such a bad grade." Bill didn't know what a Communist was or what Communism had to do with bad grades. But he did understand that if he didn't bring home good grades he was unworthy.

Bill even remembered the six agonizing weeks until the next report card. When it arrived he received five "A's" and one "B." What was his father's response? Was it delight? Was it an apology for his previous comments? Not at all. His father merely said, "That's more like it." The reprieve was halfhearted and temporary.

In essence, false guilt is a stern warden that may give a temporary reprieve but is always ready to call upon you to prove your worthiness once again. We may know that Christ died for our sins. We may know that our sins are forgiven. We may know that we have value and dignity because we are created in God's image. But we may feel unworthy and feel as if we must prove ourselves at a moment's notice.

The key, as we will see in the next section, is to embrace Christ's atonement rather than our own. We must not only know that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ, but act upon that reality so that we live a life through grace rather than legalism.

A Cure for False Guilt

Finally, I would like to conclude by talking about Christ's atonement for us. If we are to break the chain of false guilt, then we must embrace Christ's atonement rather than our own. Although that statement may seem obvious, it is difficult for someone with an overactive conscience to truly embrace emotionally. For such a person, perfection is the means of achieving salvation. If I can be perfect, then I will no longer feel shame, and I will no longer feel guilt. This is the personal atonement that someone with false guilt often is seeking.

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ's atonement was for our sins. Sin is "any attitude, belief, or action that constitutes rebellion against or transgression of God's character." Clearly sinful man is incapable of making restitution because our best works are as filthy rags before a holy and omnipotent God (Isaiah 64:6). Our atonement must be made by someone with clean hands and a sinless life. Christ, of course, fulfilled that requirement and died in our place for our sins.

Nevertheless, someone with false guilt seeks a form of self-atonement. Why? Well, there are at least two reasons: indiscriminate shame and doubt about the character of God. The first is indiscriminate shame. We should feel guilty and we should feel shame for sinful behavior. The problem comes when we feel guilt and shame even when a sinful action or attitude is not present. Steve Shores believes that the "weeds of shame" can begin to sprout even when we have a legitimate need. We then tend to use the machete of false guilt to trim these weeds back. We say, "If I can do enough things right, I

can control this and no one will know how bad and weak I am.” This performance-oriented lifestyle is a way of hacking at the weeds that grow in the soil of illegitimate shame.

The second reason for false guilt is a stubborn propensity to doubt the character of God. Many Christian psychologists and counselors have argued that the reason we may question our Heavenly Father’s character is because we question our earthly father’s character. And for those who have been abused or neglected by their fathers, this is an adequate explanation. But we even see in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve doubting God and they did not even have earthly fathers. So I believe it is more accurate to say that our sin nature (not our family of origin) has a lot to do with our tendency to doubt God’s character.

This is manifested by two tendencies: blaming and hiding. When we feel false guilt, we tend to want to blame others or blame ourselves. If we blame others, we manifest a critical spirit. If we blame ourselves, we feel unworthy and don’t want others to see us as we are and we hide emotionally from others. The solution is for us to embrace Christ’s atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us. Christ died once for all (Romans 6:10) that we might have everlasting life and freedom from guilt and the bondage to sin.

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Politically Correct Ethics

Liberal Idealism’s Approach to Ethics

Ben and Jerry’s ice cream is renown for being the ice cream

for those who want to be friendly to the environment. Ben and Jerry's Homemade Inc. built a national reputation by (1) claiming to use only all natural ingredients and (2) sending a percentage of the profits to charities. The company's Rainforest Crunch ice cream supposedly uses only nuts and berries from the rain forests.

But there is a lot more to ethical behavior than a laid-back, socially correct agenda. An audit of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. revealed the use of sulfur dioxide preservatives and use of margarine instead of butter in some of the flavors. Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. also served on the editorial board of Anita Roddick's Body Shop, another company expounding the use of natural products. It took an article in *Business Ethics* to expose Body Shop's false advertising claims and other ethical failures. Synthetic colorings, fragrances, and preservatives were being used in Body Shop products.[\[1\]](#)

Today we live in a world engrossed in the ideas flowing from a socially correct agenda, and it is overshadowing the time proven priority of basic business ethics. It is an agenda centered in tolerance and environmentalism. (Interestingly, those on the environmental side are not very tolerant of those who do not hold to their rigid perspective, such as their stand on not using animals in product testing.)

Levi Strauss is another interesting case in point. The company has a strong politically correct mindset, and diversity and empowerment are central for their organizational ethics. They have demonstrated a strong concern for human rights, yet they are clearly on the liberal side of family values. They have been boycotted by the American Family Association for their support of homosexuality providing benefits for the "domestic partners" of their employees.

Although this socially correct movement expounds the idea of tolerance for all, proponents tend to be very intolerant of anyone who may support a position they do not agree with.

Kinko's Copies found this out the hard way when they advertised on the Rush Limbaugh show. A boycott was quickly threatened until Kinko's promised not to advertise on Rush's show again.

There is great danger in using political views to measure business ethics because social goals can become equated with business ethics. This is not right. Business ethics is concerned with the fair treatment of others such as customers, employees, suppliers, stockholders, and franchisees. Truth in labeling and advertising is paramount in establishing a business enterprise and is even more important than the issues of animal testing and commitment to the rain forest, as important as they may be.[\[2\]](#)

This approach to ethics comes from liberal idealism. We see this perspective in Robert Bellah's book, *The Good Society*. Liberal idealism seeks to transform society by social engineering. The liberal idealist looks for ways of managing a modern economy or developing broad social policies that will meet the needs of society as a whole. This system believes in the innate goodness of mankind, the worldview of enlightenment thinking, that men and women are fully capable of reasoning what is good and right, i.e., the autonomy of human reason. There is no felt need for revelation or any authority beyond themselves. Liberal idealism is marked by a lot of faith in government and the ability of organizational programs to orchestrate a healthy society.

We will be contrasting this line of thought with a more bottom up view that emphasizes personal integrity and greater concern for individual moral convictions.

Bottom up Ethics

But there is another more traditional way of looking at ethics. It is an individual model, rather than an organizational one. It demonstrates a greater concern for the

moral conviction of individuals. This view emphasizes that institutions don't make ethical decisions, people do. It stresses that virtue comes from the individuals who make up the many small groups and larger institutions, from families to voluntary associations to multinational corporations. The goal is to convert the individual in order to change the institution. Answers are sought more through education and/or religion to reach the individual in the belief that transformed individuals will transform their institutions.

A corporation that has established an ethics department with an approach more along the lines of the individual model is Texas Instruments. Their theme is "Know What's Right Do What's Right." Their emphasis is on training individuals within the corporation to know the principles involved in each unique ethical dilemma that may present itself and motivating the individuals involved to make good ethical decisions. The company maintains various avenues of support to assist individuals within the corporation in making difficult decisions. Carl Skoogland, vice president of the Ethics Department at Texas Instruments, has said, "In any relationship an unquestionable commitment to ethics is a silent partner in all our dealings." Their seven-point ethics test is oriented toward individual initiative:

1. Is the action legal?
2. Does it comply with our values?
3. If you do it, will you feel bad?
4. How will it look in the newspapers?
5. If you know it is wrong, don't do it!
6. If you're not sure, ask.
7. Keep asking until you get an answer. [\[3\]](#)

Although critics might say these types of simple maxims lack in specific guidance, when combined with an overall educational program they help individuals think through issues

and make the right decisions themselves, multiplying the base of ethical agents within the corporation.

Traditional Western culture, which has given us the most advanced and free lifestyle of any culture, has been based on both a Greek model of transcendent forms and a Judeo-Christian model of God- given objective standards. This tradition has taught us that we are all flawed and need a personal transformation before we can be of any true value in transforming society.

Religion and Education in Ethical Development

Earlier we mentioned Robert Bellah's book, *The Good Society*, and its support of liberal idealism, or the ability of government and organizational programs to orchestrate a healthy society through broad social agendas.

William Sims Brainbridge, in writing a review of Bellah's book, makes a statement that could well apply to so many of the modernist writings: "The book's prescription sounds like a highly diluted dose of religion, when what the patient needs might be a full dose."

This "organizational model" fails to fully appreciate the need for integration of religion and education in order to provide a united front against the materialism and self-centeredness of our present culture. As long as we allow our educational system to teach that we are evolved animals, here by chance and of no eternal significance, we can only expect short-sighted self-interest. If fundamentally all there is is matter, energy, time, and chance, why can't one believe in anything such as apartheid, or ethnic cleansing, or euthanasia, or genocide? Where is liberal idealism's source for personal integrity and convictions other than in cultural

relativism? Under a theory of cultural relativism all intercultural comparisons of values are meaningless.

The need, of course, is for transcendent truths. By transcendent, we mean an ethical ideal independent of any given political system or order. This ethical ideal can then serve as an external critique of corporate or political aspirations or activities. Is this not what Plato was referring to when he discussed his theory of universal forms, that there are ideals beyond the reality of this physical world? In this postmodern world we are now experiencing a complete rejection by many of any objective truth. In fact, anyone who still believes in the search for truth is often labeled as ethnocentric, i.e., the liberal idealism of our present age refuses to accept that someone might find a truth that has universal application.

The ethics of enlightenment thinking do not appear to be the answer. Crane Brinton, in his book, *A History of Western Morals* says, "the religion of the Enlightenment has a long and unpredictable way to go before it can face the facts of life as effectively as does Christianity."[\[4\]](#) We appear to have an implosion of values in a society that is seeking to teach that there is no God and no afterlife, but if you live an ethical earthly life somehow it will pay off.

British historian, Lord Acton, is best remembered for his warning that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He believed that liberty was the highest political end. But, he also recognized that liberty can't be the sole end of mankind. There must also be some kind of virtue, and virtue has its roots in religion. Lord Acton's work showed that no society was truly free without religion.[\[5\]](#) Professionals must be educated to understand the moral worth of their actions and the roles religion and education play in promoting self-control.

Religion and Education at Odds

We have been discussing the need for both religion and education in establishing an ethical base for all our actions. But the question arises, how will we find the needed balance in an American society in which public education and traditional religions are at odds with one another over very basic presuppositions such as the nature of the universe, humanity, ethics, culture, evil, truth, and destiny?

The liberal solution has been to remove the traditional truths and make our institutions humanistic. The conservative response has been to establish an independent educational system in which those who hold to more traditional values can integrate religious truth with educational aims. We now have two major educational tracks, the public track based on the religion of secular humanism and the private track based on the religion of biblical Christianity. The professionals involved in the educational institutions must decide how to deal with the tension between the two tracks. The need is to resolve tension and build bridges of understanding, rather than intensify the cultural war. But, as Christians, we must not compromise truth. There must be cooperation without compromise.

John Adams, our first vice-president, said, "Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."^{6} Meaning is the living fabric that holds us together with all things and meaning for life will only be found through the transcendent values of religion. In his article, "The Globalization of Business Ethics: Why America Remains Distinctive," David Vogel writes, "Thanks in part to the role played by Reformed Protestantism in defining American values, America remains a highly moralistic society."^{7}

At this point, in realizing the need to be fair, we must be willing to give a critical assessment of the gross behavioral

failures that have occurred in the realm of the religious. The most blatant examples are probably the numerous TV evangelists who have fallen prey to greed and other temptations that have destroyed their lives and ministries. Another example is the many ministers and priests who have practiced sexually deviant behavior with children in their care. Many of these religious leaders are now or have been serving time in prison for their personal moral failures.

These examples highlight the moral depravity of mankind. But this does not mean that we need to adopt the sixteenth century views of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) who had a very low view of human nature. Unfortunately, much of the world has been heavily influenced by the amoral perspective of a Hobbesian foundation of ethical behavior. Hobbes decided that what is good or bad is based on what society likes or dislikes. This is cultural relativism, the rejection of any standard beyond that established by the present culture. Hobbes, like so many others, seems to have had an innate fear of the possibility that there might be a transcendent truth out there worth pursuing. Because of our personal inner moral failure, we must look outside ourselves to find the standards by which we are to live and establish those standards in our laws and in our educational systems.

Does a Rising Tide Lift all Boats?

President Kennedy said, "A rising tide lifts all boats." But think about it! Does a rising tide lift all boats? Not if some of the boats have holes in them.

In this essay we have been discussing the contrast between a politically correct ethical approach to dealing with our ethical concerns against a more bottom up individual responsibility approach.

The historic roots of the American experience are bound up in the idea of individualism, a political tradition that

enshrines individual liberty as its highest ideal. But democracy requires a degree of trust, and unfortunately, our heritage of trust is eroding. American businesses have been transformed from comfortable and stable rivals into bloodletting gladiators.[\[8\]](#) There is a problem in emphasizing individual freedom and the pursuit of individual affluence (the American dream) in a society with an economy and government that has rejected the principles of natural law. Too many of our boats have holes in them i.e., little or no personal integrity. We must work at restoring the principles of individual integrity and personal responsibility before we try to establish an ethical agenda for our organizations. Unless we realize our own morally flawed state, we will seek to repair the institutions without the humility and personal transformation necessary to afford any hope of ultimate success. Organizational ethical behavior is very important, but it must be elevated through an upsurge of individual ethical behavior.

Those coming from a liberal idealism approach to ethics hold noble ideas of common good based on a belief in the inherent goodness of men and women. They believe that if we just change the structures of society, the problems will be solved. Their perspective is that greater citizen participation in the organizational structures of our government and economy will result in a lessening of the problems of contemporary social life. What they neglect to consider is that government attempts to make people good are inherently coercive. Our constitution rests on the premise that virtue comes from citizens themselves, acting through smaller groups, such as the family, church, community, and voluntary associations. The stronger these small, people-centered groups are, the less intrusive the government and other large organizations need to be.

But how do you deal with the need for individual transformation? A common phrase we often hear is “You can’t

legislate morality." In reality all laws are a legislation of morality. All we are doing is changing an "ought to do/ought not to do" into a "must do/must not do" by making it a law. A solid base of moral law helps to establish the standard for individual behavior, but as the New Testament so clearly tells us, the law is inadequate to the task at hand. It is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that enables us to overcome the forces within and without that seek to destroy our God-given abundant life. Only by placing our trust in Christ can we begin to repair the holes in our life. When the internal integrity of our life is as it should be, we are then ready for the tides of life to come. A rising tide does lift all boats that have internal integrity.

Notes

1. Marianne M. Jennings, "Manager's Journal," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 1995.
2. Ibid.
3. Texas Instruments, publication TI-28172.
4. Crane Brinton, *A History of Western Morals* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 462.
5. Charles Oliver, "Leaders & Success," *Investor's Business Daily*, 14 December 1993.
6. Quoted in John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 185.
7. David Vogel, "The Globalization of Business Ethics: Why America Remains Distinctive," *California Management Review* (Fall 1992), 44.
8. Robert Reich, "Corporate Ethic: We can change behavior by altering mix of incentives," *The Dallas Morning News*, 14 January 1996, 5J.

Slogans – A Biblical Worldview Response

Jerry Solomon considers many popular slogans to see how they are designed to influence our thinking. Taking a biblical, Christian worldview, he finds that many popular slogans are promoting vanity, immediate gratification, or materialism. Ends that are not consistent with an eternal Christian life view. As he points out, we do not have to let these slogans control our thinking.

Let's try an experiment. I'll list several slogans, some from the past, others from more contemporary times, but I'll leave out one word or phrase. See if you can supply the missing word or phrase. Here are some examples:

"Give me liberty or give me. . ."

"Uncle Sam wants . . ."

"I have a . . ."

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask . . ."

"Just do . . ."

"Life is a sport; . . ."

"Gentlemen prefer . . ."

"Image is . . ."

"Coke is . . ."

"You've come a long way, . . ."

"This is not your father's . . ."

"You deserve a break . . ."

Well, how did you fare with my experiment? Unless you've been living in a cave for many years, you probably were able to complete several of these phrases. They have become a part of "The fabric of our . . ." Yes, the fabric of our lives. In most cases these slogans have been written to promote a

product. They are catchy, memorable maxims that help the listener or reader associate the statement with a commodity, thus leading to increased sales. Advertisers spend millions of dollars for such slogans, an indicator of their importance.

Double Meanings

Often a slogan contains a double entendre intended to attract us on at least two levels. For example, an ad for toothpaste from several years ago asks, "Want love?" Obviously, the advertiser is playing upon a universal need. All of us want love. But the initial answer to the question is "Get . . . Close Up." Of course a couple is pictured in close embrace with vibrant smiles and sweet breath as a result of their wise use of the product. The implication is that they are sharing love, but only as a result of using the love- giving toothpaste. Another example, again from several years in the past, states "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins." The double meaning is obvious, especially when the slogan is coupled with the accompanying picture of a young girl. No doubt the companies that hired the ad agencies for such campaigns were very pleased. Their sales increased. The fact that I am even using these illustrations is indicative of their success in capturing the attention of the consumer.

Slogans and the Christian

But the marketplace is not the only arena where slogans are found. Christians often use them. Many contemporary churches strive to attract the surrounding population by utilizing various adjectives to describe themselves. For example, words such as "exciting," "dynamic," "friendly," or "caring" are used as part of a catchy slogan designed to grab the attention of anyone who would see or hear it. And such slogans are supposed to be descriptive of how that particular church wants to be perceived. This applies especially to those congregations that are sometimes called "seeker sensitive."

The idea is that there is a market in the surrounding culture that will be attracted to the implications of the slogan. One of the foundational tenets of our ministry at Probe is that the Christian should think God's thoughts after Him. Then, the transformed Christian should use his mind to analyze and influence the world around him. One of the more intriguing ways we can experience what it means to have a Christian mind is by concentrating on the content of the slogans we hear and see each day. In this article we will examine certain slogans in order to discover the ideas imbedded in them. Then we will explore ways we might apply our discoveries in the culture that surrounds us.

Slogan Themes: Vanity

"Break free and feel; it reveals to the world just how wonderful you are." "Spoil yourself." "Turn it loose tonight; don't hold back." "You deserve a break today." "Indulge yourself." "Have it your way." These slogans are indicative of one of the more common emphases in our culture: vanity. The individual is supreme. Selfishness and self-indulgence too often are the primary indicators of what is most important. Such phrases, which are the result of much thought and research among advertisers, are used to play upon the perceptions of a broad base of the population. A product can be promoted successfully if it is seen as something that will satisfy the egocentric desires of the consumer.

Christopher Lasch, an insightful thinker, has entitled his analysis of American life *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch has written that the self-centered American "demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire." [\(1\)](#) We will return to the subject of immediate gratification later, but the emphasis of the moment is that slogans often focus on a person's vanity. The individual is encouraged to focus continually on himself, his desires, his frustrations, his goals. And the quest that is

developed never leads to fulfillment. Instead, it leads to a spiraling sense of malaise because the slogans lead only to material, not spiritual ends.

One of the more famous slogans in the Bible is "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." This exclamation is found in Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book full of application to our subject. King Solomon, the writer, has left us with an ancient but very contemporary analysis of what life is like if self-indulgence is the key. And his analysis came from personal experience. He would have been the model consumer for the slogans that began this essay today: "Break free and feel." "Spoil yourself." "Turn it loose." "You deserve a break today." "Indulge yourself." But he learned that such slogans are lies. As Charles Swindoll has written:

In spite of the extent to which he went to find happiness, because he left God out of the picture, nothing satisfied. It never will. Satisfaction in life under the sun will never occur until there is a meaningful connection with the living Lord above the sun. [\(2\)](#)

Solomon indulged himself physically and sexually; he experimented philosophically; he focused on wealth. None of it provided his deepest needs.

So what is Solomon's conclusion in regard to those needs? He realizes that we are to "fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). How would the majority of this country respond if a slogan such as "Fear God and keep His commandments!" were to suddenly flood the media? It probably wouldn't sell very well; it wouldn't focus on our vanity.

One of the Lord's more penetrating statements concerning vanity was focused on the man who is called the rich young ruler. Douglas Webster has written that

It is sad when Jesus is not enough. We are told that Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and loved him. But the love of Jesus was not enough for this man. He wanted it all: health, wealth, self-satisfaction and control. He knew no other way to see himself than the words we use to describe him a rich young ruler. [\(3\)](#)

Perhaps this analysis can apply to us too often. Is Jesus enough, or must our vanity be satisfied? That's a good question for all of us.

Slogan Themes: Immediate Gratification

"Hurry!" "Time is running out!" "This is the last day!" "You can have it now! Don't wait!" These phrases are indicators of one of the more prominent themes found in slogans: instant gratification. This is especially true in regard to much contemporary advertising. The consumer is encouraged to respond immediately. Patience is not a virtue. Contemplation is not encouraged.

Not only do we have instant coffee, instant rice, instant breakfast, and a host of other instant foods, we also tend to see all of life from an instant perspective. If you have a headache, it can be cured instantly. If you need a relationship, it can be supplied instantly. If you need a new car, it can be bought instantly. If you need a god, it can be provided instantly. For example, a few evening hours spent with the offerings of television show us sitcom dilemmas solved in less than half an hour; upset stomachs are relieved in less than thirty seconds; political candidates are accepted or rejected based upon a paid political announcement. About the only unappeased person on television is the "I love you, man!" guy who can't find a beer or love.

You're a consumer. Be honest with yourself. Haven't you been enticed to respond to the encouragement of a slogan that

implies immediate gratification? If you hear or see a slogan that says you must act now, your impulse may lead you to buy. At times it can be difficult to resist the temptation of the moment. The number of people in serious debt may be a testimony to the seriousness of this temptation. The instant credit card has led to instant crisis because of a thoughtless response to an instant slogan. When we hear "Act now!" or "Tomorrow is too late!" we can be persuaded if we are not alert to the possible consequences of an unwise decision.

One of the most respected virtues is wisdom. The wise man or woman is held in high esteem. This is especially true for the Christian. The Bible tells us of the lives of many people: some wise, some unwise. The wise person is portrayed as someone who patiently weighs options, who seeks God's counsel, who makes decisions that extend far beyond instantaneous results. The unwise person is portrayed as one who acts without sufficient thought, who doesn't seek God's counsel, who makes decisions that may satisfy for the moment but not the future. So the contemporary Christian should strive to become wise in the face of the slogans that surround him. He should realize that the supposed benefits of products cannot be compared to wisdom. As Scripture states:

How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels; and nothing you desire compares with her (Proverbs 3:13-15, NASB).

Let's develop our own slogan. Perhaps something like, "Wisdom now; decisions later!" would be a good antidote to the messages we hear and see so often. Also, let's implant the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, especially patience and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). And let's reinforce our thought life with the truth that things of value are not achieved instantly. That reminds me of another slogan: "Rome

was not built in a day.” And how Rome was built is not nearly as valuable as how our lives are built.

Slogan Themes: Materialism

In the early sixteenth century an Augustinian monk declared *Sola Fide!*, “Faith Alone!”, a slogan that had been used by many before him. But Martin Luther issued this proclamation in opposition to certain theological and ecclesiastical emphases of his time. Instead of teaching that faith could “make” one righteous, he insisted that only God can “declare” one to be righteous based upon Christ’s victory on the cross. Eventually he came to believe that the church needed reformation. And as the saying goes, “The rest is history.”

In the late twentieth century it appears that the most important slogan is *Sola carnalis*, “The flesh alone!” or “The physical alone!” Put in a contrary manner: “What you see is what you get!” Material things are usually the focus of our attention. Non material or spiritual things generally are not part of our consciousness. The impression is that life can be lived properly through the purchase of products. Or, life is to be lived as if this is the only one you’ve got; there is no heaven or hell, no sin, no sacrifice for sin, no judgment. As the old commercial says, “You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get.” And the slogan of a more recent commercial relates that “It doesn’t get any better than this!” as friends share the events of a wonderful day together in a beautiful setting while drinking just the right beer. Of course, there is a measure of truth in each of these slogans. We should live life with gusto, and we should enjoy times of companionship with friends. But from a Christian standpoint, these ideas should be coupled with a sober understanding that this life is not all there is.

Jesus often spoke directly to those who would deter Him from His mission, which required His brutal sacrifice. For example, Satan sought to tempt Jesus by focusing on material things.

But the Lord rejected Satan's enticements by focusing on things that transcend this life. And His rejections always began with a powerful, eternally meaningful slogan: "It is written," a reference to the truth of Scripture. On another occasion, after Jesus showed "His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things," Peter proclaimed, "This shall never happen to You." Jesus replied that Peter was setting his mind on man's interests, not God's. Then followed a haunting statement that has become a crucial slogan for those who would be Christ's disciples: "If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." This conversation came to a conclusion when Jesus asked two rhetorical questions: "For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:21-26)

Do those questions sound trite? Have we heard and read them so often that we don't consider their implications? If we are immersed in the concepts of today's slogans, such questions should be sobering. Referring back to our previous examples, Jesus' questions contain answers that say no, it is not true that "You only go around once." And yes, it does get better than this. We are more than physical beings destined for dirt. We are spiritual and physical beings destined for life in heaven or hell. And for the believer in Christ this life is to be lived with "the life to come" in mind.

Are We Slaves of Slogans?

"Remember the Alamo!" "No taxation without representation!" "I shall return!" "I have not yet begun to fight!" "Never give up!" These memorable slogans are the stuff of legends. They represent a level of commitment that led many to give their lives for a cause or country. Are the slogans of today any less intense? No doubt many new ones are entering the consciousness of those who have been at the center of the

tragic conflicts in Bosnia, Lebanon, and other centers of violent conflict. Strife seems to create powerful slogans.

But what of the strife that is found on the battlefield of our minds? Slogans are indicative of the war that is a part of the life of the mind. (It is fascinating to note that the etymology of the word slogan stems from the Gaelic *slaugh-garim*, which was a war cry of a Scottish clan.)

No doubt I could be accused of exaggerating the impact of slogans. But let's remember that enormous amounts of money are spent to encourage us to respond to the messages they contain. For example, commercials shown during the most recent Super Bowl cost the sponsors approximately \$1,000,000 per 60 second spot. Such sums surely would not be spent if there weren't a significant payoff. And it is not as if slogans were hidden in some underground culture; we are flooded with them at every turn. As one writer has put it: "Commercial messages are omnipresent, and the verbal and visual vocabulary of Madison Avenue has become our true *lingua franca*." [\(4\)](#) We may be at the point where we can communicate with one another more readily through the use of advertising slogans because they provide a common ground. But what is that common ground? Is it compatible with a Christian worldview? The answer to both questions in our secularized culture is usually "No!".

We have emphasized three themes that are readily found in contemporary slogans: vanity, immediate gratification, and materialism. Of course, there are many more subjects, but these serve to demonstrate that the *lingua franca*, the current common ground, is one that should be carefully weighed against the precepts of Scripture. The Christian worldview cannot accept such themes.

A disciple of Christ is challenged not only to consider the implications of slogans in the marketplace, but in the church as well. We can be swayed by the same ideas that drive those who formulate the slogans of commercialism. Douglas Webster

offers these penetrating comments:

Public opinion has become an arbiter of truth, dictating the terms of acceptability according to the marketplace. The sovereignty of the audience makes serious, prayerful thinking about the will of God unnecessary, because opinions are formed on the basis of taste and preferences rather than careful biblical conviction and thoughtful theological reflection. Americans easily become “slaves of slogans” when discernment is reduced to ratings. [\(5\)](#)

Surely none of us would like to be described as a “slave of slogans.” We want to believe that we are capable of sorting out the messages we hear so often. Yes, we are capable through the Lord’s guidance. But as Webster has written, we must be sober enough to be sure that we are not being led by taste and preferences. Instead, we should implant careful biblical conviction and thoughtful theological reflection in our lives. And I hasten to add that such thinking should apply to us both individually and within our churches.

Perhaps the most fitting way to conclude our discussion of slogans is with another slogan: “To God be the glory in all things!” Such a thought, if made the center of our lives, surely will demonstrate the power of slogans.

Notes

1. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner, 1979), 23.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), 16.
3. Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus: What’s Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill: 1992), 68.
4. Rogier van Bakel, “This Space for Rent,” *Wired* (June 1996), 160.
5. Webster, 29.

The Worldview of Jurassic Park – A Biblical Christian Assessment

Dr. Bohlin examines the message of Jurassic Park, bringing out some of the underlying messages on science, evolution, new age thinking, and cloning. The movie may be entertaining, but a Christian scientist points out some of the misconceptions people are taking away from the movie. Remember, this is just a piece of fiction—not a scientific treatise.

The Intent Behind *Jurassic Park*

Driving home after seeing the movie *Jurassic Park* in the first week of its release, I kept seeing tyrannosaurs and velociraptors coming out from behind buildings, through intersections, and down the street, headed straight at me. I would imagine: What would I do? Where would I turn? I certainly wouldn't shine any lights out of my car or scream. Dead give-aways to a hungry, angry dinosaur. Then I would force myself to realize that it was just a movie. It was not reality. My relief would take hold only briefly until the next intersection or big building.

In case you can't tell, I scare easily at movies. *Jurassic Park* terrified me. It all looked so real. Steven Spielberg turned out the biggest money-making film in history. Much of the reason for that was the realistic portrayal of the dinosaurs. But there was more to *Jurassic Park* than great special effects. It was based on the riveting novel by Michael

Crichton and while many left the movie dazzled by the dinosaurs, others were leaving with questions and new views of science and nature.

The movie *Jurassic Park* was terrific entertainment, but it was entertainment with a purpose. The purpose was many-fold and the message was interspersed throughout the movie, and more so throughout the book. My purpose in this essay is to give you some insight into the battle that was waged for your mind throughout the course of this movie.

Jurassic Park was intended to warn the general public concerning the inherent dangers of biotechnology first of all, but also science in general. Consider this comment from the author Michael Crichton:

Biotechnology and genetic engineering are very powerful. The film suggests that [science's] control of nature is elusive. And just as war is too important to leave to the generals, science is too important to leave to scientists. Everyone needs to be attentive.[^{\[1\]}](#)

Overall, I would agree with Crichton. All too often, scientists purposefully refrain from asking ethical questions concerning their work in the interest of the pursuit of science.

But now consider director Steven Spielberg, quoted in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*: "There's a big moral question in this story. DNA cloning may be viable, but is it acceptable?"[^{\[2\]}](#) And again in the *New York Times*, Spielberg said, "Science is intrusive. I wouldn't ban molecular biology altogether, because it's useful in finding cures for AIDS, cancer and other diseases. But it's also dangerous and that's the theme of *Jurassic Park*."[^{\[3\]}](#) So Spielberg openly states that the real theme of *Jurassic Park* is that science is intrusive.

In case you are skeptical of a movie's ability to communicate

this message to young people today, listen to this comment from an eleven-year-old after seeing the movie. She said, "Jurassic Park's message is important! We shouldn't fool around with nature."[\[4\]](#) The media, movies and music in particular, are powerful voices to our young people today. We cannot underestimate the power of the media, especially in the form of a blockbuster like *Jurassic Park*, to change the way we perceive the world around us.

Many issues of today were addressed in the movie. Biotechnology, science, evolution, feminism, and new age philosophy all found a spokesman in *Jurassic Park*.

The Dangers of Science, Biotechnology, and Computers

The movie *Jurassic Park* directly attacked the scientific establishment. Throughout the movie, Ian Malcolm voiced the concerns about the direction and nature of science. You may remember the scene around the lunch table just after the group has watched the three velociraptors devour an entire cow in only a few minutes. Ian Malcolm brashly takes center stage with comments like this: "The scientific power...didn't require any discipline to attain it...So you don't take any responsibility for it."[\[5\]](#) The key word here is responsibility. Malcolm intimates that Jurassic Park scientists have behaved irrationally and irresponsibly.

Later in the same scene, Malcolm adds, "Genetic power is the most awesome force the planet's ever seen, but, you wield it like a kid that's found his dad's gun." Genetic engineering rises above nuclear and chemical or computer technology because of its ability to restructure the very molecular heart of living creatures. Even to create new organisms. Use of such power requires wisdom and patience. Malcolm punctuates his criticism in the same scene when he says, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they

didn't stop to think if they should."

Malcolm's criticisms should hit a raw nerve in the scientific community. As Christians we ask similar questions and raise similar concerns when scientists want to harvest fetal tissue for research purposes or experiment with human embryos. If Malcolm had limited his remarks to *Jurassic Park* only, I would have no complaint. But Malcolm extends the problem to science as a whole when he comments that scientific discovery is the rape of the natural world. Many youngsters will form the opinion that all scientists are to be distrusted. A meaningful point has been lost because it was wielded with the surgical precision of a baseball bat.

Surprisingly, computers take a more subtle slap in the face—surprising because computers were essential in creating many of the dinosaur action scenes that simply could not be done with robotic models. You may remember early in the movie, the paleontological camp of Drs. Grant and Satler where Grant openly shows his distrust of computers. The scene appears a little comical as the field-tested veteran expresses his hate for computers and senses that computers will take the fun out of his quaint profession.

Not so comical is the portrayal of Dennis Nedry, the computer genius behind *Jurassic Park*. You get left with the impression that computers are not for normal people and the only ones who profit by them or understand them are people who are not to be trusted. Nedry was clearly presented as a dangerous person because of his combination of computer wizardry and his resentment of those who don't understand him or computers. Yet at the end of the movie, a young girl's computer hacking ability saves the day by bringing the system back on line.

The point to be made is that technology is not the villain. Fire is used for both good and evil purposes, but no one is calling for fire to be banned. It is the worldview of the culture that determines how computers, biotechnology, or any

other technology is to be used. The problem with *Jurassic Park* was the arrogance of human will and lack of humility before God, not technology.

The Avalanche of Evolutionary Assumptions

There were many obvious naturalistic or evolutionary assumptions built into the story which, while not totally unexpected, were too frequently exaggerated and overplayed.

For instance, by the end of the book and the film you felt bludgeoned by the connection between birds and dinosaurs. Some of these connections made some sense. An example would be the similarities between the eating behavior of birds of prey and the tyrannosaur. It is likely that both held their prey down with their claws or talons and tore pieces of flesh off with their jaws or beaks. A non-evolutionary interpretation is simply that similarity in structure indicates a similarity in function. An ancestral relationship is not necessary.

But many of the links had no basis in reality and were badly reasoned speculations. The owl-like hoots of the poison-spitting dilophosaur jumped out as an example of pure fantasy. There is no way to guess or estimate the vocalization behavior from a fossilized skeleton.

Another example came in the scene when Dr. Alan Grant and the two kids, Tim and Lex, meet a herd of gallimimus, a dinosaur similar in appearance to an oversized ostrich. Grant remarks that the herd turns in unison like a flock of birds avoiding a predator. Well, sure, flocks of birds do behave this way, but so do herds of grazing mammals and schools of fish. So observing this behavior in dinosaurs no more links them to birds than the webbed feet and flattened bill of the Australian platypus links it to ducks! Even in an evolutionary scheme, most of the behaviors unique to birds would have evolved after the time of the dinosaurs.

A contradiction to the hypothesis that birds evolved from dinosaurs is the portrayal of the velociraptors hunting in packs. Mammals behave this way, as do some fishes such as the sharks, but I am not aware of any birds or reptiles that do. The concealment of this contradiction exposes the sensational intent of the story. It is used primarily to enhance the story, but many will assume that it is a realistic evolutionary connection.

Finally, a complex and fascinating piece of dialogue in the movie mixed together an attack on creationism, an exaltation of humanism and atheism, and a touch of feminist male bashing. I suspect that it was included in order to add a little humor and to keep aspects of political correctness in our collective consciousness. Shortly after the tour of the park begins and before they have seen any dinosaurs, Ian Malcolm reflects on the irony of what *Jurassic Park* has accomplished. He muses, "God creates dinosaurs. God destroys dinosaurs. God creates man. Man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs." To which Ellie Satler replies, "Dinosaurs eat man. Woman inherits the earth!" Malcolm clearly mocks God by indicating that not only does man declare God irrelevant, but also proceeds to duplicate God's creative capability by creating dinosaurs all over again. We are as smart and as powerful as we once thought God to be. God is no longer needed.

While the movie was not openly hostile to religious views, Crichton clearly intended to marginalize theistic views of origins with humor, sarcasm, and an overload of evolutionary interpretations.

***Jurassic Park* and the New Age**

Ian Malcolm, in the scene in the biology lab as the group inspects a newly hatching velociraptor, pontificates that "evolution" has taught us that life will not be limited or extinguished. "If there is one thing the history of evolution has taught us, it's that life will not be contained. Life

breaks free. It expands to new territories, it crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously, but, uh, well, there it is!...I'm simply saying that, uh, life finds a way."

Evolution is given an intelligence all its own! Life finds a way. There is an almost personal quality given to living things, particularly to the process of evolution. Most evolutionary scientists would not put it this way. To them evolution proceeds blindly, without purpose, without direction. This intelligence or purposefulness in nature actually reflects a pantheistic or new age perspective on the biological world.

The pantheist believes that all is one and therefore all is god. God is impersonal rather than personal and god's intelligence permeates all of nature. Therefore the universe is intelligent and purposeful. Consequently a reverence for nature develops instead of reverence for God. In the lunch room scene Malcolm says, "The lack of humility before nature being displayed here, staggers me." Malcolm speaks of Nature with a capital "N." While we should respect and cherish all of nature as being God's creation, humility seems inappropriate. Later in the same scene, Malcom again ascribes a personal quality to nature when he says, "What's so great about discovery? It's a violent penetrative act that scars what it explores. What you call discovery, I call the rape of the natural world." Apparently, any scientific discovery intrudes upon the private domain of nature. Not only is this new age in its tone, but it also criticizes Western culture's attempts to understand the natural world through science.

There were other unusual new age perspectives displayed by other characters. Paleobotanist Ellie Satler displayed an uncharacteristically unscientific and feminine, or was it New Age, perspective when she chastened John Hammond for thinking that there was a rational solution to the breakdowns in the park. You may remember the scene in the dining hall, where philanthropist John Hammond and Dr. Satler are eating ice

cream while tyrannosaurs and velociraptors are loose in the park with Dr. Grant, Ian Malcolm, and Hammond's grandchildren. At one point, Satler says, "You can't think your way out of this one, John. You have to feel it." Somehow, the solution to the problem is to be found in gaining perspective through your emotions, perhaps getting in touch with the "force" that permeates everything around us as in *Star Wars*.

Finally, in this same scene, John Hammond, provides a rather humanistic perspective on scientific discovery. He is responding to Ellie Satler's criticisms that a purely safe and enjoyable *Jurassic Park*, is not possible. Believing that man can accomplish anything he sets his mind to, Hammond blurts out, "Creation is a sheer act of will!" If men and women were gods in the pantheistic sense, perhaps this would be true of humans. But if you think about it, this statement is truer than first appears, for the true Creator of the universe simply spoke and it came into being. The beginning of each day's activity in Genesis 1 begins with the phrase, "And God said."

Creation is an act of will, but it is the Divine Will of the Supreme Sovereign of the universe. And we know this because the Bible tells us so!

They Clone Dinosaurs Don't They?

The movie *Jurassic Park* raised the possibility of cloning dinosaurs. Prior to the release of the movie, magazines and newspapers were filled with speculations concerning the real possibility of cloning dinosaurs. The specter of cloning dinosaurs was left too much in the realm of the eminently possible. Much of this confidence stemmed from statements from Michael Crichton, the author of the book, and producer Steven Spielberg.

Scientists are very reluctant to use the word "never." But this issue is as safe as they come. Dinosaurs will never be

cloned. The positive votes come mainly from Crichton, Spielberg, and the public. Reflecting back on his early research for the book, Michael Crichton said, "I began to think it really could happen."[\[6\]](#) The official *Jurassic Park* Souvenir magazine fueled the speculation when it said, "The story of *Jurassic Park* is not far-fetched. It is based on actual, ongoing genetic and paleontologic research. In the words of Steven Spielberg: This is not science fiction; it's science eventuality."[\[7\]](#) No doubt spurred on by such grandiose statements, 58% of 1000 people polled for *USA Today* said they believe that scientists will be able to recreate animals through genetic engineering.[\[8\]](#)

Now contrast this optimism with the more sobering statements from scientists. The *Dallas Morning News* said, "You're not likely to see Tyrannosaurus Rex in the Dallas Zoo anytime soon. Scientists say that reconstituting any creature from its DNA simply won't work."[\[9\]](#) And *Newsweek* summarized the huge obstacles when it said, "Researchers have not found an amber-trapped insect containing dinosaur blood. They have no guarantee that the cells in the blood, and the DNA in the cells, will be preserved intact. They don't know how to splice the DNA into a meaningful blueprint, or fill the gaps with DNA from living creatures. And they don't have an embryo cell to use as a vehicle for cloning."[\[10\]](#) These are major obstacles. Let's look at them one at a time.

First, insects in amber. DNA has been extracted from insects encased in amber from deposits as old as 120 million years.[\[11\]](#) Amber does preserve biological tissues very well. But only very small fragments of a few individual genes were obtained. The cloning of gene fragments is a far cry from cloning an entire genome. Without the entire intact genome, organized into the proper sequence and divided into chromosomes, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct an organism from gene fragments.

Second, filling in the gaps. The genetic engineers of *Jurassic*

Park used frog DNA to shore up the missing stretches of the cloned dinosaur DNA. But this is primarily a plot device to allow for the possibility of amphibian environmentally-induced sex change. An evolutionary scientist would have used reptilian or bird DNA which would be expected to have a higher degree of compatibility. It is also very far-fetched that an integrated set of genes to perform gender switching which does occur in some amphibians, could actually be inserted accidentally and be functional.

Third, a viable dinosaur egg. The idea of placing the dinosaur genetic material into crocodile or ostrich eggs is preposterous. You would need a real dinosaur egg of the same species as the DNA. Unfortunately, there are no such eggs left. And we can't recreate one without a model to copy. So don't get your hopes up. There will never be a real *Jurassic Park*!

Notes

1. Sharon Begley, "Here come the DNAsaurs," *Newsweek*, 14 June 1993, 61.
2. Patrick Cox, "*Jurassic Park*, A Luddite Monster," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 July 1993.
3. Steven Spielberg, quoted by Patrick Cox, *WSJ*, 9 July 1993.
4. Cox, *WSJ*, 9 July 1993.
5. From this point on all dialogue is from the movie *Jurassic Park*, Kathleen Kennedy and Gerald R. Molen, Producers, copyright 1993, Universal City Studios, Inc., and Amblin Entertainment.
6. Michael Crichton, quoted in "Crichton's Creation," *The Jurassic Park Official Souvenir Magazine*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Topps Company, Inc., 1993), 4.
7. "Welcome to Jurassic Park," *The Jurassic Park Official*

Souvenir Magazine, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Topps Company, Inc., 1993), 2.

8. American Opinion Research poll of 1,000 adults from May 7-24, 1993 cited in *USA Today*, Friday, June 11, 1993, 2A.

9. Graphic inset, "How Real is *Jurassic Park?*," *The Dallas Morning News*, Monday, 14 June 1993, 10D.

10. Begley, "Here Come the DNAsaurs," 60-61.

11. Raul J. Cano, Hendrik N. Poinar, Norman J. Pieniazek, Aftim Acra, and George O. Poinar, Jr. "Amplification and sequencing of DNA from a 120 135-million-year-old weevil," *Nature* 363 (10 June 1993): 536-38.

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Why Care about Theology?

What is your response when you hear the word *theology*? Some people tend to cringe and think that such a word is of use only to the seminary student or, at the most, their pastor. Have you given much thought to how this word may apply to your life? If so, please continue your pursuit by thinking along with us. If not, we hope to encourage you to begin to take theology a little more seriously than you may have before.

Just what is theology? Literally, it is derived from a combination of two Greek terms meaning "a word about God." Eventually it was employed to refer not only to a study of the nature and attributes of God, but to the whole range of Christian doctrine. Augustus H. Strong, a theologian of the early twentieth century, offered a definition that is even broader. He wrote, "Theology is the science of God and of the

relations between God and the universe.”(1) So theology is concerned with a very wide range of subjects, such as the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, salvation, angels, the church, and the end times. Or, we can even say our theology pertains to all of life.

Sound theology is very important in the life of a Christian. History shows us this has always been true. From heresies in the very early church, through the upheaval of the Reformation, to the “Jesus Seminar” of more recent times, Christians have been challenged to give serious attention to matters of theology. And there are important reasons for each of us to devote increased attention to it at this time in history. Historic orthodox theology is currently being questioned, if not attacked, from both outside and inside our churches and institutions. Several examples will demonstrate this.

Contemporary Illustrations

A few years ago an infamous movie entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ* drew national and international attention because of its blasphemous caricature of Christ. The non-orthodox reports of the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of various scholars, have received the attention of both theological journals and popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. The conjectures of New Age advocates such as Shirley MacLaine include heretical views of God, Christ, and other facets of theology. Process theologians, who teach at many seminaries, teach a doctrine of God that includes the idea that “the world can be thought of as the body of God,” and the notion of a changing God who is as dependent on the world as the world is on Him.(2) Recent books from within evangelical circles include titles such as *The Openness of God*, which “asserts that such classical doctrines as God’s immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge demand reconsideration.”(3) More orthodox evangelical writers have written such books as *No Place for*

Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? Obviously, the title indicates that the author is concerned about what he believes is a collapse of theology.(4) *The Body*, a book by Charles Colson, decries what Colson sees as a drift to a consumer-oriented church that, among other things, isn't concerned about matters of theological truth(5).

Such illustrations serve to alert us to the need for more theological reflection, not less. These are challenging times for theology!

Who Are the Theologians?

Do you know anyone who can be called a theologian? You probably immediately begin to think of a seminary professor or an erudite pastor you may know. But is it possible *you* can be called a theologian? If someone were to ask you what you believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and many other doctrines, chances are you would answer their questions. Thus you are stating your theology; you are, at some level, a theologian. There are certainly "professional" theologians who spend their lives thinking about and teaching theology, but theology is not just for schools and seminaries; it is for life. It is for you and every other member of Christ's body, the church.

In the fairly recent past in this country theology was spoken of in both the academy and the church. David Wells, a contemporary professional theologian who is concerned about recapturing such unity, has written that at one time theology encompassed three essential elements: "(1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements." (6) "Confession, in this understanding, is what the Church believes. It is what crystallizes into doctrine." Thus we are to confess our theology based on the inspired Word of God, the Bible. Then we are to wrestle intellectually with what it means to hold such theology in the present world.

Finally, we are to wisely apply the truth found in the first two steps.(8) It appears that too often such steps are lacking among all but a few contemporary Christians.

For more than two years my wife and I visited worship services at many churches in the Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas metroplex, which some refer to as a major part of the "Bible belt." The churches represent a wide spectrum of denominational affiliations, and some are non-denominational. Our visits left us with many impressions, some of which are very positive. But one of several concerns is that too many of these churches emphasized appeasement rather than proclamation. That is, there was concern for relating to the "seeker" at the expense of teaching the believer; or there was an emphasis on "how to" sermons that contained little doctrinal substance; or there was stress on what is called contemporary Christian music coupled with lyrics that were often void of meaning; or there were statements of trite cliches that can do little, if anything, to lead the church to maturity. In other words, much was done to appease the "wants" of the people and little was done that would give the impression that theology is important in these churches.

On the other hand, those few churches that were the exceptions to such emphases boldly stated theological truth and genuinely worshipped God in the process. Their praise had meaning; their prayers were directed to the holy and sovereign God; their sermons contained truth that encouraged the church toward maturity; and even though individual "wants" were not stressed, true needs were met because theology for all of life had been proclaimed.

Which of these accounts is descriptive of your church? Does your church summon you to theological maturity? Or are you caught in a web of appeasement? The writer of Hebrews implored his readers to "press on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). May God help us do the same!

Theology in the World

A 1994 *U.S. News & World Report* poll of religious beliefs in the U.S. indicates that “about 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit, and about 60 percent say they attend religious services regularly.”(9) In addition, “more than 80 percent, including 71 percent of college graduates, believe the Bible is the inspired word of God.”(10) And “68 percent of Americans are members of a church or synagogue.”(11) But do such statistics mean that sound theology plays a significant part in our lives? For example, could it be “that the surprising growth of church membership rolls in recent decades may signify the ascendancy of shallower, less demanding forms of religion with wider appeal?”(12) We believe the answer to this question is, “Yes!” It appears that too many Christians are unwilling to face the demands of theological thinking, and shallowness is the result. Good theology requires contemplation, study, and even debate. It is demanding, and it is certainly not shallow.

Since we are living in a culture that believes “anything goes,” distinctive statements concerning our theology are increasingly necessary. Most people are willing to accept you as a Christian if your beliefs (i.e., your theology) are not narrow. If you are willing, for example, to state that Christianity is one of many legitimate paths to salvation, you will be accepted. But if you state that the gospel is the only path to salvation, you may be labeled as a narrow-minded bigot. Although a large majority of the people in this country claim to be religious, a large portion of that majority is still thinking within a relativistic worldview that attempts to reject absolutes. The exclusive claims of Christianity don’t fit within such a worldview.

This was brought out clearly for me during an open forum in the lobby of a dormitory on a large state university campus. For more than two hours one of my colleagues and I attempted

to answer questions concerning Christianity from approximately a hundred college students. Their questions led us in many directions. We discussed social, political, apologetic, and many other issues. But the subject that disturbed them most was salvation through Jesus Christ. When I declared that Jesus was the only way to God, many of the students expressed their strong disagreement and even anger. One student was indignant because he realized that my statement concerning Christ logically meant that his belief in an American Indian deity was wrong. Even some Christian students were uncomfortable with my assertion. They had an uneasiness about it because it seemed to be too intolerant. Thus I had to quickly remind them that Christ himself said He is the only way to God. I was not making a claim about Christ; I was simply telling them what He said about himself.

Those Christian students are indicative of the need for more demanding thought concerning theology. To claim to be a Christian and at the same time be immersed in the shallow pond of theological tolerance is antithetical. Perhaps the non-Christian students have an excuse; they don't know better. But the Christian students should know better; they need training in theology. And the same is true for all of us.

An Example of the Need

People continue to seek Jesus. But which Jesus? Is it the Jesus who was born of a virgin, who performed awesome miracles, who claimed to be God, who died on a cross for our sins, who rose from the dead, who ascended into heaven, who said He would return? Or is it the Jesus who died as a disillusioned revolutionary peasant? Or is it the Jesus who was a great religious teacher on a par with Buddha?

All these questions are very old, but at the same time they are very contemporary. And they indicate that theology, in this case the theology of Christ, continues to be important. As Christians, we are still challenged to think theologically.

Long-held, foundational, orthodox theology is being contested, not just within academia, but in more public venues. Let's consider a prominent example.

In 1991 a book was published by the title of *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.⁽¹³⁾ John Dominic Crossan, the author, then published a second book in 1994 entitled, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.⁽¹⁴⁾ Then the third book in his trilogy about Jesus, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images*,⁽¹⁵⁾ was also published in 1994. Such titles are filled with indications that Crossan is anything but a believer in an orthodox doctrine of Christ. Jesus may have been a Mediterranean Jewish peasant, but was He something much more? The second title indicates that the author believes there is need for a new biography of Jesus, so he has provided it. And the third title boldly asserts that the "original sayings" of Jesus have been isolated from all other sayings so that we can discover the "essential" Jesus.

I have brought Crossan and his books to our attention because he is a prominent member of what is called the Jesus Seminar. This much-publicized seminar is composed of scholars who "used to meet regularly to discuss and vote on the originality of Jesus' sayings (1985-92) and are now evaluating his actions and deeds in a similar manner."⁽¹⁶⁾

Crossan's view of Jesus is exposed in a meandering passage that follows his perspective of the surrounding Roman Empire in which Jesus lived. He writes:

Jesus lived, against the systemic injustice and structural evil of that situation, an alternative open to all who would accept it: a life of open healing and shared eating, of radical itinerancy, programmatic homelessness, and fundamental egalitarianism, of human contact with discrimination, and of divine contact without hierarchy. He also died for that alternative. That is my understanding of what Jesus' words and deeds were all about.⁽¹⁷⁾

Please note that Crossan has painted a picture of Jesus as a revolutionary whose primary concern was with things of this life. In fact his last phrase, “divine contact without hierarchy” (a confusing idea), is as close as he comes to stating that Jesus was anything more than a political radical. There is no mention of Jesus as the sacrificial Savior who takes away sin and gives eternal life.

In light of the fact that such perspectives are in vogue, and in light of the fact that they are taught to future pastors and professors, can we afford to leave theology in the back rooms of our minds?

Practical Theology

A recent book asserts that God “learns something from what transpires” in this world. The same text also asserts that “God comes to know events as they take place,” and that we should see God “as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world.”(18)

What is your reaction to such statements? If you have a reaction at all, you are to be commended. You are thinking theologically. As was true with me, your doctrine of God may have been challenged, and you may want to ask the author various questions. Those questions would probably have a lot to do with how you perceive God in your daily life. For example, you may want to ask if God is somehow dependent on you. If so, in what way?

Such thoughts demonstrate that theology is practical. If we stop a few minutes and concentrate, it is not difficult to see that our theology affects us, whether we are conscious of it or not. Let’s consider a few questions that can lead us to see how this is true.

1. If God used His awesome imagination to create the universe out of nothing, what is implied when the Bible states that humans are made in His image?

We can also use our God-given imaginations to create, not out of nothing, but out of what God supplied.

2. Is the Holy Spirit a person or a thing?

The Holy Spirit is a person within the godhead, the triunity. As a person, He interacts with us daily, and we can be filled with "Him," not "it."

3. If I accept Christ's sacrificial death for me, can my salvation be taken away?

No! "You have been saved" (Eph. 2:8) for eternity. You are secure as a member of God's family.

4. Was Jesus literally resurrected from the dead?

Yes! He has conquered death for us. "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54).

5. What is man's nature?

Man is made in God's image. But his image has been marred; thus our very nature inclines us to sin. Yet, though our genes, society, and other factors may influence us to sin, God holds us personally responsible to accept or reject His gracious offer of sin's remedy in Christ.

6. Do angels really exist?

Yes! Evil angels are in league with Satan and are actively opposed to God's purposes. Good angels are doing the bidding of God in the spiritual realm. Both evil and good angels can serve to remind us that there is both a physical and a spiritual dimension.

7. Is the church a building?

No! The church is the redeemed people of God, of all the ages, living and dead; the church is also called the "body of Christ." As such it is a living, dynamic carrier of the grace and power of God.

8. Is Jesus returning in power and authority for His church?

Yes! The truth of this brings security and hope in the midst of a troubled world.

In a cursory way these questions have touched the major categories of theology. It is our hope that you will study such categories seriously. What you believe about them is important to you and those who follow after you. Theology matters!

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Angels: The Good, the Bad,

and the Ugly – The Range of Angelic Activity

Sue Bohlin presents accounts of angelic activity in our world today consistent with the biblical account of angels and their actions. From a biblical worldview perspective, she considers both the involvement of good angels and bad angels in the circumstances of life. A good understanding of angelic activity will aid us in understanding the full world around us, both the seen and the unseen.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



I was about thirteen years old when I had my first encounter with an angel. I was going upstairs to my room, pulling my entire weight on the handrail, when it suddenly came off in my hand. I fell backwards, head first. Halfway into a terrible fall, I felt a strong hand on my back push me upright. There was nobody there—well, nobody *visible*!

Angel stories are always fascinating, and in this essay I address angels: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good angels are the holy ones, the bad angels are the evil ones, which the Bible calls demons, and the ugly angels are demons disguising themselves as good angels. These ugly angels have deceived many people in a culture that has embraced “angel mania.”

The Good Angels

The book of Hebrews calls angels “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). Angels minister in many ways to us, and I’d like to look at some of their ministries with examples from the scriptures as well as some modern anecdotes.

Provision

The Lord uses His angels to physically provide for His own. It was an angel who brought Elijah bread and water while fleeing from Jezebel after his victory on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 19:5-6).

In 1944, the penniless wife of a pastor and evangelist in Switzerland, Susie Ware prayed, "God, I need five pounds of potatoes, two pounds of pastry flour, apples, pears, a cauliflower, carrots, veal cutlets for Saturday, and beef for Sunday." A few hours later, someone knocked on the door, and there was a young man carrying a basket, who said, "Mrs. Ware, I am bringing what you asked for." It was precisely what she'd prayed for—down to the exact brand of pastry flour she wanted. The young man slipped away, and even though Rev. and Mrs. Ware watched at the window to their building, the man never exited. He just disappeared.[{1}](#)

Guidance

Sometimes, angels give guidance so God's people will know what He wants us to do. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take Mary as his wife and to name her baby Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-21)

And it was an angel who told Philip where to go in his travels so that he could meet the Ethiopian eunuch and lead him to Christ. (Acts 8:26)

My friend Lee experienced the comfort of guidance from an angel when the other men in his army unit were pressuring him to visit a red-light district. As he prayed for strength, an invisible messenger came to him and said, quite audibly from about ten feet away, "Have no fear of them. Do not succumb. I will sustain you and deliver you."

Encouragement

Angelic ministry to us can include powerful encouragement. When Paul and his shipmates were caught in a horrible storm and faced shipwreck, an angel appeared to him, assured him that not a life would be lost, and that he would live to stand trial before Caesar. (Acts 27:23)

One mother of a young girl told me that the night after her daughter's cancer surgery, a very tall nurse with long braids, a real Amazon, ministered to her all night long. She was caring for the girl with a strong but gentle tenderness, and talking with the mom about how good God is. After they went home, the mother decided to write a thank-you note to the nurse, and called the hospital to ask for her name. Everyone—even the head of nursing—insisted that there was no nurse with that description working at the hospital. She believes God sent an angel to encourage her through that dark night.

Protection

This world is a dangerous place, and angels can provide supernatural protection. Daniel 6 tells the story of how an angel shut the mouths of the lions when he was thrown into their den.

A young lady named Myra worked in the inner-city ministry of Teen Challenge in Philadelphia. One neighborhood gang liked to terrorize anyone who tried to enter the Teen Challenge building, and they harassed Myra as well. One night, when she was alone in the building with the gang banging on the door, she felt she should continue to try to reach out to them with the gospel of Jesus. As she opened the door, she breathed a prayer for protection. The boys suddenly stopped their shouting, looked at each other, turned and left quietly. Myra had no idea why.

Later on, as the staff people were able to build relationships with the gang members, the ministry director asked them why they dropped their threats against Myra and left her alone that night. One young man spoke up, saying, "We wouldn't dare touch her after her boyfriend showed up. That dude had to be seven feet tall." The director said, "I didn't know Myra had a boyfriend. But at any rate, she was here alone that night." Another gang member insisted, "No, we saw him. He was right behind her, big as life in his classy white suit." {2}

Another young woman walking home from work in Brooklyn had to go past a young man loitering against a building. She was fearful; there had been muggings in the area recently, and she prayed for protection. She had to go right by him, and although she could feel him watching her, he didn't move. A short time after she reached home, she heard sirens and saw police lights. The next day her neighbor told her someone had been raped, in the same place and just after she had passed by the young man.

She wondered if the man she'd passed was the rapist, because if it were, she could identify him. She called the police and discovered they had a suspect in custody. She identified him in a lineup and asked the policeman, "Why didn't he attack *me*? I was just as vulnerable as the next woman who came along." The policeman was curious too, so he described the woman and asked the suspect about her. He said, "I remember her. But why would I have bothered her? She was walking down the street with two big guys, one on either side of her." {3}

Rescue

Sometimes, angels rescue people in danger. It was an angel—if not the Angel of the Lord, who is the pre-incarnate Christ—who joined Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, rescuing them from the flames (Daniel 3).

My friend John told me that he and a friend were walking

through a rough neighborhood one night when 12 or 15 gang members jumped them. John took two punches and sank to the ground. He expected to be robbed and severely beaten, but he wasn't. Instead, he heard a voice from about six feet up: "It's okay, they're gone." He looked up and saw his friend who mysteriously was now about 25 feet away, leaning against a wall with his fists still clenched as if he were ready to fight. But there was no gang. They just disappeared. And there was nobody next to John.

Warrior Angels

The ministry of warrior angels catches the imagination in a special way. The prophet Elisha prayed that the Lord would open the eyes of his servant so he could see the mighty angelic army of God protecting them.

In Nazi Germany, one mother took her little boy, who was unchurched, to a shelter run by nuns that had become known as a safe place because nothing bad ever seemed to happen there. His first night, while everyone else was praying that God would protect them, this little boy kept his eyes open. After the "amen," he told his mother, "It came up to here on them!" and pointed to his breastbone. When asked what he meant, he said, "The gutter came up to here on them!" A nurse asked, "What are you talking about?" and he told her that he saw men filled with light guarding each corner of the shelter, so tall that they towered above the roof. The shelter was protected by huge warrior angels that only a little boy could see.[\[4\]](#)

Guardian Angels

Do we have guardian angels? The Bible doesn't give a definitive answer on that, although the Lord Jesus did say, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 18:10) And Psalm 91:11 promises, "For He will command His angels concerning you to

guard you in all your ways.”

One day, when my son was a baby, I tripped while I was holding him, and he went flying headlong toward a brick wall. There was nothing I could do to protect him, but I watched as he inexplicably stopped an inch from the wall and fell gently to the carpet. I knew immediately that an angel’s hand had been his bumper pad.

These are only a few of the stories of thousands about angels who protected and rescued people, both Christians and non-Christians. But a nagging question continues to arise: where are the angels when girls are raped, and drunk drivers crash headlong into a car of teenagers, and evil people blow up buildings with hundreds of innocent people in them?

The angels are still there, continuing to minister in pain and death. We usually don’t realize the role of angels in the midst of horrible circumstances because their work is unseen and often unfelt.

Behind the question of, “Where are the angels?” is the very difficult problem of why a good God would allow pain and suffering. The book of Job gives us two important insights into the problem of pain: first, when disasters and suffering assail us in the physical realm, there may be something bigger and more important going on in the unseen spiritual realm.[\[5\]](#) Second, God never gives Job an answer to his demand to know the “why”: He just says, “I am the sovereign Lord, acting in ways you cannot understand. You just need to trust Me, that I know what I’m doing.” The fact that God is in control, that He allows all pain and suffering for a reason, is the great comfort that we need to remember when it seems like the angels have forsaken us. They haven’t, because God hasn’t.

The Bad Angels

There are good angels, and there are bad angels. All of them

were created as holy angels, but about a third of them rebelled against God and fell from their sinless position. Satan, the leader of these demons or unholy angels, is a liar, a murderer, and a thief. (John 10:10) He hates God and he passionately hates God's people. The Bible tells us that he prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). We need to remember that Satan and all the demons are supernaturally brilliant, and Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

It's this masquerade as a holy angel that is behind the current angel craze in our culture. While there are a number of wonderful Christian books available that relate stories of holy angels helping people, there are many books, publications, and seminars that are filled with demonic deception of the ugliest kind. Because when you start talking to angels, you end up dealing with demons.

The Ugly Angels

The enemy of our souls is using a new twist on an old lie, exploiting the current interest in angels to attract the untaught and the undiscerning. Much of the current angel mania is simply New Age philosophy, which is actually old-fashioned pantheism. Pantheism is the belief that everything—an impersonal God as well as every part of the creation—is one big unity. All is one, God is one, we are God—and New Age philosophy throws reincarnation into the mix as well.

You know you're around "ugly angels," or demons masquerading as angels of light and holiness, when you see or hear these terms:

1. Contacting or communing with angels.

There are now books available with titles like *Ask Your Angels*[\[6\]](#) and *100 Ways to Attract Angels*[\[7\]](#). But the Bible gives neither permission nor precedent for contacting angels.

When people start calling on angels, it's not the holy angels who answer. They're demons, disguising themselves as good angels to people who don't know how to tell the difference.

2. Loving our angels, praying to our angels.

Some self-styled "angel experts" instruct their followers to love their angels and call upon them for health, healing, prosperity, and guidance. But angels are God's servants, and all this attention and emphasis and glory should go to God, not His servants. God says, "I will not share my glory with another" (Isaiah 42:8). Scripture makes no mention of loving angels—only God, His word, and people. And it never tells us to pray to angels, only to the Lord Himself.

3. Instruction, knowledge, or insight from angels, particularly ones with names.

Some angel teachers are proclaiming that angels are trying very hard to contact us, so they can give us deeper knowledge of the spiritual^[8]. Invariably, this "angel knowledge" is a mixture of truth and lies, and never stands up to the absolute truth of Scripture.

There are four angel names that keep popping up in the angel literature: Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael. Michael and Gabriel are the only angels mentioned by name in the Bible. The other two show up in the apocryphal *First Book of Enoch*, which includes a fanciful account of the actions of these four beings. [Note: it has been brought to my attention that there are actually two other named angels in the Bible: Apollyon, the angel of the abyss in Revelation 9:11, and Satan, who is an evil, fallen angel.] Those who report modern day angel teachings are actually channeling information from demons.

4. Special knowledge or teachings from angels.

Naomi Albright distributes teachings about the deep meanings of colors, and numbers and letters of the alphabet which she

claims is “knowledge given from above and brought forth in more detail by the High Angelic Master Sheate, Lady Master Cassandra, and Angel Carpelpous, and the Master Angel, One on High.”{9} These same beings told Mrs. Albright to stress two main teachings: first, that God accepts all religions, and second, Reincarnation.{10} These two teachings keep showing up in much of the New Age angel literature, which shouldn’t be surprising since they are heretical lies that come from the pit of hell, which is where the demons feeding these lies to the teachers are from.

Other angel teachings are that all is a part of God (pantheism); the learner is set apart from others by the “deep” knowledge that the angels give (this is a basic draw to the occult); and that eventually, the one who pursues contact with these angels will be visited by an Ascended Master or a Shining Angel (which is a personal encounter with a demon).

We need to remember that God’s angels are not teachers. God’s word says they are messengers—that’s what “angel” means—and they minister to us. God has revealed to us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), so any hidden knowledge that spirit beings try to impart is by nature occultic and demonic.

5. Human divinity

The message of the ugly angels is that we need to recognize that we are one with the divine, we are divine . . . we are God. In Karen Goldman’s *The Angel Book: A Handbook for Aspiring Angels*, she says things like, “Angels don’t fall out of the sky; they emerge from within.”{11} And, “The whole purpose in life is to know your Angel Self, accept it and be it. In this way we finally experience true oneness.”{12}

The following bit of heretical garbage was channeled from a demon posing as an angel named Daephrenocles: “The wondrous light of the Angels, from the elohim to the Archangels to the

Devas and Nature Spirits, are all bringing to you the realization that you are magnificent—you are divine now and divine first.”[\[13\]](#)

Much of the angel literature refers to “the angel within.” But angels are a separate part of the creation. They were created before man as a different kind. They are not within us. The movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” notwithstanding, when we hear a bell ring it does not mean that an angel is getting his wings. Nor do good people, especially children, become angels when they die. We remain human beings—not angels, and certainly not God.

What our culture needs in response to the angel craze is strong discernment built on the foundation of God’s word. We need to remember, and share with others, three truths about angels:

1. The ministry of holy angels will never contradict the Bible.
2. The actions of holy angels will always be consistent with the character of Christ.
3. A genuine encounter with a holy angel will glorify God, not the angel. Holy angels never draw attention to themselves. They typically do their work and disappear.

It’s very true that many have “entertained angels unaware” (Hebrews 13:2). But we need to make sure we’re entertaining the right kind of angels!

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8. Karyn Martin-Kuri, in an interview with *Body Mind and Spirit* journal, May/June 1993. Also, Albright, Naomi, *Angel Walk* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Portals Press, 1990).
9. *Paths of Light* newsletter, Angel Walk F.O.L. (Followers of Light), No. 24, July 1994, p. 6-10.
10. Albright, *Angel Walk*, p. 77-78.
11. Goldman, Karen, *The Angel Book—A Handbook for Aspiring Angels* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1988), p. 20.
12. Ibid, p. 95.
13. *These Celestial Times* newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 1. (Gaithersburg, Maryland), p. 4.

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Is There Really a Hell?

Rick Rood discusses the biblical teaching on hell, as well as the practical effects of this belief for Christians.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



The story has been told of C. S. Lewis listening to a young preacher's sermon on the subject of God's judgment on sin. At the end of his message, the young man said: "If you do not receive Christ as Savior, you will suffer grave eschatological

ramifications!" After the service, Lewis asked him the question, "Do you mean that a person who doesn't believe in Christ will go to hell?" "Precisely," was his response. "Then say so," Lewis replied. [\(1\)](#)

This story illustrates something that most Christians know, but few articulate: that of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the one we feel most uncomfortable discussing is the doctrine of eternal punishment or hell. And it is not difficult to understand why this is so. The doctrine of hell is offensive to unbelievers, and contradicts the emphasis on tolerance and on human potential that dominates our times. Who of us enjoys alienating our friends by speaking of eternal judgment for sin? For many of us, the doctrine of hell is also difficult to reconcile with the the love and grace of God. Furthermore, we are well aware of Christians who have misused the doctrine of hell by using it to manipulate and control other people. In seeking to distance ourselves from the abuse of this doctrine, and to avoid appearing intolerant and uncaring, many of us have eliminated the word "hell" entirely from our vocabulary (making our belief an entirely personal matter).

Recent surveys have revealed some very interesting facts about current attitudes toward hell. A survey conducted by George Gallup in 1990 revealed that just under 60% of Americans believe there is a hell (down over 10% from 1978), though only 4% believe that hell was their own personal destination. A survey in the mid-1980s of American evangelical college and seminary students revealed that only one in ten believed that the first step in influencing unbelievers for Christ should be to warn about hell. 46% of seminary students believed that to emphasize to non-believers that eternal judgment would be a consequence of rejecting Christ was "in poor taste." A survey conducted in 1981 revealed that 50% of theology faculty believe in the existence of hell (61% of Roman Catholics, and 34% of Protestants)! [\(2\)](#)

In spite of the prevailing current attitudes toward hell revealed by these surveys, however, it is still apparent to most Christians that the doctrine of hell is firmly grounded in the teaching of Scripture. All but one of the letters of the Apostle Paul mention the wrath or judgment of God on sin. And of the twelve uses of the word *gehenna* (the strongest word for hell) in the New Testament, eleven come from the lips of Jesus himself! In fact, the Savior taught more about hell than He did about heaven! Of the more than 1850 verses recording the words of Christ, 13% pertain to the topics of judgment and hell. Of the 40 or so parables uttered by Jesus, more than half relate to God's eternal judgment on sin. Surprisingly, the much beloved "Sermon on the Mount" contains some of Jesus' most straightforward words about hell!

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

In his book simply titled "Inferno," Dante Alighieri describes in great detail his imaginary tour through nine levels of hell. Dante's book makes for fascinating reading. But to learn what hell is really like, we must turn to another source: the Bible.

As we begin reading through the Old Testament, we find frequent references to "sheol" (the world of departed spirits) as the abode of all the dead (cf. Deut. 32:22). As we continue reading, we find also that a day will come when the bodies of all who are in sheol will be resurrected: some to "everlasting life" but others to "everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

The common belief of godly rabbis during the intertestamental era that sheol was divided into two sections is reflected in the New Testament, which refers to the abode of the righteous as "Paradise" (Lk. 23:43) or "Abraham's bosom" (Lk. 16:22), and the abode of the unrighteous as "Hades" (Lk. 16:23). After Christ's resurrection, it appears that those who resided in Paradise were ushered into the presence of God in heaven where they await the future resurrection of their bodies. But those

who are in Hades await a resurrection to a different destination— hell.

The word that is used most frequently in the New Testament for hell is *Gehenna*. Gehenna is a reference to the Valley of Hinnom located on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the city's "garbage dump" during Jesus' time. The fires that burned here never went out.

As did his contemporaries, Jesus referred to Gehenna as the place where "the fire is not quenched" and where "their worm does not die" (Mk. 9:48). Whether He implied a literal flame and a literal worm is not of great importance. Jesus also described hell as a place of "outer darkness" (Mt. 22:13). But it is clear that He meant us to understand that hell is a place of continual deterioration and suffering for those who inhabit it! Jesus also referred to those who were cast into hell as being "cast outside" (Mt. 8:12), or as Paul simply puts it "away from the presence of the Lord" (II Thess. 1:9). Hell is a place of exclusion and loss of every blessing that comes from God. Hell is described as a place of "contempt" by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 12:2)—where every person is despised by every other inhabitant. As one writer has put it: "Sinners in hell will have company but no sympathy" [\(3\)](#)

Jesus said hell will be a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:42). The weeping no doubt speaks of terrible remorse and grief. But the gnashing of teeth speaks of intense anger—anger at oneself, anger at Satan, anger at God. Paul speaks of hell's inhabitants as experiencing "wrath and anger ... trouble and distress" (Rom. 2:8-9).

The Bible also tells us that in hell not all will be judged alike. Jesus made it clear that there will be degrees of judgment in hell. He said that the one "who knew his master's will and did not ... act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few" (Lk.

12:47-48). But though not all will be judged equally, all will be judged with certainty. Exodus 34:7 tells us that though the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, ... yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Does the Bible teach that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for sin? One alternative proposal is that for many (if not all) a second opportunity will be given after death to respond to the grace of God. Appeal is usually made to the statement in Peter’s first letter that “the gospel ... has been preached even to those who are dead” (4:6). William Barclay states that in this passage we find a “glimpse of nothing less than the gospel of a second chance” (Commentary on the Epistles of Peter). Yet, the context makes clear that he is speaking of those to whom the gospel was preached during their lifetime, but who now were deceased! There is no indication at all that a “post-mortem” opportunity to repent exists.

In John 8, Jesus says that for those who “die in their sins” there is no possibility of joining Him in heaven (vv. 21,24). In contrasting the expectation of the believer of being reunited with loved ones in heaven, he says that unbelievers “have no (such) hope” (I Thess. 4:13). These statements are difficult to reconcile with the belief that the deceased are offered a second opportunity after death. Hebrews 9:27 says that “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”

Another proposal, that is gaining a wider acceptance today, is that unbelievers will simply be snuffed out of existence or “annihilated.” Support for this belief is often sought in statements throughout Scripture that describe sinners as “perishing” or being “destroyed.” The psalmist says, “May the wicked perish before God” (68:2). The same word, however, is

used in Isaiah 57:1 to refer to the righteous: "The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart." It is clear that in the latter case, the word implies "severe suffering." It could not possibly mean that the righteous are "extinguished." There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the opposite is the case when the word is used to describe the fate of sinners. To "perish" or be "destroyed" means to "suffer ruin," not to be "annihilated."

That the Bible teaches eternal conscious punishment for sin in hell, is the only deduction that can be reached from the fact that the most emphatic words available to the biblical writers were consistently used to describe hell's endless duration, as well as to describe the duration of heaven, and even the eternal existence of God! Just as Jesus described the destiny of the righteous as "eternal life," so He described the destiny of the unrighteous as "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:46). Just as John described God as the one who "lives forever and ever" (Rev. 15:7), so He described the fire of hell as lasting "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11).

Sometimes it is said that the Greek word for eternal (*aionios*) really means "age lasting," implying that at the end of a series of ages God will empty hell of all its inhabitants. Those who hold this interpretation, however, fail to recall that while this present age is finite in duration, it was the common understanding among Jesus' listeners that the "age to come" was eternal!

In reference to the fate of Judas, Jesus said: "It would have been better for him if he had never been born" (Mt. 26:24). If indeed it is as terrible a fate as these words suggest, and if it is eternal in duration, why would a loving God send people to hell? If God is a God of love, why would He consign anyone to an eternity as terrible as the Bible describes the fate of those whose destiny is hell?

Perhaps the biblical doctrine of hell can begin to make more

sense to us when we reexamine our understanding of two other teachings of Scripture: the nature of God, and the nature of man and of sin.

One of the wonderful revelations of Scripture is that God is a God of infinite love and grace. Who of us is not refreshed when we read the words of the psalmist: "But Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (86:15)? Yet it is the same God who is also described as the One who "will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:7)! The God who loves the sinner is also the God whose "eyes are too pure to approve evil" and who cannot "look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13). The psalmist quotes God at one point as saying, "You thought that I was just like you" (50:21). But we are in need of the realization that just as God's love is far beyond our own, so the purity of his holiness exceeds all our conceptions! When Isaiah was granted a vision of the Lord on his throne, he was shaken by his impression of his holiness (Isa. 6:3)! For sure, God is a God of indescribable love, but He is just as much a God of absolute holiness and righteousness! When we gain a vision of the holiness of God as it is portrayed in the Bible, we begin to understand the reasonableness of the doctrine of hell.

We are also helped when we allow Scripture to more fully inform us in our comprehension of the nature of man and of sin. The emphasis in our generation on the value and dignity of the human person has been a welcome corrective to a past overemphasis on the depravity of man. Yet it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that though we are indeed created in the image of God and of very special value in His eyes, nonetheless we are also deeply and indelibly stained by sin in every area of our being. The God who knows every thought and motive of every human heart, said that it "is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Jesus himself said that "from within, out of

the heart of men, proceed (all manner of evil)" by which we are defiled (Mk. 7:21-23)!

When Ezra learned of the disobedience of the people of Israel in marrying unbelievers, he said, "I tore my garment and my robe, ... and sat down appalled" (Ezra 9:3). When the Apostle Paul saw the city of Athens filled with idols, "his spirit was ... provoked within him" (Acts 17:16)! Is it possible that we have lost something of the sense of the seriousness of sin that seemed to grip the heart of these two men?

Some have objected that while sin is certainly worthy of punishment, a "finite" sin is hardly worthy of the "infinite" punishment of hell. But that our rebellion against God should be considered "finite" in nature is not entirely clear.

When we consider that the One against whom we have rebelled is the One who gave us life, who is the source of every good thing that we know in life, and who has extended his love by giving his own Son as payment for our sin, how can we possibly measure the gravity of our sin or the punishment it deserves? When we consider too that there is no indication that those in hell will ever experience a "change of heart" in attitude toward God, perhaps we can see that God's judgment is entirely just.

The Doctrine of Hell: What Difference Does It Make?

We want to focus on three areas of life that should be impacted by our understanding of the biblical doctrine of hell.

The first is our attitude toward sin ... particularly our own. A number of years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* In it he challenged the popular notion that all of our thoughts and actions can be accounted for by factors beyond our own personal control, that we are

rarely responsible for our own conduct. For sure, there are “mitigating” factors in most of our lives that influence our character and conduct to greater or lesser degree. And God is not unaware of these things. “He knows our frame, that we are but dust” (Ps. 103:14). He knows as well that we are born with a sinful nature that is beyond the power of human will to overcome (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). But He also knows that the choice is our own as to whether we approve and condone the fruit of our sinful nature, or whether we turn to Him for grace to hold in check our sinful impulses and to learn to follow his will. In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “Thy will be done.” The choice is ours as to which kind of person we will become.

When we realize that we are responsible for what we choose to do about our sin, and that it is more than merely an act that may result in unpleasant consequences for ourselves, but that it is also a disposition of rebellion against God, that requires his holy judgment, we cannot help but become more sensitive to its presence in our lives!

The second result of a biblical understanding of hell is a much greater appreciation for the grace and salvation we have received from God! Our appreciation for the immense value of this gift is greatly enhanced when we fully comprehend the nature of that from which we have been delivered. Our perception of the awesomeness of salvation is determined in large measure by our perception of the awfulness of hell!

Finally, a biblical understanding of hell should move us to include in our proclamation of the gospel a clear warning about the consequence of failing to respond. We need to be more forthright than the preacher whom Charles Spurgeon reported as saying, “If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be sent to the place which it is not polite to mention.” [\(4\)](#) C.S. Lewis once said: “If Christianity only

means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference.” [\(5\)](#) If there really is a hell, then Christianity is far more than one more bit of good advice!

In his book *Our Guilty Silence*, John Stott recounts how the seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries to China, not wanting to offend the sensitivities of the Chinese, excluded the cross of Christ and other details from their message. Quoting Hugh Trevor- Roper, Stott says, “We do not learn that they made many lasting converts by the unobjectionable residue of the story.” [\(6\)](#)

There is little question that the doctrine of hell has at times been abused. But as one writer has well put it: “May its misuse not result in its disuse” in our efforts to lead people to Christ.

Notes

1. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992. p. 13
2. Dixon, pp. 10-13; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp.2-3.
3. John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992, p. 146.
4. Quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991, p. 171.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960, p. 133)

6. John Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd, p. 45.

Recommended Resources on the Subject of Hell:

Blanchard, John. *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992.

Dixon, Larry. *The Other Side of the Good News*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992.

Fernando, Ajith. *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.

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The Truth About Heaven

Rick Rood analyzes the teaching of the Bible about heaven, as well as the practical effects of the Christian belief in heaven.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

What images come to mind when you think of Heaven? Do you think of a mode of life that is exciting and fulfilling? Or do the words of the epitaph of one dear soul come nearer to hitting the mark?

Weep not for me, friend, tho' death do us sever, I am going to do nothing forever and ever. [{1}](#)

Does Heaven awaken for you a sense of anticipation, or does it evoke visions of monotonous and boring inactivity?

What is Heaven really like? Is Heaven even something we should spend much time thinking about? Or should we relegate thoughts of Heaven to the dusty corners of our mind, lest we render ourselves of little earthly good?

In this essay we want to focus on what the Bible teaches about Heaven, and how these teachings should impact the way we live. We will note some of the foundational truths about Heaven revealed in Scripture.

We know first of all that Heaven is the spiritual realm in which the glory of God's presence is manifest, and in which dwell the angels of God, and all believers who have departed this world (Heb. 12:22-24). The few glimpses of Heaven given in Scripture reveal a pervading sense of the holiness of God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4-5), which had an alarming and overwhelming impact on those who were granted such visions (Isa. 6; Dan. 7:9-28). Isaiah, when he saw the Lord sitting on His throne, said, "Woe is me . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

We are also informed that it is a place which human words are inadequate to fully describe. Ezekiel could only describe what the glory of Heaven was "like" or "resembles" (Ezek. 1). In reporting on his apparent visit to heaven, the apostle Paul said that he "heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:4). What he saw was not only

impermissible but impossible to describe in human terms! Heaven is certainly among those things he described elsewhere as “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9)! No wonder Paul says in another place that we shall be “astonished” when we see the Lord at His coming in glory (2 Thess. 1:10)!

Third, we know that for those who belong to Christ, Heaven is their immediate destination after death. To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul said that “to be absent from the body (is to be) at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), and that should he depart this world, he would “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But there is really no reason to believe we will not be. To be infinite in relation to time is an attribute only God can possess. We know that Scripture speaks of “months” in Heaven (Rev. 22:2) and even “ages” to come (Eph. 2:7). Certainly also, the music which will be sung in Heaven requires a temporal mode of existence. It seems apparent also that in Heaven we will be cognizant, to some degree, of what is transpiring on earth. When Moses and Elijah met the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, it’s recorded that they discussed Jesus’ coming return to glory (Luke 9:30-31). And during the coming tribulation period we are told that the saints in Heaven will be anxiously awaiting the completion of God’s purposes on earth (Rev. 6:10-11). Until His kingdom comes, even in Heaven the question will be asked, “How long, O Lord?” (as these saints are recorded as imploring).

Oswald Sanders said: “God has not told us all we’d like to know, but He has told us all we need to know” about Heaven {2}. So, let’s look closer now at more of what the Bible does tell us about existence in heaven.

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like?

Spiritual Changes!

Mark Twain once sarcastically asserted that in Heaven, for twelve hours every day we will all sing one hymn over and over again.^[3] Hardly an inviting thought! The Bible, however, paints a much different picture of what life in Heaven will be like. Consider just a few of Heaven's most significant characteristics.

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of "the hope of righteousness" for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body (Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold "the glory of the Lord" we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him "just as He is." And when we do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

Second, in Heaven our comprehension of the nature of God will be greatly expanded. The apostle Paul says that "though now we see through a glass darkly," then we shall "see face to face" and "shall know fully, as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12). It is

this knowledge I am convinced that will move us to spontaneously join the heavenly chorus in singing hymns of praise to Almighty God. From the few glimpses of heavenly worship we are granted in Scripture, we learn that our praise of God will focus both on who He is—the eternal, holy, almighty God (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8)—and on what He has done (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14). If our worship of God is muted now, it is at least partially because we do not yet fully comprehend the greatness of His glory and the awesomeness of His creative and redemptive work. But in Heaven we will gain much clearer insight into the wisdom of God displayed in the intricacies of His creation, and of His marvelous purposes manifest in His redeeming work. Some have wondered how we could be happy in heaven knowing that some of God’s creatures are enduring His eternal judgment. It seems apparent, however, that in Heaven we will gain a much clearer perspective on the justice of God (cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1-4). Perhaps the most perfect happiness of Heaven is impossible apart from some element of sorrow over the eternal loss of those who have rejected God’s grace. No doubt, however, many of the mysteries of life and of God’s ways in our individual lives will be more clearly understood, prompting us to join in His praise.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that there will be opportunity for growth in Heaven . . . not growth toward perfection, but growth in perfection. As a man, Jesus was indeed perfect. Yet Scripture tells us that He “grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man.” Scripture also tells us that one of the three virtues that will abide forever is hope (1 Cor. 13:13). And what is hope but the expectation of better and better things yet to come . . . the prospect of all for whom Heaven is our eternal home!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

George Bernard Shaw once said, “Heaven, as conventionally

conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore" {4}. The interesting thing about Shaw's statement is that he was right . . . at least when it comes to Heaven as it is "conventionally conceived!" {5} But the Bible informs us that the life that awaits us is not only "better" than anything we could ever dream of here, or even "much better," but according to the apostle Paul, "very much better" (Phil. 1:23)! Now we want to continue our consideration of some of these "very much better" things that await us in Heaven.

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and "dies" (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is "spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!"

The second "very much better" thing that will await us is the creation of a new heaven and earth in which we shall live with Christ forever. Jesus referred to this transformation of the creation as "the regeneration" (Matt. 19:28) the same term used to describe the new birth of a believer. Paul described it as the time when it will be "set free from its slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). In the Revelation we are told that in

the new creation there will be “no more sorrow, pain or death” (Rev. 21:4). And in Isaiah’s prophecy we read that the glories of the new creation will be so marvelous that “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17)! Not only will the sufferings of this present life fade in comparison to the glory of this new world order (Rom. 8:18), but even the most wonderful of life’s experiences will be so overshadowed by our new life that they will barely survive in our memory! When the apostle John was given a vision of life in the new creation, he was so overwhelmed that he had to be reminded to record what he was witnessing (Rev. 21:5), and to be assured twice that what he was beholding would really come to pass (Rev. 21:5; 22:6)!

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united worship of God, we will serve (Rev. 22:3) and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). The domain over which we will reign will no doubt encompass all of creation, for we’re told that for Christ “all things have been created” (Col. 1:16), and that with Him we will inherit “all these things” (Rev. 21:7)! Though in many respects there will be a certain continuity between our present and future life, many tasks and occupations of the present order will no longer be needed. The enterprises in which we will engage will be totally creative and productive far more fulfilling and exciting than anything we know on earth today!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? The Prospect of Heavenly Reward

So far in our discussion on Heaven we have noted aspects of our heavenly experience that will be true for all of us who will ultimately make it our home.

We want to focus now on the fact that there are some things about Heaven that will not be equally enjoyed by all.

Jesus on more than one occasion stated that not all who enter Heaven will enjoy its blessings to the same degree. Not that there will be any judgment or punishment for those who are heavenbound. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). But Jesus did say that in His kingdom "many who are first shall be last, and the last first" (cf. Matt. 19:30).

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ's presence "with confidence," or "to shrink away from Him in shame" (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a "stumbling" fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be "rewarded," or "suffer loss"; that it is possible to be "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the "fire" referred to here is a reference to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as "a flame of fire" (Rev. 1:14). "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for "bad" in this case refers not merely to what is "evil" but to what from God's perspective is "worthless." Not only will our "works" be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

What is the nature of the reward that may be won or lost? Many passages speak of our heavenly reward in terms of the responsibility with which we will be entrusted by God when we reign with Christ in the new heaven and new earth. In Jesus' parable of the talents, He spoke of rewarding those who had been faithful by putting them "in charge of many things" in His kingdom (Matt. 25:21-23). In another place He spoke of putting some of us in places of authority over cities in His kingdom (Luke 19:17,19). To those who had stood by Him in His

earthly trials, Jesus promised to place them “on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” in His future kingdom, as well as to seat them at His side at His table (Luke 22:28-30)! Not only would they be worthy of being entrusted with greater responsibility, but also capable of enjoying the closest fellowship with Christ!

In many passages heavenly rewards are likened to the “crowns” worn by victors in athletic contests. Whether literal or metaphorical, these crowns represent different aspects of our heavenly reward. The “crown of life” is promised to those who persevere under trial (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), the “crown of righteousness” to those who long for Christ’s return (2 Tim. 4:8), an “incorruptible crown” to those who exercise self control (1 Cor. 9:25), the “crown of rejoicing” to those who lead others to Christ (1 Thess. 2:19), and the “crown of glory” to those who serve unselfishly as spiritual leaders (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

The most important fact about our heavenly rewards is that they are based not on our position or ability, but on our faithfulness. Time and again Jesus told His followers that “he who is faithful in a little thing, will be faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10; 19:17).

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

Before we conclude, we want to think about just a few of the ways in which our life on earth should be impacted by what we believe about Heaven.

First, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the disappointments and sufferings of this life. D. A. Carson was right when he wrote: “There is nothing in Scripture to encourage us to think we should always be free from the vicissitudes that plague a dying world” [\[6\]](#). But one thing the hope of Heaven can do is help us to put the “dark side” of life in perspective. Paul wrote: “For I consider that the

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). The glory to come will be immeasurably greater than the depth of any sorrow we may know today!

But Scripture also tells us that our present sufferings actually play a role in preparing us for that glory to come! As the apostle put it: "For momentary, light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The very qualities and virtues that will fit us for Heaven are today being woven into our soul through the many afflictions of our present life . . . freeing us from the bonds of self-indulgence, creating in us a heart of compassion for others, and prodding us to draw ever closer to the One whose presence we shall enjoy for eternity to come.

Second, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the true nature of success. On every side we hear the message that the "good life" consists in the accumulation of material possessions, the acquisition of power, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Scripture does encourage us to enjoy the many good things of life with which we may be blessed (1 Tim. 6:17); but the hope of Heaven should remind us that this world and all that is in it is passing away, that its glory is for only a season (1 John 2:15-17), that we truly are "strangers and aliens" in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

That's why it exhorts us to set our minds and hearts on Heaven and to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3). God is urging us to turn aside from what in His eyes are "trivial pursuits" that end only in emptiness, and to devote ourselves to those ambitions that will yield fruit that will accompany us into the next world. When Jesus said to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness," He was encouraging us to make these things our highest priority in life.

Finally, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on death. The Scriptures nowhere teach that as believers we are

immune from or should deny the reality of the sorrow that death can bring. But in Christ, we share in His victory over death! We grieve, but we grieve not as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), rather as those who are certain of our reunion with loved ones who have gone before, of receiving a glorious body that will never weaken or decay, of entering a wonderful new life beyond our fondest dreams, and of forever being with the Lord!

At the end of his beloved "Narnia Tales" C. S. Lewis describes the events that transpire as the characters in his story enter Heaven: "(T)he things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." [\[7\]](#)

Notes

1. Gilmore, John. *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 175.
2. Sanders, J. Oswald. *Heaven Better By Far*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, p. 10.
3. Sanders, p. 19.
4. Stedman, Ray C. *God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1991, p. 334.
5. Stedman, 334.
6. Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 250.

7. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 183-184.

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