

Spiritual Abuse

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of what makes churches and organizations spiritually and emotionally unhealthy and hurtful.

In some ways, this article on spiritual abuse is an update on [a previous article on Abusive Churches](#). However, this article also provides a biblical perspective on the broader issue of spiritual abuse occurring in our country today.

Many church leaders became aware of the prevalence of abusive churches more than four decades ago when Professor Ronald Enroth wrote his best-selling book, *Churches That Abuse*. A few years later he followed up with a book on *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*.



More than three decades ago, Dr. Pat Zukeran wrote a week of Probe radio programs based on the first book by Ronald Enroth. The transcript of that program is still one of the top ten most popular articles based on the number of Internet searches that land on them each year.

That response to this important subject isn't unique. For example, thousands have also purchased the book by Stephen Arterburn *Toxic Faith*. The same is true of Ken Blue's book *Spiritual Abuse* and Philip Keller's book *Predators in Our Pulpits*. June Hunt with Hope for the Heart has also written a helpful booklet on *Spiritual Abuse*.

Jesus addressed the issue of spiritual abuse many times when he confronted the Pharisees. In Matthew 23, he proclaims seven woes to the Scribes and Pharisees. He concludes with: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" He describes them this way in John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your

father's desires.”

Paul also addresses various aspects of spiritual abuse and legalism within the church. He warns us about legalism by teaching that no works of the law can justify us (Romans 3:20). Instead, the “law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).

Spiritual abuse can occur when someone is in a position of spiritual authority misuses that authority to control or manipulate another Christian. It may take the form of using religious works to control. It may involve misusing Scripture or twisting biblical concepts. Churches or Christian organizations may be guilty of teaching false doctrine. Even churches that teach sound doctrine may be guilty allowing worship leaders to bring music into the church with bad theology.

Spiritual abuse can also occur when someone in a position of spiritual authority fails to act. Many of the recent church scandals took place because church leaders or denominational leaders failed to act on or report incidents of sexual harassment or sexual abuse.

Characteristics of Abusive Churches

The book, *Churches That Abuse*, lists eight characteristics of abusive churches. You might compare that list to your own church and to other churches you know.

1. Abusive churches have a control-oriented style of leadership. The leader may be arrogant and dogmatic. The leader often is portrayed as more in tune spiritually with God. Thus, these leaders often are not accountable to anyone.

2. Second, the leader of an abusive church often uses manipulation to gain complete submission from their members. These tactics may involve guilt, peer pressure, and

intimidation. The leader may even suggest that divine judgment from God will result if you question them.

3. There is a rigid, legalistic lifestyle involving numerous requirements and minute details for daily life. Members are pressured to give a certain amount of time and money to the church. Often members drop out of school, quit working, or neglect their families to meet a church-designated quota.

4. Abusive churches tend to change their names, especially once they are exposed by the media. Often this is done because the church received bad publicity or was involved in a significant scandal.

5. Abusive churches are often denouncing other churches because they see themselves as superior to all other churches. The church leadership sees itself as the spiritual elite and the "faithful remnant." They are the only ones "faithful to the true gospel."

6. Abusive churches have a persecution complex and view themselves as being persecuted by the world, the media, and other Christian churches. Because they see themselves as a spiritual elite, they also expect persecution from the world and even feed on it.

7. Abusive churches specifically target young adults between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. Often, they target youth who are less experienced but looking for a cause. Sometimes an abusive church becomes surrogate parents to these young adults.

8. Members of abusive churches have a great difficulty leaving and often involves social, psychological, or emotional pain. Church members are often afraid to leave because of intimidation and social pressure. If they leave, they may be stalked and harassed by members of the abusive church.

Leaving an Abusive Church

For many of the reasons previously discussed, it is difficult for members to [leave an abusive church](#). There is significant emotional and spiritual damage that results. Often, former members of an abusive church not only leave the church, but they leave God.

The emotional damage is significant. One author suggested that victims of church abuse or other forms of spiritual abuse suffer PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). They find it difficult to trust others, whether leaders in a church or other leaders in their life.

Victims of abusive churches also find it difficult to find the right church. That is why Ronald Enroth in his second book and Ken Blue in his book talk about discerning good from abusive. Here are a few questions worth considering.

1. Does the church leadership invite dialogue and solicit advice from others in the church who are not part of the elite group of leaders? Dogmatic and authoritarian pastors are threatened by diverse opinions whether from members or from people outside the church.
2. Is there a system of accountability or is all the power located in one person? Dogmatic and authoritarian pastors are not accountable to anyone. They may have a board of elders who merely “rubber stamp” any decisions.
3. Does the church encourage independent thinking and encourage members to develop discernment? Abusive church leaders attempt to get all its members to conform. There is a very low tolerance (sometimes no tolerance) for alternative perspectives even about insignificant programs and minor policies about how to run the church.
4. Is family commitment strengthened? Many churches (not just abusive churches) often demand so much of members that they

begin to neglect their families. If parents are made to feel guilty for going to their children's school events when it might conflict with a routine church meeting or activity, something is wrong.

5. Is the individual church member growing spiritually or on the edge of burnout? If you have to constantly attend a myriad of church meetings and meet a quota (time, talent, treasure) in order to be given church approval, something is wrong.

When someone leaves an abusive situation, it becomes difficult to trust others. That is also true when leaving an abusive church. Going to a different church or study group can be difficult and even frightening. But these questions help in choosing a church or organization that will help you grow spiritually.

Enabling Behavior and a Biblical Response – Part 1

There are no perfect churches because there are no perfect people. Sometimes I will hear someone say they are looking for the perfect church. A good response I have heard is: "If you find the perfect church, don't join it because you will ruin it. You aren't perfect."

Every church has its problems, and pastors have a sin nature. But it does seem that we are also guilty of enabling behavior inside the church that isn't healthy. Here are just a few statements I have gleaned from various sources.

Christians today often enable spiritual abuse from leaders because we value charisma over character. A pastor or leader is often given a platform not because of character but because he is a dynamic preacher.

Jesus warned His disciples (Matthew 20:25-28) that leaders should not exercise authority over people. Instead, whoever

wants to become great must lower himself to be a servant. Paul even warns (2 Timothy 4:3) there will be a time when followers "will not endure sound doctrine." Instead, they will want "to have their ears tickled" by eloquent speakers, who may not even have sound doctrine.

Paul reminds Timothy (1 Timothy 3:2-3) that a leader in the church should be "must be above reproach . . . sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money."

Peter (1 Peter 5:2-3) instructs the church that leadership should "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

Christians today also enable spiritual abuse when they value the institution over individuals. We have seen this in our numerous radio programs involving church sexual abuse. Churches and denominations have been too quick to cover up sexual abuse scandals and intimidate victims. Time and again we hear them worrying about their reputations or the reputation of the church or denomination.

Christians today enable spiritual abuse when they value division over unity. Pastors and Christian leaders who are denouncing other churches or denominations can make us feel good about our church and denomination. But it doesn't bring unity. Paul teaches in Ephesians 4:3-6 to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Enabling Behavior and a Biblical Response – Part 2

Christians today enable spiritual abuse when they value performance over character. Churches are often quicker to remove a pastor teaching heresy than to remove a pastor with character deficits. We should address heresy. Peter warns (2 Peter 2:1) that there will be “false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves.”

But some churches or denominations may have pastors or church leaders who have good theology but poor character. One example in the New Testament can be found in a man named Diotrephes (3 John 9-12). John plans to confront him because he is self-willed (likes to put himself first) and rebellious (does not acknowledge authority) and a slanderer (talking wicked gossip). Some commentators have called him the first “church boss” because he uses power for ungodly ends within the church.

But notice that John says nothing about him having bad theology. In his previous letters (1 John and 2 John), he does call out the unbiblical teaching of the false teachers. The problem with Diotrephes was not theology but psychology. For all we know, he might have been a good Bible teacher, but his behavior is the problem. How many churches have turned a blind eye to character problems with a pastor because he was a good preacher and brought people into the church?

Christians today enable spiritual abuse when they value anger and outrage over grace and meekness. Too often we reward candidates who raise their voice and point their fingers by electing them to office. We may enjoy a pastor who pounds the pulpit and condemns society, but is that what is required of a

church leader?

Christians should not be enabling this behavior, they should be confronting this behavior and even condemning this behavior. This first step should be to follow the instructions of Jesus (Matthew 18:15-17) to go directly to a person engaging in spiritual abuse (after prayer and reflection). If he listens to you, “you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along.” If this is happening in society, we should speak out against spiritual abuse and abusive churches.

An important response to spiritual abuse is biblical truth. As believers we should proclaim the truth. Truth means freedom, not bondage. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Additional Resources

Stephen Arterburn, *Toxic Faith*, Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991.

Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Ronald Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1992.

Ronald Enroth, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994.

June Hunt, *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst*, Dallas: Hope for the Heart, 2015.

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C.S. Lewis as Evangelist

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an insightful examination of how legendary Christian author C.S. Lewis used his writing to invite his readers to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Lewis and Evangelism

“C. S. Lewis never invited unbelievers to come to Jesus. He was a very successful evangelist.” So begins Michael Ward’s essay “Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis’s Depictions of Conversion.” Ward follows up this provocative comment with others like it. For example, “Einstein failed his entrance exam to the Federal Polytechnic. He was a very successful physicist.”^{1} What is Ward wanting us to see here?



While he recognizes that his initial statement about Lewis needs some qualification, he’s nonetheless put his finger on something very important about Lewis’s evangelistic style. For while Lewis had a heart for evangelism, and desired to see men and women surrender their lives to Christ, he’s not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term “evangelist.” One might readily describe Lewis as a Christian apologist or imaginative storyteller, a literary scholar or skillful debater, but “evangelist” would probably not top the list. Nevertheless, it’s important to remember that Lewis engaged in evangelistic activity in a variety of ways. While he was certainly not a “preaching” or “revivalistic” sort of evangelist, he was a “very successful evangelist” all the same.

Philip Ryken has helpfully described Lewis as a “teaching

evangelist,” a “praying evangelist,” and a “discipling evangelist.” Most important of all, however, he refers to Lewis as a “writing” or “literary evangelist.” And this is surely correct, for Lewis’s greatest “evangelistic impact” has been felt through his books and essays.[{2}](#)

Not long before his death, Lewis was interviewed by Sherwood Wirt of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. When asked if the aim of Christian writing (including his own writing) was to bring about an encounter between the reader and Jesus Christ, Lewis responded by saying, “That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view.”[{3}](#) Moreover, in his “Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger,” Lewis frankly confesses that most of his popular Christian books “are evangelistic” in character, and addressed to those outside the Christian faith.[{4}](#)

Of course, Lewis was not *merely* a “literary evangelist.” While such terminology captures the fundamental way in which Lewis shared his faith, it was certainly not the only way. Moreover, evangelism was not something Lewis did simply because he enjoyed it. He felt an obligation, even a burden, to make Christ known to others.[{5}](#) And as we’ll see later, these evangelistic concerns and motivations came with a very real cost to Lewis in terms of his professional career and friendships.[{6}](#)

The Significance of Lewis’s Conversion

If there’s one thing Lewis makes clear about his *own* conversion, first to theism and then to Christianity, it’s that he felt himself to have been *pursued* by God and *drawn* into relationship with Him. While in one sense he saw his conversion as arising from a “wholly free choice” on his part, he also saw it as resulting from a kind of Divine necessity.[{7}](#) Lewis makes this clear in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

Consider the description of his conversion to Theism: “You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.” Eventually, Lewis tells us, he “gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed,” describing himself as “perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”[\[8\]](#)

Interestingly, before this, Lewis had described God as offering him “a moment of wholly free choice”—an opportunity to either “open the door or keep it shut.” He tells us that he chose to open it, but almost immediately relates that “it did not really seem possible to do the opposite.” He goes on to speculate that perhaps “necessity” is not “the opposite of freedom.”[\[9\]](#) All of this reveals how significant Lewis found God’s involvement in his conversion to actually be.

His conversion to Christianity is similarly, if less dramatically, narrated. He writes of feeling “a resistance almost as strong as” his “previous resistance to Theism.”[\[10\]](#) But having been through something similar already, the resistance was “shorter-lived.” While being driven to Whipsnade Zoo, Lewis came to believe “that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” He once again speculates about whether this momentous event resulted from freedom or necessity and concludes that maybe the difference in such a case is inconsequential.[\[11\]](#)

But why is this important for a discussion of Lewis and evangelism? Because it helps us understand how Lewis (on the one hand) could work tirelessly for the salvation of others, while also (on the other) recognizing that God was so powerfully involved in the conversion of a human soul that he (i.e., Lewis) need never worry that such weighty matters depended solely on him. He could thus be a relaxed evangelist, using his gifts to point others to Christ, while also recognizing that salvation is ultimately a work of God.

The Importance of “Translation” in Lewis’s Evangelistic Work

So far, we’ve seen that the most important of Lewis’s evangelism was through his writings. Indeed, the first book Lewis wrote, after becoming a Christian, was *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Published in 1933, the book bears the rather lengthy subtitle: “An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Romanticism, and Reason.” And as with so many of the books that followed Lewis’s conversion, it was concerned to commend Christianity to others.

In 1938, Lewis published the first volume of his “Cosmic Trilogy,” titled *Out of the Silent Planet*.^{12} In this book, Lewis communicates elements of Christian theology within the context of a science-fiction adventure story. In 1940, he published *The Problem of Pain*, a work of Christian apologetics concerned to address the problem of evil and suffering. As I’ve noted elsewhere, this book “attracted the attention of James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the . . . BBC.”^{13} Welch wrote to Lewis, asking if he might be willing to compose a series of broadcast talks for the BBC. Lewis accepted the invitation, and the talks he composed eventually became the first book of his now classic statement of basic theology, *Mere Christianity*.^{14} These influential talks were delivered during the years of World War II.

In addition to these now-famous “broadcast talks,” Lewis also spoke to the men and women of the Royal Air Force during the war. Such experiences helped teach Lewis the importance (and even necessity) of “translating” Christian doctrine into terms the average layperson could readily understand. Lewis wanted to communicate Christian truth to his audience, and he realized that to do so effectively, he needed to learn their language.^{15} He thus described his task as “that of a *translator*—one turning Christian doctrine . . . into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could

understand.”[{16}](#)

It was Lewis’s skill as a “translator” that made him so successful as a “literary evangelist.” Few writers have been so effective at communicating the essential truths of Christianity to a broad, general, and often unbelieving audience, as C. S. Lewis. Indeed, Lewis placed so much importance on “translating” Christian truth into the language of the average layperson that he thought every ordination exam ought to require that the examinee demonstrate an ability to do it.[{17}](#) And in *Mere Christianity* (along with other works), we get a glimpse of Lewis doing this very thing.

Evangelism in Lewis’s Fiction

In discussing the evangelistic work of C. S. Lewis, we’ve seen how Lewis’s evangelistic concerns impacted his work as a popular Christian apologist. Now it’s time to consider how these same concerns find expression in his fiction. In his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,” Lewis discusses a major motivation for his fictional work. He tells us:

“I wrote fairy tales because . . . I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could (00W, 37).[{18}](#)

Through his fiction, Lewis helps his readers personally experience the potency of Christian truth. Consider *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In that story, Edmund (one of the four Pevensie children who enter Narnia through the wardrobe) initially sides with the White Witch against the great lion Aslan. The Witch has all Narnia under her spell, making it “always winter and never Christmas.”^{19} In his desire to one day be king of Narnia, Edmund betrays his brother and sisters. According to the Deep Magic that governs Narnia, he thus deserves to die.^{20}

But Aslan, the true king of Narnia, intercedes for Edmund, and the Witch renounces her claim on his life. The catch is that Aslan must give his own life in place of Edmund’s. This he willingly does. But like Jesus in the Gospels, death cannot hold him in its power, and he returns to life again. According to one scholar, “the desired response” to this is not so much “to believe in the vicarious suffering of Christ, but to taste it.”^{21} Lewis thus used his fiction as a vehicle for evangelism, helping his readers to “taste” Christian truth in powerful (and even delightful) ways.

The “Cost” of Lewis’s Evangelistic Witness

Although Lewis was not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term “evangelist,” he nonetheless had a heart for evangelism and was motivated to labor for the conversion of others. In fact, Christopher Mitchell has observed that “Lewis perceived evangelism to be his lay vocation, and the means by which he expressed this evangelistic impulse were his speaking and writing.”^{22}

While Lewis was not the sort of person to preach a conventional “Come to Jesus” sort of evangelistic sermon, he was nonetheless (as Michael Ward has noted) “a very successful evangelist.”^{23} When one considers the vast literary output

of Lewis, so much of which had evangelistic intentions, combined with his speaking, preaching, and debating on issues of vital concern to the Christian faith, along with his many prayers for the conversion of others, and generous financial assistance rendered for the cause of Christ, it is clear that the whole tenor of Lewis's post-conversion life was driven by a strong evangelistic impulse for the salvation of souls. And this in spite of the very costly nature of this witness.

According to Mitchell, Lewis's evangelistic commitments fostered "ridicule and scorn . . . among his non-Christian colleagues" at Oxford.[{24}](#) Indeed, even some of Lewis's closest friends occasionally felt embarrassed by his "zeal for the conversion of unbelievers."[{25}](#) Many of his colleagues were scandalized by the fact that Lewis used his academic training to write popular-level books in theology and Christian apologetics. No doubt some were also jealous of his ever-increasing popularity with the general public, for Lewis had an uncanny ability to write one book after another that people actually wanted to buy and read.

So *why* did Lewis do it? That's the question Mitchell asks near the end of his essay on this topic.[{26}](#) Why did Lewis persist in evangelistic writing and speaking that aroused such scorn from academic colleagues, and occasional embarrassment from friends? Mitchell suggests that it likely had something to do with Lewis's conviction that "There are no *ordinary* people."[{27}](#) Hence, while his evangelistic activities created difficulties for him, difficulties that might easily have been avoided, Lewis was convinced that bringing glory to God through the saving of human souls was "the real business of life."[{28}](#) And whatever abuse, scorn, or discomfort this might cause him personally, he was apparently willing to endure it in order to be found faithful.

Notes

1. Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The*

- Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 143.
2. See Philip G. Ryken, "Winsome Evangelist: The Influence of C. S. Lewis," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, 62.
 3. C. S. Lewis, "Cross-Examination," interview by Sherwood E. Wirt, in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 262.
 4. C. S. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," in *God in the Dock*, 181.
 5. This would seem to be implied by Lewis's remarks in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1980), 18-19.
 6. See Christopher W. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3-14.
 7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 224-25.
 8. *Ibid.*, 228-29.
 9. *Ibid.*, 224-25.
 10. *Ibid.*, 237.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. For readers interested in reading my prior article on this book, please see Michael Gleghorn, "Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet," Probe Ministries, October 29, 2023, probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-planet/
 13. Please see Michael Gleghorn, "C. S. Lewis, the BBC, and Mere Christianity," Probe Ministries, April 24, 2016, probe.org/c-s-lewis-the-bbc-and-mere-christianity/
 14. For a helpful discussion of all the issues and concerns surrounding these events, please see Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts that Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).
 15. C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock*, 94, 98.

16. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," in *God in the Dock*, 183.
17. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock*, 98-99.
18. C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 37.
19. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 16.
20. *Ibid.*, 138-39.
21. Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), Kindle edition, loc. 2640.
22. Christopher W. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.
23. Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood," 143.
24. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory," 7. Note: The whole of this paragraph is indebted to Mitchell's discussion in this chapter.
25. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
26. *Ibid.*, 9-14.
27. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 19.
28. C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.

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Why Study Church History?

James Detrich provides five reasons to study church history and allow our knowledge to build our confidence in our faith.

When I was in college, we had to do what was called

“evangelism night.” It was a night in which a group of us would pile into someone’s old, broken-down car (we were all poor back then) and skirt downtown to the city’s walking bridge, a large half-mile overpass extending over the Chattanooga River. We were always sure that plenty of people would be there that needed our message. One night I began talking to a man about Christ and he quickly cut me off, “I am a Christian,” he exclaimed. “Great,” I replied. As we continue talking, though, I soon discovered that he was a “different” Christian than me. He said he believed in an expansive New Testament that contained many more books than the twenty-seven I was accustomed to, and he had six or seven Gospels, where I only had four. When I told him that I didn’t think he was right, that the New Testament only contained twenty-seven books and four Gospels, he asked me an important question, “How do you know that there are only four Gospels? Maybe there are more books to the Bible than you think!” I stood there, knowing that he was wrong. But I didn’t know *why* he was wrong. I had no idea of how to combat him—I didn’t know church history well enough in order to provide, as 1 Peter 3:15 says, an account of the assurance that lies within me.



This is one of the great reasons why we as Christians need to study church history. In this article I am going to make a passionate plea for the study of church history and give five reasons why I believe it is essential for every follower of Christ. Alister McGrath said that “Studying church history . . . is like being at a Bible study with a great company of people who thought about those questions that were bothering you and others.”^{1} These bothering questions, much like the one I could not answer on the walking bridge, oftentimes can be answered through learning the stories and lessons of history. It was Martin

Luther, the great reformer, who cried out: "History is the mother of truth." This is the first reason why Christians need to study history, so that we can become better skilled to answer the nagging questions that either critics ask or that we ourselves are wrestling with. It would have been a tremendous help that day on the bridge to know that in the second and third centuries, the time right after Jesus and the apostles, that church pastors and theologians were exclaiming and defending the truth that we only possess four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If I had only known of this rich tradition, if I had only known my church history, I would have been able to give a reasonable account of that hope that lies within me.

Church History Provides Comfort

The first reason why Christians should study church history is that it helps Christians provide a more reasonable account of what we believe. The second reason is that Christians, just like any other people, go through many times of loneliness and despair. The book of Psalms reveals multiple times where various psalmists reveal that they feel as though God has left them, that their enemies are closing in, and that no one, including God, really cares. Suffice it to say that this often leads to a crisis of faith. Many of us suffer that same crisis from time to time, and the one thing that usually helps to be encouraged is to get around God's people. When we are with others who believe as we do, it helps to stabilize, and to build, our faith. There is a sense in those moments of being with other Christians that our faith is bigger and more expansive—that it is communal, not merely individual.

Studying church history is about being with the community of faith. Reading the stories, learning the truths, examining the insights of these faithful men and women down through the centuries gives to us the sense that our faith is not shallow, but as the song used to say, it is "deep and wide." Church

historian John Hannah claims that studying Christian heritage “dispels the sense of loneliness and isolation in an era that stresses the peripheral and sensational.”^{2} It breaks us away from this modern culture that emphasizes the glitz and the glamour of the here and now, and helps us to establish confidence in the faith by examining the beliefs central to our faith that have been developed over a long period of time. Christian theology does not invent beliefs; it finds beliefs already among Christians and critically examines them. The excavation site for Christian theology is not merely in the pages of Scripture, though that is the starting point, but it expands from there into the many centuries as we find the Holy Spirit leading His church. For us today, it gives us the ability to live each day absolutely sure that what we are believing in actually is true; to know and understand that for over 2000 years men and women have been worshipping, praising, and glorifying the same God that we do today.

It's similar to those grand, majestic churches, the cathedrals that overwhelm you with the sense of transcendence. The expansive ceilings, high walls, and stained glass leaves the impression that our faith, our Christian heritage, is not small but large. Entering into a contemplation of our faith's history is like going into one of those churches. It takes away the loneliness, the isolation, and reminds us of the greatness of our faith.

Church History Solidifies Our Faith

The third reason for studying church history takes us to the task of theology. Have you ever wondered if something you heard being preached in church was essential? Maybe you've asked, Is this really so important to my faith? Understanding and articulating what is most important to Christianity is one of the crucial tasks that theology performs. This task is developed from a historical viewpoint. It asks the question, What has always been crucially important to Christians in each

stage of church history? Over the centuries, Christian theologians have developed three main categories for Christian beliefs: dogma, doctrine, and opinion.^{3} A belief considered as dogma is deemed to be essential to the gospel; rejecting it would entail apostasy and heresy. Doctrines are developed within a particular church or denomination that help to guide that group in belief. What a church believes is found in its doctrine. Lastly, beliefs relegated to opinion are always interesting, but they are not important in the overall faith of the church. But dogma is important and history tells the story of how the church receives these important truths. It tells the story of how the church came to understand that God is three and one, the received truth of the Trinity; or how they came to understand that Jesus was both human and divine, the received truth of the Person of Christ. In examining these things, you begin to understand what is most essential and what is less important.

This is the same question that was being asked in the early fourth century. Some folks calling themselves Christians were going around proclaiming that Jesus Christ was different from God the Father, that even though He was deserving of worship, there was a time when He was created by the Father. Other Christians rose up and declared that to be heretical. They claimed that the words and actions of Christ as recorded in the Scripture clearly affirms Him to be equal with the Father. The Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 sided with the latter group, claiming that Jesus was indeed equal with His Father. The exact wording of the council's conclusion is that Jesus is "of the same substance" with His Father. That dogmatic decision is reflected in the church's doctrinal beliefs and it demonstrates its crucial importance for Christianity.

History is indeed the treasure chest of truth. Open it up. Discover the riches within it. Find out what is there and what is not—what is important and what is not!

Church History Helps Us Interpret the Bible

Why should we study church history? The answers already given are that it provides perspective in answering tough questions, gives a sense that our faith has gravitas, delineates that which is important; the fourth reason is that the study of church history helps us to interpret the Bible. You might be inclined to say, "We don't need church history, all we need is the Bible." But we must remember that people interpret the Bible in many and various ways. For instance, do you know that the largest meeting in North America that discusses the Bible is called the Society of Biblical Literature. It meets every year and boasts of having thousands of members. Among those within the society, only an astonishing 30% of them are evangelicals, or people who would have a more conservative interpretation of Scripture. People all over are reading the Bible, but they are reading it in different ways.

So, how do we know how to interpret the Bible? We believe that a certain interpretation or tradition of the text goes all the way back to Jesus and His apostles. Thus, Scripture must be interpreted in light of this tradition—the way that the early community of believers read the various texts of Scripture as they recognized its authority in matters of faith and practice. They recognized that these texts supported, explained, and gave evidence to the belief system that they held dear. For us, going back and reading the early church fathers is profitable for our understanding of the broader cultural and theological framework so that we can better understand what Scripture is saying. For instance, as we discovered above, the Trinity is a crucial dogma of the church. Therefore, any interpretation of the Bible that contradicts that basic belief would be inadequate. History helps to paint the lines that we must stay within and it helps to construct the boundaries for a faithful reading of the text. Examining what was important to the apostles, and the

generation that followed, and then the next generation, gives a basic tradition, a framework, of values and beliefs, that must guide our faith today. The study of church history helps us to develop that basic framework.

It was a second-century pastor that complained that the heretics of his day read the same Bible as he did, yet they twist it into something else. He equated it someone taking a beautiful picture of a king constructed with precious jewels and rearranging those jewels so that the picture now resembles a dog.^{4} We would contest ruining such a beautiful piece of art! This is exactly what happens when the beauty of the Bible is misinterpreted. To keep that from happening, we must study church history and find out what the precious jewels actually are that construct the beauty of the Bible.

Church History Demonstrates the Working of God

We have listed four reasons to study church history: it helps answering questions, it presents a faith that is deep and wide, it delineates what is important, and it helps us to interpret the Bible. The fifth reason why we should study church history is that it demonstrates the working of God. More specifically, it gives evidence that the Holy Spirit is working through and among His people, the church of God. It is the same Spirit that was working in that early Christian community that is still at work today in the community of faith. In other words, history provides a further resource for understanding the movement of God in the entire community of faith. We affirm that there is continuity between the early Christian community and the community today, because we serve one God and are the one people of that God. Hence, every sector of church history is valuable, because it is the same Spirit moving through every stage of history. Church history is His story and it tells of God's faithfulness to the community of believers as they have carried forth His truth

and have given animation to His character. Just as Christ is the image of the invisible God, the church, through the Son and by the Spirit, is also the image of the invisible God. Church history is the story of how the community reflects that invisible God.

This is the concept that brings all the others into a connected whole. The reason why studying church history can provide answers to crucial questions of faith is due to the fact that the Spirit has been moving in the hearts of men and women down throughout history, aiding them in their questions of faith and the fruit of that work has been preserved for us today. The reason why studying church history can show us what is important to the faith is because the Spirit has been at work guiding the church into truth. The reason why studying church history can help us interpret the Bible is because the Spirit has illuminated the path for understanding the Bible for centuries. This is what is fascinating about church history: it is a study of His Story. He is there, just as Jesus said He would be. Remember it was Jesus who said that He was going away, but that He would send a Comforter. And this One would guide us in all truth. Church history is the story of that illuminated path where the God of the church guides His people into all truth. History is where He is.

Notes

1. Alister McGrath, "The State of the Church Before the Reformation" in *Modern Reformation* [January/February 1994]: 11.
2. John D. Hannah, "Notes on the Church to the Modern Era" (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary), 2.
3. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Who Needs Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 73.
4. This is a metaphor presented by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1.

Gen-Z: The Generation That Ends Christian Influence in America?

In order to grow the number of Gen-Z Christians, we need an understanding of ways to build bridges from their pluralistic, secular worldview to seriously contemplating the unique grace of God. Steve Cable draws upon the wisdom of two pastors who are making a real difference in the lives of young adults to address this important topic.

What Are Gen-Zs Like?

In this article we look beyond the Millennials to consider the latest generation and what they tell us about the future of Evangelicals in America. Gen-Z is the generation born between 1995 and 2010.



This year, half of the Gen-Z generation are 18 or older. By the time they are all at least 18, the Millennials and Gen-Zs will make up almost 50% of the adult population. We will consider how this generation compares with previous generations. We want to understand this generation to truly communicate the good news of the gospel to them; to help them “to walk in a manner worth of the Lord.”[{1}](#)

In their book, *So the Next Generation Will Know*[{2}](#), Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace identified some key traits common among Gen-Zs. They are:

1. Digital Multitaskers – “spending nearly every waking hour interacting with . . . digital technology,” often while watching television

2. Impatient – quickly moving from thing to thing with an attention span of around 8 seconds
3. Fluid – constantly blurring the lines; making truth, genders, and family structures personal choices
4. Lonely – swamped in social media where personal relationships are minimized while personal troubles follow them everywhere. Sean points to “the availability of endless counterfeits that claim to be able to fill their hearts with meaning.”[{3}](#)
5. Individualistic – individual feelings more important than facts while judging the choices of others is avoided. As James White points out in Meet Generation Z[{4}](#), “the ability to find whatever they’re after without the help of intermediaries . . . has made them more independent. . . . Like no other generation before, Gen-Z faces a widening chasm between wisdom and information.”[{5}](#)

Most importantly, most of these young Americans are thoroughly secular with little exposure to Christian theology. As White opines, “They are lost. They are not simply living in and being shaped by a post-Christian cultural context. They do not even have a memory of the gospel. . . . They have endless amounts of information but little wisdom, and virtually no mentors.”[{6}](#)

As they enter adulthood, the culture around them will not encourage them to consider the claims of Christ. In fact, the Millennials going before them are already seen leaving any Christian background behind as they age into their thirties.

Gen-Z: How Are They Trending?

What can we truly know about the religious thinking of Gen-Zs age 11 to 25? Pew Research surveyed teens and their parents giving us a glimpse into both[{7}](#).

They found *one third* of American teens are religiously

Unaffiliated.^{8} In contrast, their parents were less than *one quarter* Unaffiliated. Another Pew survey^{9} found more than *half* of young adult Gen-Zs are unaffiliated. This group is easily the largest religious group among Gen-Zs.

Teens attend church services with their parents, but lag behind in other areas. Less than *one fourth* of teens consider religion very important. And on an absolute belief in God and praying daily, the teens trail their parents significantly.

Using an index of religious commitment^{10}, almost *half* of the parents but only *one third* of teens rated high. In fact, almost half of teenagers with parents who rated high did not rate high themselves.^{11}

Perhaps the minds of teenagers are mush. Their views will firm up as they age. In reality, older Gen-Zs and Millennials also trail older adults by more than 20 points in believing in God and praying daily.^{12} Also, church attendance drops dramatically among these young adults who are no longer attending with parents.

If religion were important to teens, they would look to religious teaching and beliefs to help make decisions about what is right and wrong. But less than *one third* of teens affiliated with a religion turned to its teachings to make such decisions.

As George Barna reports,^{13} “The faith gap between Millennials and their predecessors is the widest intergenerational difference identified at any time in the last seven decades.” It seems that Gen-Z will increase this gap.

Gen-Z: Worldview and Apologetics

Why have the Unaffiliated been growing dramatically over the last 25 years while doctrinally consistent Christians have been declining? At one level, we recognize the watered-down

gospel taught in many churches encourages people to pursue other things and not waste time on church. That may have been the primary issue at one time. But in this decade, we are seeing a real reduction in the number of Evangelicals as well. The self-professed Evangelicals^{14} among those ages 18 to 29 has reduced from 29% down to 20%, a reduction of almost one third.

One major driver is the dominant worldview of our young adult society. The worldview promoted by our schools, media, and entertainment industry has changed from a Christian inspired worldview to a worldview which is secular and specifically anti-Christian. As James White observes, "It's simply a cultural reality that people in a post-Christian world are genuinely incredulous that anyone would think like a Christian—or at least, what it means in their minds to think like a Christian."^{15}

Almost all Gen-Zs have been brought up hearing the worldview of Scientism espoused. This worldview teaches "that all that can be known within nature is that which can be empirically verified . . . If something cannot be examined in a tangible, scientific manner, it is not simply unknowable, it is meaningless."^{16} At the same time, most Gen-Zs have not even been exposed to an Evangelical Christian worldview. Consequently, apologetics is critical for opening their minds to hear the truth of the gospel. Many of them need to understand that the basic tenets of a Christian worldview can be true before they will consider whether these tenets are true for them. Answering questions such as: "Could there be a creator of this universe?" and "Could that creator possibly be involved in this world which has so much pain and suffering?" is a starting point to opening their minds to a Christian view.

Encouraging Gen-Zs to understand the tenets of their worldview and comparing them to a Christian worldview begins the process of introducing them to the gospel. As White points out, "I

have found that discussing the awe and wonder of the universe, openly raising the many questions surrounding the universe and then positing the existence of God, is one of the most valuable approaches that can be pursued.”[{17}](#) The Christian worldview is coherent, comprehensive and compelling as it explains why our world is the way it is and how its trajectory may be corrected into one that honors our Creator and lifts up people to a new level of life.

Gen-Z: Removing the Isolation of Faith

What will it take to reach Gen-Z? James White says, “. . . the primary reason Gen-Z disconnects from the church is our failure to equip them with a biblical worldview that empowers them to understand and navigate today’s culture.”[{18}](#) If we want to equip Gen-Zs to embrace faith, we must directly discuss worldview issues with them.

The challenge is exacerbated as most Gen-Zs are taught a redefined tolerance: to not only accept classmates with different worldviews, e.g. Muslims and the Unaffiliated, but to believe that it is as true for them as your parents’ worldview is for them. As Sean McDowell states, “Gen-Zs are exposed to more competing worldviews—and at an earlier age—than any generation in history.”[{19}](#)

The new tolerance leads directly to a pluralistic view of salvation. Christ stated, “No one comes to the Father except through me,”[{20}](#) and Peter preached that “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved.”[{21}](#) Yet the survey of American teens[{22}](#) finds *less than one third* believe that only one religion is true, broken up into *two-thirds* of Evangelicals and *less than one-third* of Mainlines and Catholics.

Compounding these issues is the growing practice of limiting the impact of religious beliefs on real life. Sean points out, “The biggest challenge in teaching worldview to young people

is the way our increasingly secular culture fosters the compartmentalization of faith.”{23} We need to help them see how a consistent Christian worldview applies to all issues. It is foolish to segregate your spiritual beliefs from your life decisions.

As an example, many Gen-Zs are enamored by a socialist view that the government should provide everything we need, equally distributing goods and services to all. Those who work hard and excel will have their productivity redistributed equally. It sounds like a possibly good approach and yet it has destroyed the economies of many countries including Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela. It fails because it is based on a worldview that “assumes greed comes from inequality in the distribution of material goods in society.”{24} In contrast, the Bible is clear that greed is part of the fallenness of the human heart. As a result, any centralized function with no competition discourages productivity and becomes an inefficient bureaucracy.

Reaching Gen-Zs

Today, most Gen-Zs move into adulthood with little exposure to the gospel. The majority are either Unaffiliated, another religion, or have a nominal Christian background. Current surveys find that 98% of young Americans do not have a Christian worldview.{25}

This sobering data does not mean giving up on reaching Gen-Z. But if we are not intentional about it, we are not going to stem the tide. As James White observes, “What is killing the church today is (focusing) on keeping Christians within the church happy, well fed, and growing. The mission . . . must be about those who have not crossed the line of faith.”

And Sean McDowell points out that we need “to teach the difference between subjective and objective truth claims and make sure they understand that Christianity falls in the

latter category.”{26}

Sean encourages a focus on relationships saying, “Relationships are the runway on which truth lands. Take the time to listen with empathy, monitor from a place of wisdom, and demonstrate your concern.”{27} White agrees, saying, “If we want (them) to know the faith, we have to teach, model and incarnate truth in our relationship with them.”{28} From a place of relationship, we can address challenges keeping them from truly hearing the gospel.

One key challenge is the role of media. As Sean notes, “Media shapes their beliefs, and it also shapes the orientation of their hearts.”{29} To counter this pervasive influence, he suggests engaging them in a skeptic’s blog. Help them consider 1) what claim is being made, 2) is the claim relevant if true, and 3) decide how to investigate the claim.{30} By learning to investigate claims, they are examining the truth of the gospel. We should never fear the gospel coming up short when looking for the truth.

Key ways White’s church is connecting with the Unaffiliated include:

1. Rethinking evangelism around Paul’s message in Athens. Tantalizing those with no background to search for truth in Christ.
2. Teaching the grace/truth dynamic in quick segments consistent with their learning styles.
3. Being cultural missionaries – learning from those who have not been Christians.
4. Cultivating a culture of invitation by creating tools to invite friends all the time.

If we focus on growing the number of Gen-Z Christians, we could change the trajectory of American faith. If we devote ourselves to prayer, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and reaching the lost in America rather than continuing church as

usual, God can use us to turn the tide.

Notes

1. Colossians 1:9.
2. Josh McDowell and J. Warner Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, 2019, David C. Cook.
3. McDowell and Wallace, p. 66.
4. James White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, Baker Books, 2017.
5. White, p. 44.
6. White, p. 64-65.
7. Pew Research Center, U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals, September 10, 2020.
8. These are people who self-identify as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. In previous surveys, we referred to them as the Nones. Calling them the “unaffiliated” helps us avoid the confusion between “Nones” and “nuns.”
9. Call out Pew survey from 2019.
10. The index of religious commitment looks at the answers to questions on church attendance, belief in God, prayer, and importance of religion and rates a respondents commitment from high to low based on their answers.
General Social Survey, 2018.
11. 42% of the teenagers with parents with a high index had a medium or low index.
12. General Social Survey, 2018
13. American Worldview Inventory 2020, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.
14. Pew Research surveys 2007, 2014, 2019.
15. White, p. 130.
16. White, p. 141.
17. White, p. 139.
18. White, p. 80.
19. McDowell and Wallace, p. 81.
20. John 14:6b.
21. Acts 4:12.

22. Pew Research Center, U.S. Teens.
23. McDowell and Wallace, p. 87.
24. Ibid, p. 93.
25. American Worldview Inventory 2020.
26. McDowell and Wallace, p. 113.
27. McDowell and Wallace, p. 78.
28. White, p. 64.
29. McDowell and Wallace, p. 164.
30. Ibid, p. 173-4.

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Abusive Churches

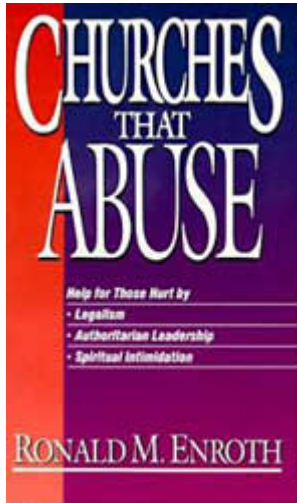
What characterizes abusive churches is their cultic method of ministry. Although outwardly orthodox in their theology, these churches use abusive and mind control methods to get their followers to submit to the organization. In this article Dr. Pat Zukeran covers eight characteristics of abusive churches.

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



We are all familiar with traditional cults such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are, however, other groups with cultic characteristics that do not fit the same profile as the traditional cults. Sometimes called "abusive churches" or even "Bible-based cults," they appear outwardly orthodox in their doctrinal beliefs. What distinguishes these groups or churches from genuine orthodox Christianity is their abusive, cultic-like methodology and philosophy of ministry.





In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth carefully examines several of these churches throughout the United States. He reveals the cultic methods these groups use and points out several distinguishing marks of abusive churches. At this point I will briefly introduce each of these characteristics and some of my own. Later, I'll discuss all these characteristics in detail.

First, abusive churches have a control-oriented style of leadership. Second, the leaders of such churches often use manipulation to gain complete submission from their members. Third, there is a rigid, legalistic lifestyle involving numerous requirements and minute details for daily life. Fourth, these churches tend to change their names often, especially once they are exposed by the media. Fifth, denouncing other churches is common because they see themselves as superior to all other churches. Sixth, these churches have a persecution complex and view themselves as being persecuted by the world, the media, and other Christian churches. Seventh, abusive churches specifically target young adults between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. The eighth and final mark of abusive churches is the great difficulty members have in getting out of or leaving these churches, a process often marked by social, psychological, or emotional pain.

Those involved in a church that seems to reflect these characteristics would be wise to evaluate the situation thoroughly and leave the church if it is appropriate. Staying may increase the risks of damaging your family relationships and multiplies the likelihood of losing your perspective. Members of such churches often develop a distorted view of reality, distrust everyone, and suffer from stress, fear, and depression. Some former members even continue to experience

these things after escaping from an abusing church. There are also several documented cases in which associating with an abusive church has led to the deaths of individuals or their relatives.

Some of these groups have networks of many sister churches. In some cases these groups have split off from more mainstream denominations. Occasionally the new groups have even been denounced by the founding denomination. Such groups often disguise themselves by frequently changing the name of their organization, especially following adverse publicity. This practice makes the true nature of these organizations more difficult to determine for the unsuspecting individual. Some abusive churches have college ministries all across the country. On some university campuses such student movements are among the largest groups on their respective campuses.

It is important that Christians today know the Bible and know how to recognize such churches so as not to fall into their traps. In order to help people become more aware of churches which may be abusing their members, I now want to go through in more detail the eight characteristics I mentioned earlier.

Control-Oriented Leadership

A central feature of an abusive church is control-oriented leadership. The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self-confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God. Because of such claims, the leader's position and beliefs cannot be questioned; his statements are final. To members of this type of church or group, questioning the leader is the equivalent of questioning God. Although the leader may not come out and state this fact, this attitude is clearly seen by the treatment of those who dare to question or challenge the

leader. The leader of the movement often makes personal decisions for his followers. Individual thinking is prohibited; thus the followers become dependent on the leader.

In the hierarchy of such a church, the leader is, or tends to be, accountable to no one. Even if there is an elder board, it is usually made up of men who are loyal to, and will never disagree with, the leader. This style of leadership is not one endorsed in the Bible. According to Scripture all believers have equal access to God and are equal before Him because we are made in His image, and we are all under the authority of the Word of God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 believers are directed to measure all teachings against the Word of God. Acts 17:11 states that even the apostle Paul was under the authority of the Bible, and the Bereans were commended because they tested Paul's teachings with the Scriptures. Leaders and laity alike are to live according to Scripture.

Manipulation of Members

Abusive churches are characterized by the manipulation of their members. Manipulation is the use of external forces to get others to do what someone else wants them to do. Here manipulation is used to get people to submit to the leadership of the church. The tactics of manipulation include the use of guilt, peer pressure, intimidation, and threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience. Often harsh discipline is carried out publicly to promote ridicule and humiliation.

Another tactic is the "shepherding" philosophy. As practiced in many abusive churches this philosophy requires every member to be personally accountable to another more experienced person. To this person, one must reveal all personal thoughts, feelings, and discuss future decisions. This personal information, is not used to *help* the member, but to *control* the member.

Another means of control is isolation. Abusive churches may

cut off contact between a new member and his family, friends, and anyone else not associated with the church.

How different this style of leadership is from the leadership of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lovingly, gently, humbly, and sacrificially leads His sheep.

Rigid, Legalistic Lifestyle

The third characteristic of abusive churches is the rigid, legalistic lifestyle of their members. This rigidity is a natural result of the leadership style. Abusive churches require unwavering devotion to the church from their followers. Allegiance to the church has priority over allegiance to God, family, or anything else.

Often members are required or pressured to attend Bible studies five, six, or seven days a week. There is a requirement to do evangelism; a certain quota of contacts must be met, and some churches even require members to fill out time cards recording how many hours they spent in evangelism, etc. Daily schedules are made for the person; thus he is endlessly doing the church's ministry. Former members of one church told me they were working for their church from 5:00 am to 12:00 midnight five days a week.

Members of such churches frequently drop out of school, quit working, or even neglect their families to do the work required by the church. There are also guidelines for dress, dating, finances, and so on. Such details are held to be of major importance in these churches.

In churches like these, people begin to lose their personal identity and start acting like programmed robots. Many times, the pressure and demands of the church will cause a member to have a nervous breakdown or fall into severe depression. As I reflect on these characteristics I think of Jesus' words concerning the Pharisees who "tie up heavy loads and put them

on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger" (Matt. 23: 4). What a contrast from the leadership style of Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. . . .For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Frequent Changing of Group/Church Name

A fourth characteristic of abusive churches is a pattern of constantly changing the name of the church or campus ministry. Often a name change is a response to unfavorable publicity by the media. Some abusive churches have changed their name several times in the course of a few years.

If you are in such a church, one that has changed its name several times because of bad publicity, or if you feel unceasing pressure to live up to its demands, it is probably time to carefully evaluate the ministry of the church and your participation in it.

Denouncing All Other Churches

Let us now take a look at the fifth characteristic: abusive churches usually denounce all other Christian churches. They see themselves as spiritually elite. They feel that they alone have the truth and all other churches are corrupt. Therefore, they do not associate with other Christian churches. They often refer to themselves as some special group such as, "God's Green Berets," "The faithful remnant," or "God's end-time army." There is a sense of pride in abusive churches because members feel they have a special relationship with God and His movement in the world. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth quotes a former member of one such group who states, "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the world like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch." However the Bible makes it

clear, that there are no spiritually elite groups or churches. Ephesians 4:36 states, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all."

The Christian church universal is united by the same God, the same Holy Spirit, and the fundamental beliefs of the Bible which include such things as the Trinity, authority of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, and so on. In these central truths we stand united. A church which believes itself to be elite and does not associate with other Christian churches is not motivated by the spirit of God but by divisive pride.

Persecution Complex

The sixth characteristic follows naturally. Because abusive churches see themselves as elite, they expect persecution in the world and even feed on it. Criticism and exposure by the media are seen as proof that they are the true church being persecuted by Satan. However, the persecution received by abusive churches is different from the persecution received by Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus and the Apostles were persecuted for preaching the truth. Abusive churches bring on much of their negative press because of their own actions. Yet, any criticism received, no matter what the source—whether Christian or secular—is always viewed as an attack from Satan, even if the criticisms are based on the Bible. This makes it difficult to witness to a person in such a church for he will see your attempt to share the gospel with him as persecution. Often in cases like these, when I am accused of persecuting, I simply reply, "I am here talking to you with the Word of God which you say you believe. How can this be persecution?" This approach often helps in

continuing the dialogue with a member of an abusive church who has been brainwashed to believe that all opposition is persecution.

Targeting Young Adults

The seventh characteristic of abusive churches is that they tend to target young adults ages 18-25 who are in the middle class, well educated, idealistic, and often immature Christians. Young adults are the perfect age group to focus on because they are often looking for a cause to give their lives to, and they need love, affirmation, and acceptance. Often these churches will provide this, and the leaders frequently take the role of surrogate parents.

Painful Exit Process

The eighth characteristic is a painful and difficult exit process. Members in many such churches are afraid to leave because of intimidation, pressure, and threats of divine judgment. Sometimes members who exit are harassed and pursued by church leaders. The majority of the time, former members are publicly ridiculed and humiliated before the church, and members are told not to associate in any way with any former members. This practice is called shunning.

Many who leave abusive churches because of the intimidation and brainwashing, actually feel they have left God Himself. None of their former associates will fellowship with them, and they feel isolated, abused, and fearful of the world. One former member of a particular campus ministry said, "If you leave without the leadership's approval, condemnation and guilt are heaped upon you. My pastor told me he thought it was satanic for me to leave and wondered if I could continue my salvation experience."

Let me conclude this discussion by sharing some practical ways of reaching those who are involved in abusive churches. First,

we must begin with prayer. Witnessing to those brainwashed in abusive churches is often intimidating and difficult. Often leaders will not allow an individual member to meet with an outsider unless accompanied by an older, more experienced person who is trained in debating and/or intimidation. Therefore, we must pray (1) for a chance to speak with the individual{1} and that he would be open to what we have to share.{2}

Second, lovingly confront the person and surface some biblical issues. Often, abusive churches have a bizarre teaching or a theological error that can be pointed out. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth documents several examples of this. For instance, the leader of one church had strange teachings based on his claims of extra-biblical revelations from God.{3} These included dietary laws, sexual behavior, home decorations, and others. The leader of another group called doctors “medical deities.” He also claimed medicines had demonic names and if taken, opened a person up to demonic influence.{4} Pointing out errors, inconsistencies, and bizarre beliefs may open the individual’s mind and prompt him to begin asking questions.

Third, share articles you may find in the newspaper or in magazines on the particular church under discussion. The book that I have often quoted from, *Churches That Abuse*, is an excellent resource. The key is to get the individual to start asking questions and research answers for himself. Tell him to test everything with the Scriptures and not to be afraid to ask questions. If the leader is afraid or hesitant to answer a member’s honest questions, the maturity of that leadership may be suspect.

Jesus, however, said that truth is a means of freedom, not bondage. He said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Notes

1. Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 118.
2. Ibid., p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 128.
4. Ibid., p. 170.

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Biblical Worship

Kyle Skaggs provides a look at what constitutes worship that pleases God.

What is worship? Is it attending church service on Sundays? Is it singing hymns or praise songs? What does good worship look like?

It is generally understood that worship is an activity not limited to hymns or offerings on Sunday. Despite this, it is all too common that we find ourselves viewing it in just such a way. Worse, we find ourselves going through the motions of worship, but find ourselves treating it more and more like a chore.

The source of this problem is that we either do not have a biblical understanding of worship, or that we don't know how to apply it. We need to define what constitutes worship in a biblical worldview, what worship is pleasing to the Lord, and what worship is not pleasing to the Lord.

Worship is any honor rendered to God that would be sinful to

give to anything else. Worship is more than hymns and prayers. Worship can be rendered in every moment of our waking lives. It is worship when we learn and meditate on the Scriptures. The act of talking to God when we offer prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, or even when we pour our hearts out in grief, is also worship. When we give back our firstfruits. When we clothe and feed the needy in Christ's name. When we proclaim the gospel to those who do not know Christ. All of these activities and more are part of worship.

Worship That Pleases God

With worship defined, we can now jump to what worship is pleasing to God. The passage I am focusing on, to break down the components of what kind of worship God wants, is the burnt offering of Leviticus 1. Why the burnt offering? Because the themes and narrative techniques point towards proper worship.

The first things which stand out in this passage are recurring themes found in the rest of Leviticus. These themes are atonement and purification. God has made a covenant with the Israelites, saying, "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). A theme more specific to chapter 1, yet still present throughout, is goodwill from God and from man.

The first repeated instruction is that the sacrifice must be without blemish. This occurs three times. The second is the sprinkling or pouring of blood, which also -occurs three times. The third is the laying of hands on the offering at the Tabernacle before killing it. The fourth is an instruction to skin and divide the offering on the altar. The last repeated instruction is to wash the offering. Some key words and ideas that are repeated include the need for one's sacrifice to be "without defect," atonement, the head and the fat of the offering, that all of the animal (except any explicitly described parts) is to be burnt, and finally, the idea that the smoke from the offering makes "an aroma pleasing to YHWH."

The sprinkling of blood, as translated in the New International Version, is technically correct, but there may be better choices of translation. The root word is זָרַק[zaraq] meaning to spurt, splatter, or sprinkle. Some translations have the word “cast” or “throw.”^{1} There is nothing gentle in this act. Blood is life, and from dietary laws, it is clear that life is highly valued. The implication is that the loss of something as precious as life is required for atonement. Sanctification is conveyed through the shedding of blood on behalf of the person who gives the offering.^{2}

The reasons for laying one’s hand on the offering’s head are threefold. First, that it may be accepted as an offering on the person’s behalf. Second, there must be a cost to this offering, and the act of laying hands declares ownership^{3}, so the owner takes responsibility for that cost. Third, the hands are laid so that the animal may atone for one’s sin.^{4}

The innards and the legs of the offering are to be washed with water. Water and fire are both purifying agents in Jewish rituals. The innards contain excrement, and the legs gather dirt as the animal walks around. For birds, the crop and feathers are to be thrown down the eastern side of the altar with the ashes. Therefore, the act of washing the guts and legs of the bull and ram, as well as dumping the feathers and crop from an offering of turtle doves into the ashes, is a final act of purification before the offering is burnt and the smoke goes up to the Lord.

An “aroma pleasing to the Lord” is a recurring phrase. One translator writes that the Hebrew equivalent to “pleasing” is “placating,” “tranquilizing,” “quieting,” and “soothing.”^{5} Another translates the word to mean “sweet,” “pleasant,” “restful,” and “delightful.” Some translations even use the word “savory.”^{6} Both translations work well in conveying the meaning of the text: that the sacrifice is pleasing to the Lord, so “a sweet aroma” or “a placating aroma” seems to be

the best fit among the other meanings.

As you read through this passage, note how the offering provides atonement for sin. The burnt offering in chapter 1 is different from the sin offering found in chapter 4, which is for the atonement of accidental sins. The Hebrew word used in this passage, קָרְבָּן (qarban), can translate directly to “offering,” but when we compare the offering of Leviticus 1 to those in later chapters, we find different words used for offering. For example, Leviticus 4:1-34 uses the word חַטָּאת (haḥaṭṭāṭ), which translates roughly to “sin offering.” The offering in Leviticus 1 is קָרְבָּן (qarban), which simply refers to an offering in general. It is also used to mean “gift.”^{7} So, the offering of Leviticus 1 is a casual affair compared to the sin offering and offerings for holidays like Passover.

Both the gift and the giver must undergo purification. It also reveals bits of our nature relative to God’s early on, despite it being a freewill offering; the sinful nature of humanity necessitates that one receive atonement simply to worship God! From this, we gather that God demands reverence even in the most casual forms of worship. As previously stated, the purpose of the burnt offering was to provide atonement, to make oneself acceptable to God, and to please Him with one’s gift. It shows that God is merciful and patient, allowing for sin to be covered by the application of a sacrifice. It shows that He is just, He will not tolerate sin. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23), and something must die for any transgressions to be covered up. While the laying of hands on the sacrifice does not quite translate well to English, it shows responsibility and a willingness to give from one’s own possessions. This in turn shows that God desires whole-hearted worship.

Unpleasing Worship: Pagan Practice

As you can see, the most important part of worship is one's attitude towards God. This in turn requires a correct understanding of who God is, and His nature in relation to our worship. The sacrificial system in Leviticus is similar to that of the pagan cultures in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. By contrasting the nature of their gods and worship with that of the one true God, we can gain insight on what our attitude should be toward Him.

In the pagan myths of the Mediterranean and the Middle East like the *Enuma Elish*, humanity was frequently created as an afterthought. They were made to do tasks the gods couldn't be bothered to do themselves, or were made to pay tribute since they happened to exist. They are never made in God's image. For example, the Sumerian gods created humanity out of the blood and bones of an evil primordial being to serve them so they could focus on other tasks. In the Greek myths, man is created by the titan brothers, Epimetheus and Prometheus, to provide the gods with entertainment, and is only given the ability to walk upright like the gods because all other gifts had been foolishly given to all the animals.

Our God, on the other hand, deliberately created mankind in His own image. He told man (male and female) to fill the earth and have dominion over all in it. God made humanity the crowning jewel of His creation.

The pagan gods needed sacrifices like food offerings. They depended on humans to feed them with their offerings, and they gained strength from their worship, as can be seen in Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal who conducted increasingly desperate rituals in the hope that Baal would send fire down from heaven.

Our God has no such needs. He does not need us to provide sustenance for Him because He needs nothing. He is the

ultimate power and authority whether we worship him or not.

In contrast to the gods of the Canaanites, who were as sexually immoral, violent, and greedy if not more so than the culture that created them, God is wholly good. It can be seen from the emphasis of purity throughout Leviticus that God will not accept impurity in His people or in their offerings.

Finally, the worship of the Canaanites could not be separated from magical practice. Words had power, and thus prayers were formulaic in order to properly evoke the powers of the deity.^[8] A worshiper who said the right words and presented a suitable sacrifice in just the right way may receive blessings in return, like a magical sword or a good harvest. The Scriptures condemn this: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." (Matthew 6:7) The Lord is nothing like this; He knows the desires of our heart. He cannot be influenced by our worship, but blesses the obedient according to His good pleasure.

Unpleasing Worship: Cain's Offering

As we can see from the nature of God, how He prescribed the burnt offering in Leviticus, and how worship as practiced by the pagans is offensive to Him, the core of good worship is found in one's attitude towards God. Where the pagans did not have the benefit of a special revelation of God's word (though they are without excuse, Romans 1:20), those who did know the Lord also gave offerings that displeased Him. When we look at the next kind of offering that displeases God, we again see that one's worship is determined by the inclination of the heart.

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel both offered sacrifices to the Lord, but one was loved and the other was spurned because his works were evil and he treated the Lord's offering with contempt. Able offered the fat portions from the first of the

flock, while Cain only offered some of his produce. When God rejected his offering, Cain became angry, and when God warned him to do what is right. Cain was unwilling to change his ways. That is why Cain murdered his brother, "because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Therefore, to respect God and His offering we must, as John puts it, abide in love. If we do not love God, then we cannot love the people around us who are made in His image. Rather, we easily come to hate them, even to the point of murder.

The self-righteous do not approach God with humility. They give only what they want when they want, live like the rest of the world, don't spend any time with God, and then wonder why they can't hear the Holy Spirit! It is impossible for the self-righteous to present a pleasing offering to the Lord.

This self-righteous offering appears again and again in the Old and New Testaments. This is why the prophets frequently decry the people's sacrifices. What they say concerning the offering shows just how much the offering was disrespected.

"When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 1:8)

Again in Isaiah, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught." (Isaiah 29:13)

In the New Testament, we have the example of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who lied about the portion of their offering and were struck dead. In the gospels, we have the Pharisees whom Jesus called hypocrites. Their actions appear to be righteous, but the inclination of their hearts render their

worship worthless.

Application

So what does this mean for us? The foundation of God-pleasing worship is the inclination of our heart. It is our attitude towards our relationship with God that determines how we worship. Pagan-style worship approaches God as if He were inattentive, finite, and uncaring. If we can evoke His name just right, if our offerings are good, then we have an 'in' with God. Ultimately, we are trying to bribe God.

Cain's worship was characterized by apathy and self-righteousness. Outside of church, one dedicates no time to God. In finance, in time, in prayer, and in actions people offer up the scraps from the prosperity God has given them. They say that Christ is Lord, yet are too self-righteous and self-reliant to listen to the Holy Spirit.

We are obligated to worship God simply because *He is*. He doesn't need it, but He desires it. As a personal God, worship is a part of His relationship with us. God is good. Therefore, we must approach Him with humility. Good worship is giving Him the respect He deserves as our creator and ruler of the universe.

What we offer in worship needs to be pure. Our hearts need to be reconciled to God, and we need to approach Him with humility and the respect He deserves as our creator. The key to God-pleasing worship is the inclination of the heart.

Furthermore, worship is tied to everything we do day to day. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, . . . you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). So even when we are not singing praises, praying, or meditating on God's word, we can still be worshiping, because our deeds are a kind of offering. This means we need to consistently choose to abide in love, or we will stumble over Cain's sin. Whatever we do, even if it is

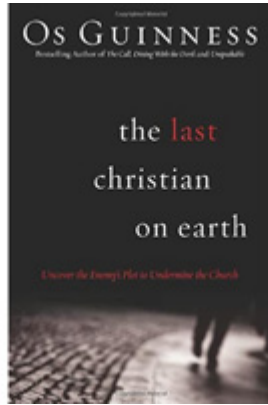
just a morning devotional, we should examine the state of our heart and ask the Holy Spirit to align it with God's.

Notes

1. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Academic, 1994), 284.1.
2. Wenham, Gordon, J. The Book of Leviticus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 62.
3. Keener, Craig and Walton, John. NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017) p. 182.
4. Rooker, Mark, F. Leviticus. The New American Commentary. Volume 3A (Brentwood TN: Holman Reference, 2000), p. 87
5. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 629.2
6. Strong, The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), #5207.
7. Ibid. #7133
8. Frazer, James. The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Volume II. (London, 1919).

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Digging Our Own Grave: The Secular Captivity of the Church



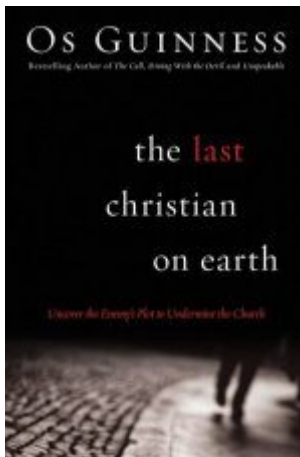
Rick Wade provides an overview of how the Christian church has become captive to the godless values and perspective of the surrounding culture, based on Os Guinness' book The Last Christian on Earth.

Our Real Enemy

If memory serves me correctly, it was my introduction to such concepts as secularization and pluralization. I'm speaking of the book *The Gravedigger Files* written by Os Guinness in the early 1980s. The subtitle of *The Gravedigger Files* is *Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church*. The book is a fictional dialogue between two members of a council which has as its purpose the undermining of the Christian church. The Deputy Director of the Central Security Council gives one of his subordinates advice on how to accomplish their goal in his area.



In 2010, Guinness published a revised and updated version of *Gravedigger Files*. He gave it the new title *The Last Christian on Earth*. The titled was inspired in part by Luke 18:8: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"



What Guinness wanted to do in *Gravedigger* and the updated version was to show how the church in America is being undermined from within. We concern ourselves so much about outside enemies without realizing that we are at times our own worst enemies. He wrote: *"The Christian faith contributed decisively to the rise of the modern world, but it has been undermined decisively by the modern world it helped to create. The Christian faith has become its own gravedigger."*[\[1\]](#)

The primary focus of Probe Ministries now is what's been called the cultural captivity of the church. All too many of us are influenced more by our culture than by the Bible. It's impossible to separate oneself from one's surrounding culture, to be sure, but when there is conflict, we are called to follow Christ. Cultural captivity is subtle. It slowly creeps up on us, and, before we know it, it has soaked into our pores and infected much of what we think and do. "Subversion works best when the process is slow and subtle," Guinness's Deputy Director says. "Subtle compromise is always better than sudden captivity."[\[2\]](#)

This book is helpful for seeing ourselves in a clearer light, and for understanding why some of the things we do, which seem so harmless, are really very harmful to our own Christian lives and to the church.

Stages of Subversion

Rather than directly attacking the church, the enemy finds it more profitable to try to undermine it. “Subversion” is the word Os Guinness’s Deputy Director uses in the book *The Last Christian on Earth*. How does this happen?

This process of undermining comes in various stages. Three of them are demoralization, subversion, and defection.[{3}](#)

Demoralization is the softening up of the church through such things as hypocrisy and public scandals. Morale drops, and our ability to resist the devil’s advances decreases.

Subversion comes about from winning over key church leaders who begin to trumpet “radical” and “daring” ideas (better words for this, Guinness says, may be “revisionist” and “unfaithful”[{4}](#)).

Defection comes when prominent members abandon the church, such as when former fundamentalists publicly deny the divine authority of the Bible.

Faithfulness, which once was understood as being committed to God, now has a new focus. The desire to be “in the world but not of the world” is realigned. The church’s commitment to the world turns into attachment, and worldliness settles in. “Worldliness” is a term once used by fundamentalists to describe being too attached to the world, but it went out of favor because of the excesses of separationism. It was a word to be snickered at by evangelicals who were adept—or thought they were adept—at being in the world without becoming its servant. This snickering, however, doesn’t hide the fact that the evangelical sub-culture exhibits a significant degree of being of the world, or worldly.

Moving through these stages, the Deputy Director says, has led the church deeper and deeper into cultural captivity. The church becomes so identified with the culture that it no

longer can act independently of it. Then it finds itself living with the consequences of its choices. Says the Deputy Director, "Our supreme prize at this level is the complete devastation of the Church by getting the Adversary [or God] to judge her himself. "Here, in a stroke," he continues, "is the beauty of subversion through worldliness and its infinite superiority to persecution. . . . if the Adversary is to judge his own people, who are we to complain?"[\[5\]](#)

Forces of Modernism

In *The Last Christian*, Os Guinness describes three challenges of modernity which aid in the subversion of the church. They are secularization, privatization, and pluralization. These forces work to squeeze us into the mold of modernistic culture. To too great an extent, they have been successful.

Secularization is the process of separating religious ideas and institutions from the public sphere. Guinness's Deputy Director speaks of society being "freed" from religious influence.[\[6\]](#) This is how secularists see the separation. Religion is seen as restrictive and oppressive and harmful, and the public square needs to be free of it. All ideas and beliefs are welcome as long as they aren't explicitly grounded in religious belief. Because of the influence of the public arena in our lives, Guinness points out that "*Secularization ensures that ordinary reality is not just the official reality but also the only reality.* Beyond what modern people can see, touch, taste and smell is quite simply nothing that matters."[\[7\]](#)

If religion is removed from the public square, the immediate result is *privatization*, the restriction of religion to our private worlds. This can be the small communities of our churches or it can mean our own individual lives. Guinness writes that "today, where religion still survives in the modern world, no matter how passionate or committed the believer, it amounts to little more than a private preference,

a spare-time hobby, and a leisure pursuit.”[{8}](#)

The third force is *pluralization*. With the meeting of many cultures comes the awareness that there are many options with regard to food, dress, relationships, entertainment, religion, and other aspects of life. The number of options multiplies in all areas, “especially,” notes Guinness, “at the level of worldviews, faiths and ideologies.”[{9}](#) Choosing isn’t a simple matter anymore since it’s so widely believed that there *is* no truth in such matters. In fact, choosing is what counts. Guinness writes, “what matters is no longer good choice or right choice or wise choice, but simply choice.”[{10}](#)

Some Characteristics of Subversion

What are some characteristics of a subverted church? Os Guinness discusses several in his book *The Last Christian on Earth*.

One result of being pushed into our own private worlds by secularization is that we construct our own sub-culture and attempt to keep a distance. But then we turn around and model our sub-culture after the wider culture. For example, it’s no secret that evangelical Christianity is heavily commercialized. Our Christianity becomes our style reflected in plenty of Christian kitsch and in being surrounded by the latest in fashions. The depth of our captivity to things—even Christian-ish things—becomes a measure of the shallowness of our Christianity. Compared to what Jesus and the apostles offered, which included sacrifice and suffering, says Guinness, “today’s spiritual diet . . . is refined and processed. All the cost, sacrifice and demand are removed.”[{11}](#)

Another pitfall is rationalization, when we have to weigh and measure everything in modernistic ways. We’re guided by “measurable outcomes” and “best practices” more than by the leading of the Spirit.[{12}](#)

Feeling forced to keep our Christian lives separate from the wider culture—the sacred/secular split, it's been called—reduces Christianity in size. We don't know how to apply it to the larger world (apart from excursion-style evangelism). "Many Christians," Guinness writes, "have so personal a theology and so private a morality that they lack the criteria by which to judge society from a Christian perspective."[\[13\]](#) Lacking the ability to even make sound judgments about contemporary issues from a distinctly Christian perspective, we're unable to speak in a way that commands attention. Christianity is thought at best to be "socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging," as someone said.[\[14\]](#)

A really sad result of the reshaping of Christianity is that people wonder why they should want it at all. The church is the pillar of truth, Paul says (1 Tim. 3:15). The plausibility of Christianity rises and falls with the condition of the church. If the church is weak, Christianity will seem weak. Is this the message we want to convey?

A Wrong Way to Respond

In the face of the pressures of the modern world on us, the conservative church has responded in varying ways in the wider culture.

Os Guinness describes what he calls the *push* and *pull* phases of public involvement by conservatives. The push phase comes when conservatives realize how much influence they have lost. For much of the nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity was dominant in public life. Over the last century that has been stripped away, and conservatives have seen what they held near and dear taken away. This loss of respect and position in our society has resulted in insecurity.[\[15\]](#)

In response, conservative Christians push for power by means of political action and influence in education and the mass

media. “But, since the drive for power is born of social impotence rather than spiritual authority,” Guinness writes, “the final result will be compromise and disillusionment.” They fall “for the delusion of power without authority.”[\[16\]](#)

When they recognize the loss of purity and principles in their actions, they begin to pull back and disentangle themselves from the centers of power. There is a return to the authority of the gospel without, however, a sense of the *power* of the gospel. Standing on the outside, as it were, they resort to “theologies stressing prophetic detachment, not constructive involvement.”[\[17\]](#) This is the phase of “hypercritical separatism.”

Then comes a third phase, the enemies’ coup de grâce. Standing back to view all this, some Christians experience what Guinness’s Deputy Director gloatingly describes as “a fleeting moment when they feel so isolated in their inner judgments that they wonder if they are the last Christian left.” There is left “a residue of part self-pity, part discouragement, and part shame that unnerves the best of them.”[\[18\]](#) But these are the few. The many are simply kept asleep, the Director is happy to report, unaware of what has happened.

This article has given only a taste of Os Guinness’s message to us. The hope for the church is a return to the gospel in all its purity and power. I invite you to read *The Last Christian on Earth* and get a fuller picture of the situation and what we can do to bring about change.

Notes

1. Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2010), 11.
2. Ibid., 51, 52.
3. Ibid., 28.
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 32-34.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Ibid., 72.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid., 97.
11. Ibid., 159.
12. Ibid., 138.
13. Ibid., 155.
14. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday, 1973,), 449; quoted in Guinness, *Last Christian*, 79.
15. Guinness, *Last Christian*, 166.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Ibid.

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Faith Trends in America: How Is Christianity Faring as We Enter the Third Decade of the 21st Century

In looking at the state of American Christianity, Steve Cable examines how handling data inaccurately can produce wildly varying conclusions.

Recent reports on the current state of Christianity in America could create emotional whiplash, making one feel elated one moment and depressed the next. People are quick to comment on survey results and their own experiences. Within the last year, we have run the gamut from Glenn Stanton's book, *The Myth of the Dying Church: How Christianity is Actually Thriving in America and the World*,[{1}](#) to a Pew Research article, *In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*.[{2}](#)



These titles appear to represent two very different viewpoints. Which is it? Are we thriving or declining at a rapid pace?

Finding the answer requires one to thoughtfully articulate your question in at least two ways:

1. What do you mean by Christianity? Are you referring to all potential Christians both Protestant and Catholic or are you focused on a subset, such as Evangelicals? And,
2. Is anything beyond affiliation with a church necessary to be considered an active Christian? Examples might include a biblical understanding of how one gets to heaven and belief in the Bible.

You also need to thoroughly understand the available survey data that might throw light on your question. You need to understand what questions are asked and how they are worded. Then you analyze the responses to the set of relevant questions to gain insight on your topic of interest. Remember, no survey asks the exact questions you would ideally use. That sounds like more work than most of you want to attempt. Unfortunately, most of the pundits writing today do not attempt to do that work either. Generally, they take fragmented data and attempt to draw intelligent inferences.

In this article, I have done this work for you, drawing

primarily on data from the Pew Research Group and the General Social Survey. We will look at which groups are growing as a percent of our population and which groups are not. Both Pew and the GSS have taken surveys over an extended period of time, helping us identify trends in religious affiliation and beliefs.

As you will see, the picture is certainly not rosy, but perhaps better than you expect. Although the growth of non-Christian segments is continuing at a fairly rapid pace, Evangelical Christianity is only declining slightly as a percentage of the population. However, I will point out how some data has been misunderstood to paint either a rosier picture or a gloomier picture than the actual current state of affairs.

Evangelicals: Thriving or Declining

All surveys we have reviewed covering this century show the same general result: the percent of people claiming an affiliation with a Protestant or Catholic church has been declining.

GSS surveys^{3} found across all ages the percentage who identify as Protestant or Catholic has dropped from 84% of the population in 1988 down to 69% in 2018. Looking only at Protestants (both Evangelical and Mainline), the drop was from 58% down to 46%. Considering those who are Millennials now, that is ages 18 to 34, we find a decline from 53% down to 36% over this thirty-year period. And the data does not show any leveling off in the rate of decline.

But we may ask, “Are Evangelicals participating in this general decline or are they thriving as some authors claim?”

The bottom-line answer is that Evangelicals are declining as a percent of the overall population but at a much slower rate. Across all ages, the percentage who identify as Evangelical

has dropped from 30% to 28% over this twenty-year period. For those aged 18 to 34 the drop was from 29% to 25%. In October 2019, Pew released a report showing that from 2009 to 2018, the percentage of Evangelicals of all ages dropped from 28% to 25%, a significantly faster rate of decline.

Even with a slow rate of decline, if Evangelicals make up around 25% of the population, they can have a significant impact on American culture and life and perhaps begin to grow again.

However, does Evangelical affiliation equate to an active Evangelical practice? We need to know how many who affiliate with an Evangelical church *are active Christians* as opposed to just being affiliated if we want to truly assess the strength of the American Evangelical movement.

Using the GSS surveys, we can look for people who:

1. Know God really exists
2. Pray multiple times per day
3. Attend church at least twice a month
4. Believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and
5. Call themselves a strong Christian

I think an active, evangelical Christian would have these basic beliefs and practices.

The percentage of the population who meet these criteria has dropped from about 9% down to just over 7% of the population over the last twenty years. This result is a large enough group to have some impact but not enough to crow about the growing Evangelical presence. We can say that Evangelical Christianity is certainly not thriving but clinging to a position of some relevance.

What's Happening with the Nones

Nones are people who state their religious affiliation is

either atheist, agnostic or nothing at all.[{4}](#) The dramatic growth of the Nones has been an ongoing headline story.

Surveys[{5}](#) indicate the Nones were 8% of the population in 1988. By 2018 they had grown to over 23% of the population. For ages 18 through 29, they tripled from 13% to 35% of the population. No one denies this growth, but some question the importance of this trend.

For example, Glenn Stanton states, “(The Nones) are simply reporting their actual faith practices in more candid ways, largely due to new ways in which polling questions have been asked in the last ten years or so.”[{6}](#) Oddly enough, he primarily relies on data from GSS for long term trends and they have asked exactly the same question regarding Nones since 1972.[{7}](#)

Some suggest Nones are primarily Christians who will return to the fold as they move into marriage and child rearing. Is there any indication that this is happening?

Well, in 2007, among those aged 18 to 32, 24% of them are classified as Nones. In 2014, for this same group now seven years older, 32% of them are Nones. As this group began rearing children, *a significantly larger percentage of them were Nones than when they were younger*. Also, instead of attending church, only 4% of these Nones attend church more than once a month.

Instead of emerging adult Nones turning into church-attending Christians as they age, more of them are becoming Nones. It appears that the cultural pressures against Christianity are outweighing the tendency of prior generations returning to seek religious training for their children.

The Barna Group has found that there are genuine differences between Millennials and older generations that will not be removed as they age. As Dave Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, states in his book, *UnChristian*,[{8}](#) “I would caution

you not to underestimate the widening gap between young people and their predecessors. Those who think that in due time Mosaics . . . will ‘grow up’ and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.” Dave’s comment is based on their analysis of multiple surveys covering thousands of individuals and a large number of in-depth interviews with young adults.

Are the Nons THE Major Growth Story?

Is the growth of nondenominational Christians a more important trend than the Nones? Glenn Stanton states, “Growth of nondenominational churches has been many times larger than the nones. . . it is not the rise of the nones that is the major story . . . It’s the “nons” and not the nones that are mushrooming.”[{9}](#)

This condition would be an amazing finding if true. However, it is not true for three major reasons which we will discuss today:

1. The percentage growth of the “nons” is *not many times larger*. From 2007 to 2014, “nons” grew their percentage of the population by 44%. But, Nones grew by almost the same rate at 42%. Looking at absolute growth, the “nons” grew by four million people versus the Nones’ 19 million—almost five times the number of “nons.” The growth of the “nons” is relegated to a minor factor when compared to the Nones.

2. The “nons” are a subset of the Evangelicals. And Stanton states, “*Evangelicals* have benefited more from these ecclesiastical exoduses than anyone else. They even . . . *outpaced the nones.*”[{10}](#) In fact, most of the “nons” growth came as a result of switching between evangelical denominations. Thus, any growth by the “nons” is offset by declines in other evangelical groups, resulting in an overall *decline of about 1%*. Evangelicals have not even come close to outpacing the Nones.

In fact, for the first time, we have the total number of nones exceeding the number of Evangelicals in America.

3. Stanton says, "It's the evangelical churches identifying as nondenominational that have been growing faster than any others including the nones and the atheists."^[11] Taking a look at percentage growth, *the atheists and agnostics have shown the most explosive growth by far*, growing their numbers from 9 million in 2007 to 17.4 million in 2014—a growth of 92%—while the “nons” grew from 8 million to 12 million over the same time period, a growth of 56%. So perhaps Stanton meant to say, “It’s the non-believers and not the Nones that are mushrooming.”

In summary, the growth of the “nons” may be of interest to those who study the relative make-up of Evangelicals in America. But to those interested in how Evangelicals are doing as a whole it is not relevant. The fact that the “nons” are increasing just reflects some churning of affiliations within the Evangelical realm. On the whole, Evangelicals are decreasing at a slow, but steady pace.

Confusing Expansion with Same-Store Growth

A commercial enterprise may report sales growth. But the savvy investor wants to know why. Opening new stores may increase sales. But if it masks lower sales per existing store, it is a red flag. They are actually losing market share.

Similarly, with parachurch ministries, their number of locations gives little indication as to the health of Christianity. However, their growth rate per location can signal increased interest in Christianity.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often overlooked. For example, one pundit points to impressive growth by two respected student ministries in adding new locations as

evidence to support an optimistic projection of Evangelical growth. However, they are not reporting an increased impact on a per site basis.

Looking at their annual reports, [{12}{13}](#) we see that one of them reports per location attendance *declining* at a rate of almost 1% per year over the last decade. [{14}](#) The other is declining even faster, reporting a growth rate of *negative* 3% per year. [{15}](#)

These declines could be caused by several different factors such as lower attendance at new locations, competition with other student groups, lower interest in their Christian message, etc. But we can be sure that these two ministries do not indicate an overall growth trend for Evangelicals.

Surveys and statistics can be very helpful in understanding the status of a ministry. However, we can be seriously misled by listening to those who do not know how to interpret the data contained in these sources.

Wrapping up our look at faith trends, in this article we saw:

1. American Evangelicals are declining slightly in the overall population with actively engaged Evangelicals holding about 7% of the population.
2. The Nones continue to grow and now exceed Evangelicals. Their growth clearly reflects the unimportance of religious affiliation among a large percentage of Americans.
3. The growth of Non-denominationals (although interesting) made no impact on the overall size of American Evangelicals and is less than the growth of atheists and agnostics.
4. Looking at growth per location of parachurch ministries is more important than growth in number of locations in assessing the growth of Christianity.

We live in a challenging time but Evangelical churches are strong enough to make a huge difference in America if we will follow the Holy Spirit's lead and present the eternal truth of

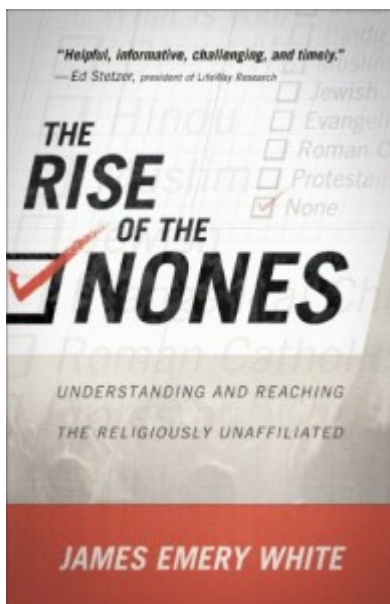
the gospel in ways that communicate to today's "nothing in particular" culture.

Notes

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15. For Intervarsity, we looked at 2007 and 2017.

The Rise of the Nones – Reaching the Lost in Today’s America

Steve Cable addresses James White’s book The Rise of the Nones in view of Probe’s research about the church.



Probe Ministries is committed to updating you on the status of Christianity in America. In this article, we consider James White’s book, *The Rise of the Nones, Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*.[\[1\]](#) His book addresses a critical topic since the fastest-growing religious group of our time is those who check “none” or “none of the above” on religious survey questions.

Let’s begin by reviewing some observations about Christianity in America.



From the 1930’s[\[2\]](#) into the early 1990’s the percentage of *nones* in America[\[3\]](#) was less than 8%. But by 2012, the number had grown to 20% of all adults and appears to be increasing. Even more alarming, among those between the ages of 18 and 30 the percentage grew by a factor of three, from 11% in 1990 to nearly 32% in 2012.

Another study reported Protestantism is no longer the majority

in the U.S., dropping from 66% in the 1960's down to 48% in 2012.

The *nones* tend to consider themselves to be liberal or moderate politically, in favor of abortion and same-sex marriage being legal, and seldom if ever attend religious services. For the most part, they are not atheists and are not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. However, among those who believe in "nothing in particular," 88% are not even looking for a specific faith or religion.

One report concludes, "The challenge to Christianity . . . does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religions. They're not thinking about religion and rejecting it; they are not thinking about it at all." [\[4\]](#) In fact, the 2011 Baylor survey found that 44% of Americans said they spend no time seeking "eternal wisdom," and a Lifeway survey found that nearly half of Americans said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

As White notes, these changes in attitude come in the wake of a second major attack on traditional Christian beliefs. The first set of attacks consisted of:

1. Copernicus attacking the existence of God
2. Darwin attacking God's involvement in creation, and
3. Freud attacking our very concept of a creator God.

The second storm of attacks focuses on perceptions of how Christians think in three important areas.

1. An over entanglement with politics linked to anti-gay, sexual conservatism, and abrasiveness
2. Hateful aggression that has the church talking in ways that have stolen God's reputation, and
3. An obsession with greed seen in televangelist

transgressions and mega-pastor materialism, causing distrust of the church.

These perceptions, whether true or not, create an environment where there is no benefit in the public mind to self-identifying with a Christian religious denomination.

Living in a Post-Christian America

A 2013 Barna study^{5} shows America rapidly moving into a post-Christian status. Their survey-based study came to this conclusion: over 48% of young adults are post-Christian, and “The influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s youngest Americans.”^{6}

White suggests this trend is the result of “three deep and fast-moving cultural currents: secularization, privatization, and pluralization.”^{7}

Secularization

Secularization teaches the secular world is reality and our thoughts about the spiritual world are fantasy. White states: “We seem quite content to accept the idea of faith being privately engaging but culturally irrelevant.”^{8} In a society which is not affirming of public religious faith, it is much more difficult to hold a vibrant, personal faith.

Privatization

Privatization creates a chasm between the public and private spheres of life, trivializing Christian faith to the realm of opinion. Nancy Pearcey saw this, saying, “The most pervasive thought pattern of our times is the two-realm view of truth.”^{9} In it, the first and public realm is secular truth that states, “Humans are machines.” The second and private realm of spirituality states, “Moral and humane ideals have no basis in truth, as defined by scientific naturalism. But we

affirm them anyway.”[{10}](#)

Pluralization

Pluralization tells us all religions are equal in their lack of ultimate truth and their ability to deliver eternity. Rather speaking the truth of Christ, our post-modern ethic tells us we can each have our own truth. As reported in our book, *Cultural Captives*[{11}](#), about 70% of evangelical, emerging adults are pluralists. Pluralism results in making your own suit out of patches of different fabrics and patterns and expecting everyone else to act as if it were seamless.

White sums up today’s situation this way: “They forgot that their God was . . . radically other than man . . . They committed religion functionally to making the world better in human terms and intellectually to modes of knowing God fitted only for understanding this world.”[{12}](#)

This combination of secularization, privatization and pluralization has led to a mishmash of “bad religion” overtaking much of mainstream Christianity. The underlying basis of the belief systems of *nones* is that there is a lot of truth to go around. In this post-modern world, it is considered futile to search for absolute truth. Instead, we create our own truth from the facts at hand and as necessary despite the facts. Of course, this creates the false (yet seemingly desirable) attribute that neither we, nor anyone else, have to recognize we are sinners anymore. With no wrong, we feel no need for the ultimate source of truth, namely God.

If You Build It, They Won’t Come

We’ve been considering the beliefs and thinking of the *nones*. Can we reach them with the gospel, causing them to genuinely consider the case for Christ?

We are not going to reach them by doing more of the same. Statistics indicate that we are not doing a good job of

reaching the *nones*.

As James White notes, “The very people who say they want unchurched people to . . . find Jesus resist the most basic . . . issues related to building a relationship with someone apart from Christ, . . . and inviting them to an open, winsome, and compelling front door so they can come and see.”[\[13\]](#)

Paul had to change his approach when addressing Greeks in Athens. In the same way, we need to understand how to speak to the culture we want to penetrate.

In the 1960’s, a non-believer was likely to have a working knowledge of Christianity. They needed to personally respond to the offer of salvation, not just intellectually agree to its validity. This situation made revivals and door-to-door visitation excellent tools to reach lost people.

Today, we face a different dynamic among the *nones*. “The goal is not simply knowing how to articulate the means of coming to Christ; it is learning how to facilitate and enable the person to progress from [little knowledge of Christ], to where he or she is able to even consider accepting Christ.”[\[14\]](#)

The rise of the *nones* calls for a new strategy for effectiveness. Today, cause should be the leading edge of our connection with many of the *nones*, in terms of both arresting their attention and enlisting their participation.

Up through the 1980s, many unchurched would respond for salvation and then be incorporated into the church and there become drawn to Christian causes. From 1990 through the 2000s, unchurched people most often needed to experience fellowship in the body before they were ready to respond to the gospel. Today, we have *nones* who are first attracted to the causes addressed by Christians. Becoming involved in those causes, they are attracted to the community of believers and gradually they become ready to respond to the gospel.

We need to be aware of how these can be used to offer the good news in a way that can penetrate through the cultural fog. White puts it this way, “Even if it takes a while to get to talking about Christ, (our church members) get there. And they do it with integrity and . . . credibility. . . Later I’ve seen those *nones* enfolded into our community and before long . . . the waters of baptism.”[{15}](#)

Relating to *nones* may be outside your comfort zone, but God has called us to step out to share His love.

Combining Grace and Truth in a Christian Mind

Every day we are on mission to the unchurched around us. James White suggests ways we can communicate in a way that the *nones* can understand.

We need to take to heart the three primary tasks of any missionary to an unfamiliar culture. First, learn how to communicate with the people we are trying to reach. Second, become sensitized to the new culture to operate effectively within it. Third, “translate the gospel into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.”[{16}](#)

The growth of the *nones* comes largely from Mainline Protestants and Catholics, right in the squishy middle where there is little emphasis on the truth of God’s word. How can we confront them with truth in a loving way?

The gospel of John tells us, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”[{17}](#) Jesus brought the free gift of grace grounded in eternal truth. As we translate the gospel in today’s cultural context for the *nones*, this combination needs to shine through our message. What does it look like to balance grace and truth?

- If we are communicating no grace and no truth, we are following the example of Hinduism.
- If we are high on grace – but lacking in truth, we give license to virtually any lifestyle and perspective, affirming today’s new definition of tolerance.
- On the other hand, “truth without grace: this is the worst of legalism . . . – what many *nones* believe to be the hallmark of the Christian faith.” The real representative of dogma without grace is Islam.” In a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity, they said that as Muslims, they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.
- Grace is the distinctive message of Christianity but never remove it from the truth of the high cost Christ paid. Jesus challenged the religious thought of the day with the truth of God’s standard. Recognizing we cannot achieve that standard, we are run to the grace of God by faith.

To communicate the truth, we need to respond to the new questions *nones* are asking of any faith. As White points out, “I do not encounter very many people who ask questions that classical apologetics trained us to answer . . . Instead, the new questions have to do with significance and meaning.” Questions such as, “So, what?” and “Is this God of yours really that good?”

We need to be prepared to “give a defense for the hope that is within us” in ways that the *nones* around us can resonate with, such as described in our article *The Apologetics of Peter* on our website.

Opening the Front Door to *Nones*

The *nones* desperately need the truth of Jesus, yet it is a challenge to effectively reach them. “Reaching out to a group of people who have given up on the church, . . . we must

renew our own commitment to the very thing they have rejected – the church.”[{18}](#) The fact that some in today’s culture have problems with today’s church does not mean that God intends to abandon it.

The church needs to grasp its mandate “to engage in the process of ‘counter-secularization’. . . There are often disparaging quips made about organized religion, but there was nothing disorganized about the biblical model.”[{19}](#) We all have a role to play in making our church a force for the gospel in our community.

It must be clear to those outside that we approach our task with civility and unity. Our individual actions are not sufficient to bring down the domain of darkness. Jesus told us that if those who encounter the church can sense the unity holding us together they will be drawn to its message.

How will the *nones* come into contact with the unity of Christ? It will most likely be through interaction with a church acting as the church. As White points out, “If the church has a “front door,” and it clearly does, why shouldn’t it be . . . strategically developed for optimal impact for . . . all *nones* who may venture inside?”[{20}](#) Surveys indicate that 82 percent of unchurched people would come to church this weekend if they were invited by a friend.

One way we have a chance to interact with *nones* is when they expose their children to a church experience. Children’s ministry is not something to occupy our children while we have church, but is instead a key part of our outreach to the lost *nones* in our community. “What you do with their children could be a deal breaker.”

In today’s culture, we cannot overemphasize the deep need for visual communication. Almost everyone is attuned to visually receiving information and meaning. By incorporating visual arts in our church mainstream, “it has a way of sneaking past

the defenses of the heart. And nones need a lot snuck past them.”{21}

We need to keep evangelism at the forefront. “This is no time to wave the flag of social ministry and justice issues so single-mindedly in the name of cultural acceptance and the hip factor that it becomes our collective substitute for the clear articulation of the gospel.”{22}

White clearly states our goal, “Our only hope and the heart of the Great Commission, is to stem the tide by turning the nones into wons.”{23}

Notes

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A Christian Purpose for Life – Proclaiming the Glory of Christ

Steve Cable answers the question, Why does God leave Christians on earth after we are saved?

Misconceptions and Our Identity

Examining the beliefs and behavior of born-again emerging adults over the last few years, one common deficiency is a misunderstanding of their relationship to eternity. Many believers either have not thought about the question of “Why did God leave me here on earth once I was saved?” or they harbor misconceptions about the answer. Let’s begin by considering some common misconceptions.



The first misconception is being purposeless. These people believe that thinking about their eternal purpose is a waste of time. Just live for the moment. My eternal destiny is secure so why bother myself with asking, “Why am I still here? I’ll worry about the things of heaven after I die.” This viewpoint devalues the sacrifice of Christ. He did not give His life for us so that we can be unconcerned about what concerns Him.[{1}](#)

The second misconception is focusing on this life’s pleasures. Many young people say things like “I don’t want Jesus to return until after I have traveled, married, had children, gotten that promotion, etc.” They assume these things are of ultimate importance in their lives. Yet, the Bible teaches us that this attitude will choke out God’s fruit in our lives. As Jesus said, “[T]he worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, enter in and choke the word and it becomes unfruitful.”[{2}](#)

A third misconception is becoming prepared for heaven. Some think that God needs to get our character up to some entrance level requirement before we are ready to move on to heaven. Most people with this view are not really working hard to match their lifestyle to a biblical standard, but they figure at some point they will. However, since our righteousness is not our own, but rather that of Jesus’,[{3}](#) we don’t need to get more righteous to enter heaven. In fact, when we see Him then we will be like Him.[{4}](#) The fastest way to make us completely mature is to take us out of this world.

One final misconception is providing for one’s family. Caring for our family is certainly part of God’s desire for our lives. However, if our sole purpose is to provide for our own family and our children have the same purpose and so on, the church will be limited to us and our progeny—and no one else.

These common misconceptions as to our purpose fall under the

warning Paul gave us in Philippians,

For many walk, of whom I often told you, . . . that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, . . . whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.{5}

Paul goes on to explain, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ . . .”{6}

We are to live our lives constantly aware of our heavenly citizenship, eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord. In this article, we examine the book of 1 Peter to see what Peter has to say about our purpose in life and how we are to live it out.

Called to a Critical Mission

Peter begins the book of 1 Peter by reminding us what Christ has done for us. Let’s read the first few verses of this amazing letter.

According to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Through the resurrection of Jesus we are born again and are looking forward to an eternal inheritance kept in heaven for us to be revealed in the last time. What a wonderful truth helping us to realize that we are already living in eternity as we wait for our inheritance to be revealed. In the meantime, we are living on this earth in a temporary “earthsuit” called to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives.

In the remainder of his letter to the churches, Peter

addresses what we are to do while we are living on this earth. He first tells us that we are likely to encounter trials and suffering in this world. Then, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 1, Peter conveys to us the importance of our mission, giving us instructions we would expect a military commander to give before sending his team out on a dangerous and critical mission. He tells us to:

Prepare our minds for action – we are to be action oriented, not passively waiting for our life to pass by.

Be alert and focused on the mission – we are to keep our minds focused on God's purpose for our life on this earth.

Keep a long term perspective – don't be deceived into putting your thoughts and your hope on the temporary temptations of the world, and

Realize God has entrusted you with the priceless resource of time – Peter tells us that we are to conduct ourselves in the fear of the Lord while we are on this earth.

In the latter parts of chapter 1, Peter reminds us that we have been redeemed at a very high cost, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. We owe a tremendous debt which motivates us to desire to faithfully carry out our mission on this earth.

The calls to action listed above must be accompanied by two critical components to be effective in this life. Specifically, Peter calls on us to purify our hearts not conforming to our former lusts and to love other believers not only as a friend, but also with sacrificial love by which Jesus loves you. The actions listed above are not our purpose on this earth, but rather activities we need to address if we are fulfill our purpose.

Our Purpose: To Proclaim His Excellencies

Why does God leave us on this earth after we are saved? In the second chapter of his letter, Peter begins by reminding us that we are living stones, part of the holy building God is building on the cornerstone Jesus Christ. This building made up of the lives of Christians is to be a beacon proclaiming the glory of God and the good news of redemption in Jesus.

In verses 9 and 10 of Chapter 2, Paul clearly states the purpose of our lives and of the church when he writes:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are a special people on this earth, God's own people. Peter uses the terms used by Yahweh of the Israelites in the wilderness where God told them through Moses,

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.[{7}](#)

The Israelites discovered that they could not obey His voice or keep His covenant even when ruled by kings who desired to serve the Lord. Jesus Christ had to "become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him."[{8}](#) In Jesus' righteousness, we now become the special people of God given His purposes to accomplish on this earth.

We are left here so that we may proclaim His excellencies. We are to proclaim more than just the general attributes of our Creator. We are to let people know that our Creator is prepared to deliver them out of darkness and let them live in

His marvelous light. God has entrusted us with His glory, His light. We have the privilege of proclaiming His glory and offering His grace. At a basic level, we proclaim His excellencies by obeying His commands to proclaim Christ, make disciples, and be available for God to use us on this earth.

If we are to proclaim the glories of Christ and the gospel of redemption to eternal life, how are we to accomplish this wonderful goal?

Fulfilling Our Purpose Through Excellent Behavior and Right Relationships

In this article we have been looking at the question, “What purpose does God have for my life as a Christian here on planet Earth?” We have seen that God leaves us here primarily for the purpose of bringing others into His kingdom. As Paul said, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . if I am to remain on in the flesh it will mean fruitful labor for me.”[{9}](#) In his letter to the Colossians, Paul stated, “We proclaim [Christ] by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ.”[{10}](#) The apostle Peter put it this way, “[You are] a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”[{11}](#)

If we are to proclaim Christ in this world, the next obvious question is, how are we to do this? Is the best approach to rent a large electronic bull horn and drive the streets preaching the good news? Or in today’s world perhaps we can start a Facebook page or send out a tweet with John 3:16? These techniques may be appropriate in some circumstances, but that is not where the apostle Peter says we should begin.

Peter follows his statement that we are called to proclaim Christ with this interesting instruction:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. [\[12\]](#)

Instead of following this primary purpose with instructions on how to best verbalize our faith, he first focuses on how we live out our faith. He clearly points out that our behavior if kept excellent in purity and good deeds will attract the attention of non-Christians, of evil doers, causing them to consider the work of Christ in this world. We see that the reason God calls us to excellent behavior is not so that we will be good enough to get into His heaven, but rather to convict others of their need for a savior.

Peter continues to address ways in which we should proclaim Christ in the remainder of the second chapter. He points out that having godly relationships is an important way of proclaiming Christ. What types of relationships does Peter address? He specifically calls out our relationships with unbelievers, government authorities, our bosses, our co-workers, husbands and wives, other believers and the elders He has placed over us.

Relationships are the biggest part of life. As people observe your relationships, they can see that they are different because you offer supernatural love, and your eternal perspective allows you to approach them with a servant's heart. As Christians, our relationships are not about getting what we deserve, but rather about giving to others the same way Jesus has given to us.

Fulfilling Your Purpose Through Your

Testimony and Your Prayers

Above we have seen that our post-salvation purpose of life on earth is to proclaim the excellencies of Jesus Christ through the gospel. We also looked at the first two ways that we should use to proclaim Christ in this world. The first way is through excellent behavior lived out before an unbelieving world. The second is through living out right relationships with those with whom we deal in this world. As you can see, these first two ways that Peter addresses do not require us to explain our faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, they draw unbeliever's attention to our lives, building up questions in their minds.

For example, in 1 Peter 2:18-19, Peter tells us,

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

Having a good attitude toward our boss even in those times when they are unreasonable finds favor with God and testifies to others of our different perspective.

After dealing with a comprehensive list of life relationships, from the government to our husbands and wives, Peter brings up our spoken testimony as well. In 3:15, he says:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

Not only are we to live our lives in ways that proclaim the glories of our Savior, we are to be prepared to give an

account for the hope that is in us. We know from the first chapter of 1 Peter that the hope that is in us is the hope that comes from being born again and knowing that we have obtained an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. We need to be prepared to share with others that through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ they too can share in this same hope that drives our lives. The phrase in the verse, to make a defense, is a translation of the Greek word *apologia* from which we obtain our English word “apologetics.”

It is important to note the context in which this call to apologetics is placed. First, it is to be done with gentleness and reverence, not with arrogance and self-righteousness. The object is not to demonstrate you are right, but rather to help the questioner come to grips with the truth of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Second, Peter reiterates his instruction found in 2:12, reminding us that we are to focus on living sanctified lives so that even those who slander us know in their hearts of our good behavior in Christ.

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:7, we are called to be “of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.” If we are to be effective in proclaiming Christ in this world we must be consistently praying about the people and the obstacles we face.

Peter makes it clear that our purpose as a church on this earth is to proclaim the goodness of Christ who delivered us out of the domain of darkness and into the eternal kingdom of God. Proclaiming Christ in this way involves our excellent behavior, our right relationships, our gentle defense of the gospel, and a commitment to prayer. Let us examine our lives to see how this call is being lived out in us.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 5:14 and 1 Peter 1:13-17

2. Mark 4:19
3. Philippians 3:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:21
4. 1 John 3:3
5. Philippians 3:18-19
6. Philippians 3:20-21
7. Exodus 19:5-6
8. 2 Corinthians 5:20
9. Philippians 1:21-23
10. Colossians 1:28 NET Bible
11. 1 Peter 2:9b NET Bible
12. 1 Peter 2:11-12

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